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Thoughts on Teaching as a Practice of Love

Cover Page Footnote

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Thoughts on Teaching as a Practice of Love

Sharon Marshall

"I have decided to love. If you are seeking the highest good, I think you can find it through love."

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

"Ravitch. . . is right that teaching is a humane art built upon loving relationships between teachers and students."

—David Brooks

"Nothing is more important to most of us than stable and loving connection" (97).

—Nell Noddings, *Challenge to Care*

Multiple Visions of Love

I teach First Year Writing at a large racially, ethnically, economically, and culturally diverse Catholic university in New York City. Several years ago, I participated in an interdisciplinary symposium on the topic of love sponsored by our College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. In preparation for my talk, I turned first to bell hooks who has written a trilogy of books on the subject and whose liberatory philosophy of teaching has greatly influenced the way I conduct myself and conceive of my purposes in the classroom. I have been moved by the way she theorizes and acts as a witness for the power of love to transform individual lives as well as public realities. hooks explains: "The word "love" is most often defined as a noun, yet all the more astute theorists of love acknowledge that we would all love better if we used it as a verb" (*All about Love* 1). hooks believes, "To engage the practice of love is to oppose domination in all its forms" (*Beyond Race* 198), in other words, to support freedom and self-determination for all. This squares with my own belief that the long-term solution to the inequality, violence, and environmental degradation that plague our world lies in increasing the number of people who commit themselves to an ethos of love and loving practice, and that the classroom is an ideal place to teach and learn how to do it.

In my talk, I mentioned a comment a dear friend made when she learned about the birth, that same year, of my first grandchild. "Another chance at love," she said, imagining the sheer pleasure we would derive from his very existence, what we would do to get to know and be known by him, and how we would help nurture him and safeguard his growth. What might happen, I asked my audience, if we viewed each foray into the classroom not only as an opportunity to teach a lesson or facilitate a discussion, but as another chance at love—at connection—that would not only enrich our students, but deepen our experience of living as well? What might happen if we stopped viewing our students just as vessels to be filled, blank screens to be written on, primitives to be civilized, test takers who must meet standards, or workers to be trained? What might

happen if critical thinking was not just something we claimed to be teaching our students but something we did regarding ourselves by interrogating whether or not we were able to connect to the lived realities, identities, passions, language, previous knowledge, and aspirations of our students and share the fullness of our humanity with them so that we could *all* become all we can be?

In asking those questions, I was imagining a way of teaching that addresses the whole student and the whole teacher, a way that Laura Rendón describes as

new teaching and learning. . . that is intellectual (i.e., includes high standards of academic achievement, allows students to engage in problem solving and critical thinking, engages multicultural perspectives, etc.) and spiritual (i.e., honors our humanity; instills a sense of wonder, sacredness and humility in our college classrooms; respects and embraces alternate cultural realities; involves social change and healing; and connects faculty and students in meaningful ways). (26)

I was using the word *love*, but as a Nichiren Buddhist who has practiced with the Soka Gakkai for over thirty years, what I was also trying to talk about was awakening to a kind of compassion, which in Buddhism means to share another's suffering—to identify with a person's struggles and to make that person's learning the mission of our lives by helping them access the vast power they possess within, a power that when tapped turns life's challenges into an opportunities for growth and even joy.

In seeking this way of teaching, I have been trying to follow the example of Buddhist philosopher, peace activist and founder of Soka schools and Soka University, Daisaku Ikeda, who views self-actualization—becoming all one can be—as the right of every human being. He writes,

Everyone has a right to flower, to reveal his or her full potential as a human being, to fulfill his or her mission in this world. You have this right, and so does everyone else. This is the meaning of human rights. To scorn, violate and abuse people's human rights destroys the natural order of things. Prizing human rights and respecting others are among our most important tasks. (*Buddhism Day by Day* 39)

