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# A vulnerable disclosure: Dangerous negotiations of race and identity in the classroom

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*Abstract:* This autoethnographic essay shares my experience as a teaching assistant, desiring to be more self aware of how my race informed my pedagogy in the classroom. Set in „Race and Cultural Diversity,“ an advanced undergrad writing course, I examine my commitments to racial and social justice within classroom happenings. Using critical performance pedagogy, this study explores my identity performance to identify and create effective strategies that further dialogue on the often charged and sensitive topic of race. Moreover, this essay reveals what I learned about myself and clarified my teaching/learning philosophy.

*Key words:* vulnerability; critical performance pedagogy; autoethnography; black femininity; teacher reflexivity

## **The dirty R word: An introduction**

Race and Cultural Diversity, in U.S. Society, a class I taught, was all about the dirty word *race*. The goals of this course made me responsible for teaching the history of race in the United States to 25 college undergraduates. My aims were to stretch their understanding of race and provide them with tools to critique their experience of race and cultural difference. Privy to leading and taking part in conversations about race and other identities of difference, I endeavored to minimize the all-to-often abstracting and blame approach to race. I needed us to get personal. My insides whispered,

“Getting personal gets investment.” Yet faculty of color, and in particular women, are not given the same respect and authority in the classroom (Lee & Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Viernes Turner, 2002; Williams & Evans-Winters, 2005).

Williams and Evans-Winters (2005) express the complexities of being female faculty of color, using Black feminist perspective and critical race theory to examine and reflect on their classroom experiences with pre-service teachers. They found that “the students are often non-responsive and frequently resist the messenger, consequently, precipitately resisting the message” (p. 202) suggesting that students evaluate messages by professors on the basis of the social identities, e.g. race and gender, embodied by the professor. Furthermore, they find that students are unable to separate the message from the messenger. In both the literature and this self-study the issue of positionality surfaced as an important determinate of teaching experiences. Again, positionality refers to the way in which people are ranked in society and this ranking transcends larger structural systems and follows people into their places of work, classrooms, and how they see themselves and their relationship to others. In light of this reality, female faculty of color, especially those desiring to employ social justice pedagogy in the classroom, can sometimes experience contention between their pedagogical beliefs and the dynamics of the classroom. This is supported when Lee and Johnson-Bailey (2004) assert:

Women of color as feminist educators find themselves in this atmosphere of diffusive power relations—the land of cognitive dissonance, caught in the conflict between our feminist pedagogical theory and the reality of our prescribed place in the world. (p.60)

Here these faculty members are referring to the position and status of women, people of color, and women of color in society. A female faculty of color in many ways is considered an aberration or even impossible to some. For this reason, she/I must negotiate position with the pedagogy and type of class environment she/I want to create. There are delicate balances that must be made—creating an environment that promotes and optimizes student learning, while maintaining respect as both a professor and person.

While some educational studies exist that take an explicit look at how race plays out in the classroom (Amobi, 2007; Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Vargas, 1999), these studies do not take a hard and intense look at the racial performance of the teacher. Nonetheless, it is clear that these studies offer

insights into the impact of race in classrooms and the importance of teacher identity than college education. In light of the battles that occur more often in not in these classrooms, it appears that reflection, self-reflection and student reflection would benefit all classrooms, especially those explicitly addressing politically charged topics.

Moreover this study acknowledged positionality and interrogated how my racial positionality, being Black particularly, mediated my decisions and negotiations around teaching pedagogy and communicating with students. The 'how to' of attaining investment in racial dialogue and doing so with the aforementioned potential challenges to my authority, because of my race and my teaching assistant status, were parts of the journey. To begin I asked the class, and myself, to write about what comes to mind when thinking about race with two requirements: It had to be from a personal view—not what people do and how mean people can be, but about ourselves; and it needed to be in poem form. The proceeding statements are snippets from the resulting poems, specifically ones that prompted a visceral response within me while reviewing them. These visceral/ gut reactions will be further discussed later as they guided my method of instruction throughout the course.