Ikeda, author of over a hundred books and recipient of numerous honorary degrees, believes “student-centered education is the best way to promote peace and human rights,” and based on this conviction, he has founded a network of schools from kindergarten to university that embody the concept of “Soka” or value-creating education (Soka University website, “Mission & Values”). He writes, “The key element in Soka education is the quality of the relationship between teacher and student—the teachers’ sense of care for the student, their efforts to appreciate and develop the unique character and potential of each learner” (“Soka Education in Practice”). Regarding education in general, Ikeda asserts, “[It] is not something conferred in a highhanded manner from without. Consequently, teachers’ inner growth contributes to students’ happiness and educational and social advances” (*Soka Education* 219). In this Buddhist view, the growth of the teacher and the student are inseparable; the teacher’s dedication to the student brings out the wisdom needed to facilitate the student’s development. And the genuine desire to help the student helps the teacher deepen her knowledge and polish her character through altruistic action.

Although teaching is generally an altruistic profession that appears to be the very embodiment of the choice to love or act compassionately—and many who teach are loving individuals—to assume we have made the conscious decision to love just because we have chosen to teach is similar to believing that love is just a feeling and that it comes naturally. Loving is a pledge that has to be constantly renewed, which is why, even though many others have expressed the beliefs I am presenting here, I think it is important to revisit them until we have, in a word, *actualized* them.

While it will take time to actualize the lasting structural changes in education that will lead to a transformation of society, as individual teachers we can work towards change, viewing our teaching as another chance at love that might bring Martin Luther King, Jr.'s vision of the Beloved Community closer to becoming a reality:

In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger, and homelessness will not be tolerated because international standards of human decency will not allow it. An all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood will replace racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice. In the Beloved Community, international disputes will be resolved by peaceful conflict-resolution and reconciliation of adversaries, instead of military power. Love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred. Peace with justice will prevail over war and military conflict. ("The King Center")

And what I am arguing in this essay is that methods for creating a "beloved *learning* community" can be found in the spirit and many of the practices employed in English composition or First-Year Writing classes. Rather than being what our colleagues in other disciplines might think of as the "grammar fix-it shop," First-Year Writing classes are sites of change. Because of the ways these courses facilitate inquiry into and across multiple disciplines and put students' knowledge, curiosity, desires, experience, and research interests at the center of the class, they have the potential to become the compass, the conscience, and the heart of a college or university. In other words, we can look to some of the teaching practices employed by many composition instructors as models for a pedagogy of love. What follows is a discussion of how I and some of my colleagues implement four components of such a pedagogy: listening, engaging the passions of the learner, recognizing and valuing difference, and educating for social justice.

Love and Listening

"This English Class is not what I expected," many students say in their reflections and evaluations of my first year writing course, English 1000c. Most of them say it approvingly, citing as happy surprises the absence of formulaic essays, boring books and topics they could care less about, and the freedom to not have to write like "a fifty-year old, white, Harvard-educated man," as one Black female student once put it. They express appreciation for the opportunity to choose their own topics, experiment with different genres, write for multiple audiences and share their work with others. The theme for my course for the past couple of semesters has been "Making the Familiar Strange and the Strange Familiar," which I borrowed from anthropological descriptions of fieldwork. I explain to students that they'll be using writing to take a closer and critical look at some of the things they take most for granted like their childhood, or standard English, or gender

roles, in an effort to see them anew or “problematize” them. I tell them they’ll be writing in new ways and researching phenomena or issues that might seem foreign at first but with practice and study will become more familiar.

Listening is one of the first strategies we practice. From the start, I am moving students in the direction of hearing and acknowledging each other. I begin the semester with an exercise that I learned from Peter Elbow in which students listen to a partner without saying anything back for 3 to 5 minutes (“Rhetoric of Assent and Believing Game”). The listener is not allowed to interrupt the speaker and the speaker can speak about whatever she wants. Then the roles are reversed. Later students introduce their partners to the class. Students enjoy this process although they say it feels unnatural not to be able to comment or interrupt. I ask them to do it to experience what it feels like to have the floor and know that you won’t be interrupted and in turn to listen without pre-empting the speaker, even when you want to ask questions or say, “I feel you.” The exercise is not a substitute for active dialogue; it’s meant to demonstrate what it can feel like to have the opportunity to speak along with the security of knowing that the students will not be interrupted. It’s meant to convey the idea that in this class there will be time and space for the students to formulate and express their thoughts (often on the fly), and that someone will listen. It is a way of opening up a space in the classroom for caring about what other people have to say, for acknowledging the right of each individual to speak and be heard. It is a way for students to put themselves in a position to experience what Nel Noddings refers to as engrossment: “When I care, I really hear, see, or feel what the other tries to convey. The engrossment or attention may last only a few moments and it may or may not be repeated in future encounters, but it is full and essential to any caring encounter (*Challenge to Care* 26).

Too often our interactions, especially in the classroom, are lacking in engrossment, in the commitment to really see, feel or hear another person out. Teachers are often fishing for the right answers and quickly pass over students who don’t have them. Students are either jockeying to demonstrate that they have the answers or playing that invisible cloak game—*please don’t let her see me*—and not speaking up at all.

My students also practice listening when they read their freewrites and drafts to each other. Even the shy ones look forward to reading to a partner or in a small group. Real bonding occurs between students when it is done in the spirit of what Horner, Lu, Royster and Trimbur call “an attitude of deliberative inquiry” (2). The teaching and learning of writing is a kind of dialogue that involves the constant interaction of teacher and student and student and student through the medium of their texts. Students write and respond to each other, and teachers respond to the writing and responding. Through our receptivity and responses we can communicate that we are present and listening; we can show that we care. Reading is a labor of love. When I read, I have to be mindful of the risks they have taken to share aspects of their lives and experience with strangers. Since I want them to bring their R game, meaning their real selves to the classroom, I have to make it a safe and affirming place. This loving place is the site for learning where we, both student and teacher are receptive because we have established a relationship of mutual respect, which is the pathway to love. I read their words and feel a sense of reverence for their lives.

Listening also happens during individual student conferences. In addition to, or sometimes in place of written feedback, I conduct at least three extended session conferences with my students each semester. This can be a daunting task given the large

enrollment. Students read their papers aloud, and we talk about them, a practice I learned early on in my teaching career from Donald Murray. Contractually, I am only required to meet with students for 15-20 minutes, but I choose to spend more time with them because I want to get to know them, and I want them to feel that I care. The bonds we create laughing and talking about their ideas and papers can be lasting. It's not uncommon for me to walk across the campus and run into a former student who wants to give me a hug.

Listening involves appreciation of the language of the speaker/writer, too. Bruce Horner, Min-Zhan Lu, Jacqueline Jones Royster, John Trimbur, supported by a long list of "teacher-scholars" in the field of composition and rhetoric, point out that around the world people have always been multilingual, and increasingly in the United States, people speak multiple languages or dialects. They question the monolingual ideal of a Standard English and the assumption that using other languages or varieties of English gets in the way of meaning and comprehension. "We call for a new paradigm: a translingual approach. This approach sees difference in language not as a barrier to overcome or as a problem to manage, but as a resource for producing meaning in writing, speaking, reading, and listening" (303).

Hating on our students' language and seeking to eradicate features of it that make them who they are is the opposite of loving them. In fact, it's a form of violence against them—especially against Black students. Elaine B. Richardson writes:

To date, the major invisible legacy of slavery in our classrooms is the transmission of White supremacist-based literacy practices which function to erase Black vernacular survival literacies. I do not mean here to suggest that White teachers who practice bashing Black cultural learning styles damage Black students. I mean that *all* teachers who have not had training in linguistic diversity and literacy education lack the skills necessary to support culturally relevant learning. From the beginning of the African American experience, education was not designed to empower African Americans but to socialize them into productive citizens. . . [but] the possibility exists that the same tool (literacy) that has been used to oppress can be used to empower. . . (158-159)