“Guilty because I am...’Race doesn’t exist’. But the next class period claims it does”—White male

“I step lightly, eyes closed, and try to avoid deepening any of these fractures...Because I know stepping lightly is not enough—I need to see where I’m going if I ever hope to connect”—White female

“Not black enough. What makes me not as black as you? Our skin is the same color but somewhere I differ. Cuz I talk “white.” You mean proper, educated. Yes I do”—African American female

“I have a culture I learned. Normal people don’t eat rice everyday. Like my family does...For the love of god, I’m not Chinese. I am Filipino”—Filipino American female

“Who crowned white people? I thought arrogance was an adjective. I didn’t know it had a face...Fuck. I’m white”—White male

On the edge of my seat, headphones covering my ears to hear clearly the words knock about in my head, palms sweaty, and heart rate increased, I exhaled. Asking my students to candidly reveal their thoughts about race was a heavy request that if obliged would take vulnerability on all of our parts. Vulnerable because none of us could hide behind the actions of others or what we heard from someone else; and because we had to be honest about how often and what we thought about the dirty word, race. Yet my

personal disclosure was of a different type. More than sharing my experiences and more than voicing my honest opinions about race, I was in a position to determine how these vulnerabilities were used and understood as learning strategies within the class as well as personal insight for us all. Choosing to engender and embody this vulnerable approach to learning and teaching race, placed my Black, female, queer, teaching assistant body on a dangerous line.

Historically as well as present day, race and gender are two dynamics shaping the educational system and social milieu of the United States (AAUW, 2001, 2008; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Watkins, 2001; Watkins, Lewis, & Chou, 2001). These undercurrents sculpt classroom dynamics and teacher/student relationships. Moreover, how bodies choose to represent and embody these identities influence the value assigned to different bodies. Situating the body, a material and discursive entity, as integral to the teaching/learning dynamic, this study utilizes critical reflexivity to take an intentional look at how my race and gender identities, in particular, inform my teaching pedagogy. The purpose here is to identify and develop: 1) Effective strategies that further productive dialogue and knowledge acquisition on the often charged and sensitive topic of race and 2) Awareness of how my racialized self informs my gender identity and enters as well as manifests in the classroom. Here, I identify and examine my gut reactions (physiologically, and pedagogically) and correlate linkages between subject matter and subject engagement on behalf of students. To take on this task of acknowledging and scrutinizing visceral reactions and juxtaposing these intuitive responses with my teaching pedagogy, this study explored the following:

What assumptions inform the creation of classroom pedagogy?  
What issues in subject matter and subject engagement ignite gut reactions within me, and how do I manage them? What negotiations are made surrounding these gut reactions in relation to course instruction and the students within the classroom?

This piece is reflective of writing and research as journey and should therefore read as a discovery and experimental piece. A project where I discover/affirm my convictions and commitment around teaching and particularly as related to the issue of race. Furthermore, this exploration was a chance to employ critical reflexivity to enhance my teaching pedagogy and reveal negotiations made while teaching on the topic of race.

This study illuminated the journey of a Black female teaching assistant's journey through teaching a course on race and culture. Moreover, it highlighted how my Blackness manifested throughout the course. Chicana Feminist Mary Pat Brady (2002) asserts, "While these categories [race, gender, sexuality] are often considered mobile, spatially independent, or even merely discursive, they emerge in part through the production and sedimentation of space" (p. 8). Albeit, the production and sedimentation of the classroom as a space, differentially marked students and myself as raced, gendered, classed, and sexualized differently and constantly made new meanings of these markings as we engaged in the course material. Therefore, it is in and through telling a different story of the classroom, a story of instructor self-critique, that my identities are re-made, recognized, and more intentionally performed.

Situating the classroom as a cultural site allows it to be understood as an interactive and contextually located space where bodies, people, and power relations intermingle. Johnson-Bailey an adult education professor declares, "The fact that our classrooms are the real world, with preset hierarchical power relations, remains largely unacknowledged. When we participate in programs or classes as students, instructors, or planners, we bring the historical weight of race with us. It matters little whether we intentionally trade or naively try to discard the privileges, the deficits, or standpoints of racial statuses...If teachers are to function proficiently, they must acknowledge and manage the uninvited specters of race that haunt our practices." Moreover, her statement embodies the reality that classroom cultures are shaped by societal realities and that to teach with integrity and social justice as a goal requires recognition and managing of living archives of race and their inevitable manifestation in classrooms. Thereby the enactment and representation of race becomes a cultural endeavor.