These ideas have been around *at least* since *College Composition and Communication's* 1974 publication of "Students' Right to their Own Language," but it bears repeating. Loving students means acknowledging the linguistic richness of their heritages and allowing them to think and compose in all the language varieties they possess. When students describe theirs or their parents' or grandparents' *patois*, for example, as broken English, I ask, "By whose standards?" This is not to say that we do not need to teach or that it's somehow wrong to teach in Standard English, but that we can choose to teach it alongside, rather than as superior to, other languages and dialects—and that we view the linguistic diversity that students bring with them into the classroom as part of their cultural capital that enriches us all. What Geneva Smitherman wrote in 1994 is even truer today: "U.S. Ebonics, framed in Hip Hop talk, is used to sell everything from McDonald's, Coca-Cola, and Gatorade to snow blowers, sneakers, and shampoo for white Hair" (38). The culture at large appropriates and creates wealth from varieties of English that are maligned in the classroom while robbing students of linguistic riches and ignoring the literacies they already possess. Theresa Malphus Welford writes about how she

encourages her students to “mesh informal and academic writing in all of their work”(21). She reports, “When my students hear these irreverent new rules, they practically stand up and cheer. Finally a teacher who respects and enjoys what *they* bring to the classroom” (22). Carmen Kynard and Robert Eddy write, “Our students’ skillful deployment of their trans-school literacies is part of how they make sense of the world and can provide unique opportunities in which to understand, critique, and re-negotiate the hostile nature of schooling” (39). If we don’t make a place for these literacies in the classroom we are not listening to but silencing these students.

Engaging the Passions of the Learner

Nel Noddings describes the ideal precollege classroom based on the concept of care, but her model is applicable to all levels of learning and it looks a lot like the writing classes that I and my colleagues try to create.

Classrooms should be places in which students can legitimately act on a rich variety of purposes in which wonder and curiosity are alive, in which students and teachers live together and grow... a dedication to full human growth—and we will have to define this—will not stunt or impede intellectual achievement, but even if it might, I would take the risk if I could produce people who would live nonviolently with each other, sensitively and in harmony with the natural environment, reflectively and serenely with themselves. (*Challenge to Care* 12)

Composition courses can encourage “full human growth” for students and faculty where individual students can know and be known and where writing can be used extensively to facilitate inquiry and personal reflection. In a recent survey that faculty conducted among students in the First-Year Writing program at my university one student wrote:

I enjoyed being able to write about topics that I felt passionate about. It allowed me to put myself into the paper rather than just do something that I was forced to do. Also knowing that I can make a difference with my opinions and open others minds with them was satisfying. It encouraged me to do better and write stronger. It also made me more inclined to research the topics and go into more depth with them.

In explaining how her work extends the theories of John Dewey, Noddings says,

He insisted that students must be involved in the construction of objectives for their own learning; that they must seek and formulate problems, not simply solve ready-made problems; that they should work together in schools as they would in most workplaces; and that there is an organic relation between what is learned and personal experience. (“The Challenge”¹¹)

Nearly one hundred years have passed since Dewey made these recommendations, but they strike me as being as necessary now as they were then, and to the extent that they can be applied to opportunities for writing and related activities, they are entirely possible to realize in the composition classroom. Like many English composition faculty,

I allow my students to research problems that concern or affect them, including student loans, income inequality, guns (especially in schools), mass shootings, gang violence, unemployment, racism, health care, unequal opportunities for women, bullying, finding a job after graduation, gay rights, poverty, and problems in personal relationship.

Our teaching not only involves rhetorical concepts or the use of a semicolon, but also the cultivation of heuristics that help students produce the texts—from memoirs to memes, to websites, to researched arguments—that become the content of the course, as students learn through their own investigations. A pedagogy of love certainly does not encourage students to float about in the warm waters of their comfort zones. But I do want to suggest that teaching as a practice of love sustains critical inquiry that is dependent on the spark ignited by genuine curiosity about topics and questions that arise or are elicited in the mind of the student.

Recognizing and Valuing Difference

Learners in the 21st-century university include women, poor and working class people, and people of color and different nationalities. But it is still rare for institutions of higher learning to acknowledge as a legitimate resource what this diversity of students knows, or the cultural capital they bring with them when they enter college. These students' test scores, their presumed capacity for intellectual work, and perhaps their job experiences become the basis upon and filter through which many faculty may judge everything that the students will eventually learn. Such students are still largely thought to be almost exclusively on the epistemological receiving end.

In many composition courses though, what students bring with them becomes a resource for their writing and can add to the reservoir of knowledge that the class can draw upon. Derek Owens claims,

The territory of the writing workspace is shaped by a host of ideological impulses swirling around the professor, the institution, the student, the local region, and other involved parties—students in composition classes play an obviously greater role in that interior decorating, and the conversation cannot help but be more variegated and more unexpected—and often riskier—than in so many other classrooms beholden to the parameters of some predetermined subject. (6)

Whether born in Zimbabwe or New Jersey, as Rilke wrote in *Letters to a Young Poet*, all students possess a treasury childhood memories that belong only to them and shape how they have come to view the world and learning. These experiences can become the starting point for critical examination of who they are and how they view themselves and the social and historical forces they have experienced.

The latest iteration of the major assignment for the first unit in my class is something I've been calling alternately a cultural memoir, a life-map essay, or an "unauthorized autobiography"—the last term based on an essay that Indian (he prefers that term) writer Sherman Alexie composed. The assignment invites students to construct and examine the cultural identities they claim. Responding to a series of prompts and short texts by diverse authors, students write about their language, histories, their names, their families, fears, aspirations, desires, memories, dreams, neighborhoods, race, class, gender, sexuality,

religion and pull it together into a segmented essay that generally blows their minds (and mine). One student wrote,

I truly enjoyed sharing my experience and stories with my classmates. I never really had a chance to talk about myself and express how I felt about certain things, but in this class, I was able to tell my classmates and professor about my life. Something that made me more excited about writing was the fact that I could establish myself as a "writer." I never considered myself one, but after writing a couple of essays about my life and experiences, I realized that I was. . . .

I believe our students' diverse social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds demand that we acknowledge the literacies, histories, and the previous learning that they bring to the classroom and the University. And I don't just mean that for students whose ethnicities, nationalities, race, sexual preferences, economic status, and religious beliefs put them outside of the perceived—or I should say misperceived—"American" mainstream. I mean everyone who comes through the door, including the White middle-class protestant boy from Ohio, who at a school like ours is the exotic flower in the garden. This is important to do because it challenges what Laura Rendón has formulated as the "agreement of monoculturalism." The agreement of monoculturalism has created an epistemological dream underscored by (a) the almost exclusive validation of Western structures of knowledge, (b) the subjugation of knowledge created by indigenous people and people of color, (c) course offerings that preserve the superiority of Western civilization, and (d) the dominant presence of faculty and administrators in colleges and universities who subscribe to monocultural paradigms of knowledge production and comprehension (41).

Monoculturalism can remain invisible to students (and faculty) unless the curtain is thrown back and the familiar is made strange by questioning whether there are other ways of knowing and being in the world. One way to throw back the curtain is to draw out and draw upon the multiplicity of students' life experiences, languages, family histories and worldviews and to compare and contrast them with dominant assumptions and systems of belief. Although this can be uncomfortable at times for students who see no reason to question the status quo because they identify with the monoculture, or for students who have suppressed so much of themselves in order to fit in that they feel shame and fear, this too, is an act of love, as love acknowledges the presence of another, or in this case, the othered.

This past semester my students and I listened to Richard Blanco, the fifth inaugural poet of the United States, the first Latino and openly gay-identified person to hold the position, reading his poem "América" about his Cuban family's inability to "get" Thanksgiving, that quintessential American holiday, almost always presented in popular culture from a "mainstream," white American point of view. In the third stanza, Blanco he writes:

By seven I had grown suspicious--we were still here.
Overheard conversations about returning
had grown wistful and less frequent.
I spoke English; my parents didn't.
We didn't live in a two-story house
with a maid or a wood panel station wagon

nor vacation camping in Colorado.
None of the girls had hair of gold;
none of my brothers or cousins
were named Greg, Peter, or Marsha;
we were not the Brady Bunch.
None of the black and white characters
on Donna Reed or on Dick Van Dyke Show
were named Guadalupe, Lázaro, or Mercedes.
Patty Duke's family wasn't like us either--
they didn't have pork on Thanksgiving,
they ate turkey with cranberry sauce;
they didn't have *yuca*, they had yams
like the dittos of Pilgrims I colored in class ("América")

Afterwards, I encouraged students to write their own poems or narratives about food and cultural traditions. It was a simple exercise, but because we all eat, and food is connected to the land, the economy, and our histories and families, it is a powerful embodiment of culture. Some students were surprised that I was encouraging them to write about something so basic; the familiar hadn't become strange yet. But others were delighted to be able to use food as an entry point for a discussion and writing about their family backgrounds. When I responded to one student that her description of Caribbean food took me back home, she sent me an e-mail saying, "You are making me fall in love with English, and I can feel a change within myself just from our 6 weeks together. . . . Thank you so much Professor" (Lyons).

Monoculturalism is one of the reasons why some students become alienated and feel silenced and uncared for in schools. Despite the well-meaning efforts of educators to "represent" different cultures, if we don't challenge existing paradigms, it's almost as though we're grafting pears and cherries onto a deeply rooted apple tree and wondering why the tree doesn't bear these fruits. It is impossible for plants and difficult for people to flourish when they are separated from their roots.

Educating For Social Justice

Behind my exhortation to love students is an appeal for racial and gender equality and social justice, a call for an end to oppression of all kinds. And underlying this is a wounded child/adolescent who learned about inequality the hard way. Painful experiences in my years of schooling made me want to become a more sensitive, culturally aware and humble teacher than some of ones who taught me.

In third grade I had the loveliest teacher one could imagine, Miss Anne Gerstel. This was in 1961 two years before the March on Washington and long before multiculturalism became a buzzword in academic circles. Miss Gerstel acknowledged our different backgrounds and asked us to talk and write about ourselves. We were Caribbean black, American black, and Puerto Rican, with a sprinkling of Italian and Jewish kids. We were the children of waiters, domestics, factory workers, longshoremen, postal employees, and clerks. I remember explaining to Miss Gerstel how my mother straightened my hair with a metal comb, a hot comb, heated on the front burner of our narrow kitchen stove. Although I have since questioned this practice, at the time, I was proud to share it and

teach my teacher something about me. I loved going to school because my teacher loved me, and I loved my teacher—because I got to read, sing in plays, and learn folkdances.

Third grade, as it happens though, was also the beginning of the end of my love for school. And as the years of schooling dragged on, what I had loved I began to dread. Miss Gerstel was absent at one point that year, and they sent in a substitute. To get the class warmed up, she asked us what songs we knew. I can still see her standing awkwardly at the front of the room with her hands clasped beneath her bosom. She went through a list of songs. We stared at her as if she were speaking Martian. And then she pointed to me and said, “I bet *you* know the song ‘In Them Old Cotton Fields Back Home.’” I sensed I was in the presence of someone who had no genuine interest in me or my classmates. She started singing with an exaggerated Southern accent, “When I was a little bitty baby, my mama would rock me in my cradle in them old cotton fields back home. . . . You know it, don’t you?”

I shook my head no. I did know the song, which by the way, was first recorded by Leadbelly in 1951 and sung by a score of black and white artists including Johnny Cash, Harry Belafonte, and Odetta. But I was not going to sing it for her because something didn’t feel right. To her credit, she was trying to bridge what she probably thought of as a cultural chasm that prevented us from responding to her. But the gap was more affective than cultural: she just didn’t act like she liked us, so we did not like her. Besides that, we were urban children and even though some of us might have been down south to visit relatives, we thought of them as unsophisticated and country; the streets of Brooklyn were what we called home. In my case, “cotton pickin” was the only expletive my Sunday school teacher mother ever used, so “them cotton fields” were not something to be remembered with fondness; they were places to be feared. It was one of the first racial microaggressions that registered with me.¹ When I told my mother, she became incensed, but because she was the president of the P.T.A. and had the ear of the assistant principal, that particular substitute was never invited back to the school again.