Two themes emerged from this classroom exploration 1) It is but is not *just* about race and 2) positionality or take a stand. The first theme refers to how racial performance played out in the classroom, insisting that other social identities, gender for example, were present in the classroom. Moreover, that these other subjectivities informed how I performed, reacted to my students, and negotiated race. The context, a classroom with race and culture as the course content orchestrated by a Black instructor, positioned race as the filter through which other identities were funneled. The statement, *take a stand*, speaks to the theme of positionality. Positionality is defined by Lee and Johnson-Bailey (2004) as, "the place one assigns to a person based on his or her membership in a group, with the major categories being gender,

race, class, sexual orientation and age.” In this particular study I examined how the enactment of my instructor role rubbed against, conflicted, and converged with my other positions, specifically that of race and gender. Take a stand echoed throughout this project as both a theme and directive.

To discuss this project and the insights revealed from its deployment, I provide a brief overview of critical performance pedagogy to make theoretical arguments about the body and articulate the interconnectedness of the body, teaching, pedagogy, and social justice education. I then my methodological process followed by a discussion of the thematic significance of the study, highlighting the relationship between classroom happenings, my visceral responses and negotiations made thereafter. Finally, I identify and describe three key components of teaching race from an embodied approach that emerged from this experimental design and consider the utility of vulnerable disclosure, especially on the instructor’s behalf, to enhance the teaching/learning experience of race.

## **Critical performative pedagogy and the body: A conceptual framework**

“A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity. Here, we attempt to bridge the contradictions in our experience” (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981, p. 23).

The interrelationship between the body (flesh), experience, and theory illuminated above captures the essence of critical performance pedagogy, a way of situating the body that enhances classroom practices and ignites political change with the regards to education (Pineau, 2002). Critical performative pedagogy emerges out of the vast area of critical pedagogy, which for all intensive purposes is an educational intervention used by educators who believe that we, as educators, are responsible for critiquing, identifying possibilities of what could be, and bringing to action potential visions (Alexander, 2010; Friere, 1968, 1998; Giroux, 2001; Greene, 1995; Weems, 2003). In critical pedagogy the body of the educator is grounded as a catalyst and therefore the classroom is situated as a site of possibility. Critical performative pedagogy takes on the task of framing the body in three particular ways and offering it as a tool for igniting critical pedagogy’s goal of liberatory education. First is the ideological body which places in dialogue the physical body, the contexts in which they are located, and the constant making and unmaking of the body’s behavior (McLaren, 1999). “Through

deliberate, arduous, and consistent effort, bodies can acquire a new way of being. It is precisely this capacity for bodies to learn to act in ways other than they do..." (p. 45). Secondly, the ethnographic body refers to the culturally situated body, the cultural mediation of bodies (Alexander, 1999; Conquergood, 1985; Pineau, 2002). Third and finally is the performing body which makes a case for intentionality and attention to how bodies and how they perform for the purpose of shifting and transgressing taken-for-granted habits and assumptions.

This performative pedagogy begs that students "struggle bodily with course content... [and] emphasizes product over process by requiring students to use their bodies systematically over a period of time, rather than simply at the end of a unit" (Pineau, 2002, p. 50). Thereby, deploying critical performative pedagogy requires activation and centering of bodies to the educational process. Pineau's overview of critical performative pedagogy makes a case for the body's imperative to teaching/learning and offers this pedagogy as an intervention to the generally abstracted and absence of the body in education of the time. Extending the work of Pineau (2002) and Boal (2010), Alexander (2010) offers six precepts to critical performative pedagogy (CPP). However, I discuss only two here: CPP is self-questioning and action-oriented. An instructor involved in CPP is constantly questioning her positioning, power relations in the classroom, and always seeking to subvert traditional power dynamics. As such this instructor must be open and devising instruction that ignites somatic and visceral reactions. Also, CPP is action-oriented and advocates for change, "in both the locations of deep attitude change and the ways in which such somatically informed cognitive shifts in knowing can inform necessary changes in bodily activities..." (p. 322). In other words, the job of an educator using CPP is to compel bodies, their material and immaterial elements, to self-scrutinize, question, and re-create themselves.

Therefore, CPP serves as a means of activating the body and locates the body as an educative tool. Collapsing CPP into a study of racial performance locates the classroom as context in which the body, in particular my body can be read through culture, the classroom, observed through its interactions with other bodies, and evaluated as a racially charged site. As an interactional process, racial performance requires that attention be paid to the body as a site of culture, a culture to be examined, as well as something to be made and remade. Since it is in the doing, in this case research, that one makes sense of the world, the body is the tool through which methods are enacted (DeVault, 1999). In this particular case critical performative

pedagogy was deployed to intentionally observe and reflect upon the racial performance of my body in the classroom

## Methods

### *Autoethnography*

Autoethnography rises out of a concern in the 1980s of relationships between researchers and the researched, identity, and interests in narratives that include emotion and the body (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Holman-Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013; Leavy, 2009). This research elucidates and critically analyzes (graphy) my personal experience (auto) of performing blackness as a teaching assistant in an undergraduate course to understand the cultural interaction (ethno) of the body, identity, and positionality within the teaching/learning process (Ellis, 2004; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010). Since its emergence different styles and approaches have developed (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013; Denzin, 2003; Ellis, 2004; Jones, 1997; Spry, 2011), varying by how much emphasis is placed on the study of others, the researcher's self and interaction with others, power relationships and the degree to which the autoethnographer incorporates and critiques hegemonic systems and sociocultural realities (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011; Spry, 2011). All autoethnographic research is concerned with culture and how the self makes sense of and in culture (Boylorn, 2013; Chang, 2008; Jones, 1997; Muncey, 2009; Spry, 2011). With a specific interest in how my race, experiences with race, and social justice commitments around race inform my teaching and hence the learning process, this autoethnographic project occurred within a class I was teaching.

### Site and participants

This study occurred in an advanced writing composition course that met two days a week for one hour and fifty minutes each session. The professor of the course led one day and I facilitated the other. The class began with 60 students; initially, 25 students were in my section but ended with 19. These students were members of different racial backgrounds, ethnic identities, and genders. The majority of students self-identified as racially white, eight and their gender as female—11. All of the students classified their sexual orientation as heterosexual or straight with one student allowing fluidity and adding “as far as they know” to her claim to heterosexuality. Two students chose not to submit information. All of them has completed their first year of college during the time they enrolled in the course.

## Data collection and analysis

Beginning February 10, 2011, I began “casing” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) my classroom, in which I was teaching, for evidence that this class was a useful place to examine. After “casing” the classroom for two weeks and assessing the potential risk and benefits of exploring the enactment of racial performance, identifying assumptions undergirding my decision-making became increasingly significant. Equally, my fieldnotes shifted from a more structured style of detailing class events, to a more narrative approach focusing in on negotiation moments as well as those instances where race was at play. Including the casing, I spent nine weeks in the field and used journaling, fieldnotes and observation, audio recordings, correspondences with students (i.e., email) and my reactions to assignments completed by students. These methods focused on general class happenings in a creative format, reflections on occurrences in class, moments of visceral/gut reactions, focusing on the context (i.e., what was being discussed in the moment, who was talking) in which these reactions or triggers took place as well as my reactions, and correspondence with students and selected class assignments to reflect upon and gauge visceral reactions and reactions to the generative conversation and course transactions. To analyze my data, I returned to my fieldnotes and conducted three layers of coding. The first time reviewing my fieldnotes, which also consisted of journal entries, I enacted open coding (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) a general analysis of the data. After this initial review, I returned to data and conducted tighter analysis looking for repetitive themes as well as concepts that could be combined. After completing these two rounds, I identified the two most salient themes, it is but is not (just) about race and where do you stand, and looked for patterns within them. I also listened to audio recordings, for pivotal statements related to these themes evidenced in the fieldnotes. Once satisfied with the themes, I reviewed my fieldnotes, audio recording, and my responses to students’ written activities and searched for moments that illuminated my identified themes. I was sure to search through all data in order to build robust context, story, and interpretation. Finally, I re-read the moments I identified as theme exemplars and crafted them into vignettes.

## Researcher cautions and careful considerations

For me, truth and vulnerability go hand-in-hand. As a result, although this study focused on my gut reactions to race and how these got negotiated through my pedagogy, I informed my students of the study. Moreover, I gave them opportunity to inquire about the study through initial ques-

tions and throughout the study. With no desire to create discomfort in the classroom where students felt they were being assessed on issues of race beyond the scope of the course or potentially stifle the possibility of honest dialogue and interactions, I chose autoethnographic methods to hone in on my visceral reactions, racial performance and convictions. I did not assess students' commentary, but instead used it for critical personal reflection. All correspondents included in this study have pseudonyms used to protect the identities of my students. With my classroom as the site of research I had to be intentional about creating distance between it and myself. As instructor, I was in the position of participant observer and it was very seldom that I was not a full participant. Since I often utilize student directed dialogue to process course contents and discuss ideas, I had a chance to make quick notes of classroom happenings. Accordingly, while in the space I frequently used jottings (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) to capture preliminary dynamics in the classroom. Also, I included a range of activities to interrogate. In addition to taking jottings during regular class sessions, I included fieldnotes during one of our oral presentation sessions where I had a less demanding participant role and could reflect more deeply on my assumptions and gut reactions to issues raised during the presentations. Exploring identity performance and pedagogical negotiations in a class of which you are in charge is a complex undertaking. However, when committed to inquiry around teacher awareness and the self as an educative tool to facilitate an embodied teaching/learning experience, these dynamics become beneficial and vital. Collapsing these cautions and considerations into the classroom and my experience of tuning into my visceral reactions and subsequent pedagogical negotiations, this next section highlights two major themes that emerged from this project through a recount of two particular exercises prompted by classroom happenings. It also narrates the interrelationship between my body and its lived experience, classroom dynamics, and negotiations I made thereafter to further and enhance the teaching/learning experience within this class.

## **Let the vulnerability begin: disclosure and negotiations "When I think about race...:" Centering the "I" in racial dialogue**

*Tightened stomach, sweaty palms, moist pits—that's what happens when you talk race. Let me fix that. That's what happens when I talk about race. I cannot sit back and be quiet or enter with a general; some people or people do this and that. I get sweaty and my stomach tightens. I do not know what others feel*

*inside, especially when they do not say. But what I do know is that race hurts. Talkin' bout it. Thinkin' bout it. Teachin' bout it hurts, but somebodys gotta do it. Somebodys gotta reach within themselves and share. Vulnerability anyone? (Fieldnote Reflections, February 17)*

In that day's class, as alluded to in this essay's opening, I asked the class to get personal and write about their perspective on race. Specifically, to write a poem based on the prompt, "when I think about race..." Most of the students followed the instructions with only a couple deciding to direct their attention to other people's actions and behaviors around race. Irrespective of what people chose to write, we were all there in attendance, listening and feeling our way through the conversation. I needed the class to know this class was a preview of what was to come and to personally reach out to those students who took on the challenge of vulnerability by sharing their individual pieces.

Greetings Scholars.

I hope this message finds you all well and preparing for the start of your weekends. I wanted to simply say thank you to all of you for engaging in the process of dialoguing around race. While some of you were more vulnerable than others, it is my expectation that we use what is shared as a means of getting underneath race, to understanding. I hope that through the semester we can use this class as a place to begin to live differently and more sincerely in the world. As mentioned by many of you, such a life is not easy and can bring great discomfort, awkwardness, newness, and also healing. Please stay in this journey with me and lets make some moves in the world!!

I believe that through honesty, difficult conversations, and facing our beliefs head on, we can truly begin to be different. I am in this journey with you and I think of our class as a family trying to become more aware of what we do not know about our family in order to strengthen it. Look for an email from me this weekend about sign up times for next week. Have a great weekend

peace and tranquility,

Ms. Hill

(class email correspondence, February 17)

I sat on my burnt orange couch, legs crossed under me in sweats and a t-shirt. Allowed the aura of Egyptian musk incense to calm my inner being, laptop in hand I started to write. I recounted class discussion, the moistness of my hands, the caution in my words, in my responses to students' articulations of their racial experiences. The words—vulnerability, understanding, journey, relationships, and care—danced, prodded, and swam through my head. I was compelled to reach out to the class and ensure them that this journey, this class, would be intense, difficult, and worthwhile. I wanted, no needed them to know I was taking an adventure with them. Through that reflection, crafting and sending a class email, and attaining students' responses of appreciation, excitement and nervousness my experiential hunch that race was a difficult and potentially dangerous topic crystallized.

Thursday February 17

11:48pm

Greetings Lisa.

I hope this message finds you well. I just wanted to check in with you to say I appreciate your willingness to be vulnerable and share your piece. I know that it is never an easy task to expose yourself and feelings, especially around tense topics. I would like to encourage you to remain open and know that there are no wrong reactions only sincere expressions and questions to follow. These discussions will not be easy for any of us but I encourage you to stay in there with me, with us (the class). If there is ever a time you are feeling excessively uncomfortable and/or just really want to talk, do not hesitate. This is going to be a difficult and sometimes uncomfortable journey for us all. So lets take it together. Have a great weekend.

peace and tranquility,

Ms. Hill  
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Friday February 18

11:47pm

Ms. Hill,

Thank you for the email, it means a lot!

I look forward to more interesting discussions and hearing more of my classmates views. I really enjoyed the discussion.

Hope you have a wonderful weekend!

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Friday February 18

2:14am

Hi Dominique,

I really appreciated this email, as well as the thank-you. Your observations are accurate. I'll go back to talking more. It's important for me to deliver my compounded realities in my own voice and not just in writing. :)

Have a good weekend!

The preceding correspondences embody my desire that students know I am not just an instructor on the topic of race, but I am a participant. Lodged in these communications are my observations of class events. The decision to require that students write a poem spawned from experiential knowledge of being in classes where race conversations generally turned into a game of dodge ball. The target to hit was race. White people usually deflected the ball or handed it to people of color assuming they had better aim, which equates to more experience with race and people of color becoming the target to hit or learn from. Now having the opportunity and responsibility to ensure dodge ball was not played, at least not in its usual terms, I turned to art, specifically poetry for direction. Since the age of 10, poetry has been my haven of safety and critical reflection about myself, the world around me, and problems I wish to solve. In my advanced studies, I came to read and learn about its benefits. Audre Lorde (1984) asserts, "poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before" (p. 38). Imbued in Lorde's statement are the interlocking nature of poetry, self, and possibility. By asking students to poetically express their thoughts about race, I was encouraging them to expose their trepidations about race and race discussions while simultaneously imagining the possibilities of racial dialogue with vulnerability and candidness present.

Following creation time, I asked the class who wanted and/or was willing to share. The room was silent. I patiently waited. My stomach in knots. I knew that I would have to read my poem. This sense of requirement came from within. It was necessary that I join them in this venture of exploring race from a personal, frank, and vulnerable perspective. As the instructor it was also key that I lead by example and partake in self-disclosure. I went

back-and-forth about going first and decided to embrace the silence and see if students volunteered. After about two minutes, which seemed like much longer, someone volunteered.

Two white male students, Dennis and Josh, read poems that spoke to their frustration with racism and race. In the end of each they spoke to the difficulty and overwhelming feeling race created. Why do white people, especially males, so frequently express the frustration with race when they do not feel it everyday? What gives them the right to even feel this way? This was my gut reaction, but the educator in me wondered how I could get them to a place of movement and out of guilt. I decided to read my poem. As I opened my mouth to say I would read mine, my stomach tightened and I began reading. Afterwards, I shared with the class the struggle in sharing the poem, the back-story of my realizations and the pains my realization brought. I suggested that perhaps the painful honesty is what is needed for movement and progress to begin when it comes to race. Did I really just read that aloud? Would this help or hinder the class' progress and comfort with discussing their feelings? Would my white students consider me racist? It wouldn't be the first time. What larger concepts do we need to address to place these poems into context? What are they thinking about me? I grappled with these questions and determined it best to remain engaged and open.

During the sharing segment of class, we listened to each other. As an instructor, I wanted to share and felt obligated to—it's part of my communal approach to education. Yet, as a Black female instructor who wrote her poem about at one point almost hating white people, hesitation weighed my tongue down. In that moment, various positionalities of mine—instructor, Black, female, teaching—converged to create a stuttering and utterly frightening experience. Being the instructor of the class invoked a tempering of my reactions to students. One white female student read, "White Girl. You're just a white Girl. What could you possibly know?" Continuously, she cleared her throat, slowed her speech, and wiped her eyes, as she read, though no tears fell during class. When finished, she sat back in her chair, crossed her arms and lowered her head. My gut response:

It saddens me that she appears hurt and that remembering those moments of being called "White girl" were painful. But what did she think these black girls may have been experiencing?...I feel conflicted. Empathetic as a teacher and person who knows the hurt of race, racism, and race tension, but also frustrated at the reality that she may not be considering that non-white individu-

als may deal with this routinely. How do I support her, but also make it clear that there is more to this story of hurt and racism? How do I make it clear that what she feels is understandable valid and should not have been experienced? (Fieldnote Reflections, February 22).

For many reasons—believing that sitting with one’s feelings and emotions are healthy; wanting white people to feel the impact of racism; somewhat numb to the cry of white girls who play the victim role all-too-often; invested in empathy, which to me require relating beyond the surface—I wanted to leave her out to dry. My teacher role, however, demanded that I did not. Instead, I went home and released my recurring frustration with white females assuming the victim role and deflecting any responsibility in conversations around social injustices. After reflecting on the class that day, venting, and reading students’ poems, I acknowledged, to myself, that my immediate irritation with this student was an autopilot response. I had been privy to being the center of so many dodge ball games (class discussions) that turned argumentative between white females and myself where I was the target to hit—me being accused of being “edgy,” “angry Black woman,” and “unapproachable,” and them crying and minimizing a lesson on structural racism to them experiencing “reverse racism”—that my body held an intuitive reaction to white females in conversations about race. Illumined by this moment and related to the theme of *take a stand* is the recognition that race is hard, talking about it from a personal standpoint is even more difficult, and probing my reasons behind racial reactions is risky yet beneficial task.

## **“Who is the author?”: Centering the “I” in course content**

With my desire that students walk away with an enhanced critical eye, especially as related to analyzing texts of different kinds, e.g., poems, popular media, articles, and artistic performances, I constructed and implemented an exercise that required the class to analyze a poem. Not just any poem, but one of my poems—a poem written by their instructor. Earlier in the semester we discussed one of my poems, “Some call me a Misfit,” which they were unaware I wrote but was later discussed in that class period. On that day, I outed myself without opening my mouth and it felt good, terrifying, freeing, and also dangerous. The poem they read a few weeks before discussed my political views, sexuality, perspective on home, as well as my evolved thinking about my beauty and sexual history. Yet the poem they were analyzing at the time was not as explicit and actually placed race and a specific racial dialogue I had at the fore. Before revealing to them I was the

author of both I wanted them to out themselves so to speak, wanted them, without knowing, to unveil their presumptions about who people are based on what they say, the words they use, and the structures they offer. More specifically, I asked students to break into smaller groups, read the poem, and have a discussion on the following: Who is the author? In other words, what assumptions do you have about the author based on the content? And why do you make these claims? Who is the audience this piece was intended for? And why? When was this piece made? And why do you make this claim? How does some of your beliefs and/or commitments resound with or go against the author? Be specific in your response? In reaction to students' in class responses to these questions, I wrote a poem.

“I am/?”

I am a man, am I?  
 A lesbian in an interracial relationship?  
 Confused,  
 And more found  
 I am a native, am I?  
 A recent immigrant  
 More developed this time around  
 I am a man, am I?  
 but the other me was too rigid,  
 at least the written me  
 I am vulnerable, am I?  
 I am,  
 and would have it no other way

The above poem combines assumptions students made about me, as the author of the piece as well as my reactions to their assumptions. After the class offered their thoughts about the author based on the language, structure, and their perspective on these contextually based creations, I found myself even more nervous—the pits of my lavender short-sleeved turtleneck were stained with sweat and my hands were clammy. I contemplated not telling them I wrote the poem they just read. Likewise I considered not telling them that a poem they read a few weeks ago was also me. I mentally ran through the possibilities of what they would say when they put together that the woman in the poem, “Some call me a misfit” who “kissed a woman and smiled afterward,” who “some people would call revolutionary,” who “refuses labels,” is their instructor. I distracted myself and resumed instruction asking, “What was this piece about?” My insides shook, cracked, flowed, and

rumbled. I asked, “Have you seen this author before? In other words, have we read something from this author already this semester?” The class engages:

“No”—African American female

““Some call me a misfit” parallels in topics discussed—Arab American female

“Yea. Relationships and the presence of race”—unknown

“No”—White male

“Same author in different mindsets...Confused and still trying to figure out society”—Pilipino American female

My internal rebuttal, “*I AM NOT CONFUSED. Nor was I CONFUSED then.*” I quickly return to the moment, shift, and education resumes. I inquire, “What would you need to know to make sense of the pieces.” I could feel my heart in my throat. I was offended, I think. Students continue to offer their opinions.

“Wouldn’t rule out it being written by the same person, but definitely written in very different moods”—White female

“Too structured to be a woman”—White male

I remain engaged. Still too shaky and nervous to admit, the poems we were discussing were written by the same person, me. Needing to remain committed to being vulnerable as an educational lesson, I blurted out, “Welllllll,” slowly entering the conversation, those pieces are written by the same person. “Andddd the author is, ME” (emphasis added). So the author of “Time of the Butterflies” could not be a man.” Someone blurts out, “we thought it was you.” I discuss the context in which each of these pieces were written, while also addressing different assumptions that came up during the exercise, i.e., author was a lesbian writing about an interracial relationship. My instructor positionality urged that I follow through with my original lesson plan and tell them I was the author of both, yet being a queer Black female teaching assistant brought trepidation on my part. I had heard and experienced for myself the power plays students make in classrooms where there is a teaching assistant. Similarly, when I first began teaching undergraduates at predominantly white colleges and universities in 2007, I was warned about the importance of keeping my life and its details personal. In fact, I was urged to just teach the content and leave my personal self out of it, as if this suggestion were possible. Giving into my educator positionality and my personal conviction that bringing the self to the educational process is necessary and beneficial to engender effective teaching/learning experiences that are liberating and embodied, I even opened the class up to discuss

their changing perceptions of me and the poems now that they know who the author is. Further, taking a stand in this case required that I choose to place my body on the line. My motivations to keep my poems anonymous, initially, resided mainly in the presumption that there was more to be learned from the class being able to explore the poems with the freedom of believing the author absent.

Overall, the activity was helpful in highlighting how assumptions are created as well as their inaccuracy. Also, this exercise revealed that more often than not the teaching/learning process is one that is impersonal or at least void of intimate articulations of the self. A White female student asserts:

I'm surprised that a teacher would share pieces like that for class analysis—I suppose if we had known that beforehand we would have changed some of what we said. Makes me think about how we change what we share if we are talking about someone we know, or someone who is present, vs. someone who is absent or someone who is anonymous.

Leading up to and throughout class, I made many negotiations—internally and on the spot. I wanted to be me, free in my racial performance, without being penalized in the classroom setting. This exercise uncovered that it was race but also more than race that impacted my decisions. After replaying the class audio recording, reading their reflections, and rereading my poem I was left with mixed feelings. Unsure of what they originally thought of me, since many of them slid by that question, I remain unaware of the degree, if at all, that activity shifted their thinking about me. I was, however, encouraged that vulnerability is an important tool in teaching/learning where a goal of the experience was self-awareness.

## **Create dangerously: A conclusion**

Interrogating how racial performance is enacted while a teaching assistant utilizing critical performance pedagogy helped identify ways to begin and facilitate difficult dialogue around race in particular. By examining my racial performance in a course on race and cultural diversity, the value of the body, its corporeality and episteme, was displayed. Similarly, this project divulged the danger and vulnerability in using one's body as a teaching/learning tool. Furthermore, to intentionally examine and critique my body and in particular its racial performance was also a risky undertaking. There is no doubt that to be a teaching assistant, Black, female, and queer

teaching on the topic of race and cultural diversity is a dangerous endeavor. Feminist of color Edwidge Danticat (2010) writes, “create dangerously, for people who read dangerously. This is what I’ve always thought it meant to be a writer. Writing, knowing in part that no matter how trivial your words may seem, someday, somewhere, someone may risk his or her life to read them” (p.10). Desiring to be dangerous with purpose, in this case interrogating my racial performance in this same classroom, necessitated vulnerable disclosures on my end. Creating dangerously in this sense was done by exposing my racial hangups, sexual orientation, assumptions about students, and baggage I am constantly working through around race, gender, and sexuality in particular, to my students. It also happened when I decided to document an examination of my racial performance in a classroom. However, the will to generate dangerously continues—this piece being a manifestation of dangerous creation. Nonetheless, through these risky moments represented above and the writing that followed, I learned more about myself and how racial performance operates, at least in that context. I also, recognized the courage needed and community fostered to engage in a process of interrogating race from a personal standpoint. I am reminded that talking about race is dangerous. There is no easy way to enter conversations about race, but this entry must [and did] embody honesty, vulnerability and an investment in relationship building.

Care must also be present to remain committed and push through difficult moments. Unearthed from the varied moments above is the educative value of moments that ignite and demand visceral responses—mentally and physiologically. These moments must not be avoided, rather worked through with care a reflection. Also, this study revealed the importance of critical reflexivity and vulnerability to create an open, emotive, and liberatory classroom culture. Furthermore, it unearths the utility of poetry and other artistic means for taking risks in the name of engendering healing and forgiveness with respect to race and racial presence within education. Correspondingly, employing and discussing poetry offered alternative insights on race and allowed a racially charged space to be a productive and vulnerable one. Although this project was undoubtedly dangerous, it unearthed the potential and my newfound interest in vulnerability as a practice. This practice pushes against advice to separate the personal from the classroom, as advised in particular by Black women and men, and demands that I disclose in order that my students be compelled to do the same. By asking students, as well as myself to enter the dialogue from personal experience, we began at the point of collaboration.

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