Much later, shortly after I graduated college, I took a screenwriting course at The New School for Social Research in New York City, only to be told by my instructor that a scene I had written was completely implausible because “black girls from Brooklyn don’t go to Vassar.” Well, I had. But I was so humiliated and traumatized by his (public) comments that I never went back to the class. That fall when I entered a graduate program in creative writing, a well-known White male writer who had been invited to our fiction workshop, mercilessly critiqued a story I wrote about the heartache and struggles experienced by an older Black woman who worked as a maid. He told me, “Nobody is interested in reading stories about people like that.” The character in that story was based on a woman I called my godmother; someone I loved and felt a deep debt of gratitude towards because of all the sacrifices she had made for her nieces and me.

Making fun of students’ abilities and aspirations and denying their lived realities, even in jest, is the opposite of loving them. It’s also an expression of a kind of spiritual poverty and absence of empathy on the part of the teacher. When there is a racial difference between the student and teacher, it can be a manifestation of the hatred and

¹ “Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Nadal, 271).

fear of difference that still mar our educational institutions even when efforts are made at inclusion. Some would argue it is part of the very structure of those institutions. Carmen Kynard and Robert Eddy articulate a dynamic and multifaceted, color-conscious writing pedagogy to address, among other things, the silencing of students of color in the face of white supremacy and privilege—and the failure of historically white institutions to make efforts to undo the effects of racism and fully embrace and engage these students (W35-38). As bell Hooks maintains in *Writing Beyond Race*:

Irrespective of whether they are predominantly white or black, academic institutions are by nature and direction structurally conservative. Their primary function is to produce a professional managerial class that will serve the interests of the existing social and political status quo. Given that the ideologies of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy form the founding principles of culture in the United States, ways of thinking and being that are taught via mass socialization in educational institutions, it should be evident that the fundamental concerns of the academy in general are at odds with any efforts to affirm black self-determination. (166)

And I would add that hooks addresses the self-determination of *any* student whose background places him or her outside of the dominant culture. Teachers, and this includes teachers of color, may want to believe that we are agents of change in the classroom, but given our roles as gatekeepers and transmitters of the aforementioned cultural values, how likely is it that without activating a strong will to challenge the status quo that we can counter the hegemonic forces that invalidate other ways of being and knowing?

Manning Marable writes:

A humanistic, liberal education must. . . provide new insights for young people usually of privileged backgrounds, to understand the meaning and reality of hunger and poverty. It should create and nourish a commitment to a society committed to social justice and a culture of human rights which has the potential for including all of us. It should foster impatience with all forms of human inequality, whether based on gender, sexual orientation, or race. The knowledge to help to empower those without power, to bridge our social divisions, to define and to enrich our definitions of democracy, should be the central aim of a liberal education for the twenty-first century. (146)

If we choose to love our students, this is the type of education we will provide for them. And that means challenging the institutional forces and bankrupt educational policies that might obstruct us, as well as correcting the blind spots and rooting out negative tendencies in ourselves that contribute to societal ills. As Audre Lorde stated, “Racism and homophobia are real conditions of all our lives in this place and time. *I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears*”(113). This is the kind of soul searching teachers who seek to empower all of their students need to engage in if we want to provide “new insights” and examples for our students. Millennials may be more open to equality in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation and economic status than older generations, but unless we are willing to tear down the walls of oppression, they are still being educated in the “master’s house.”

Earning Respect by Choosing to Love

In the beginning of this essay, I used hooks' definition to argue that love is a choice. Earning respect, however, accompanies that choice. A couple of years ago at the beginning of the semester one of my students wrote, "I don't respect anyone just because they're in a position of authority, like a teacher. You have to earn my respect." At first I went to the bad place where the monk, Bodhisattva Fukyo (name translated as "Never Disparaging") would never go (Ch. 20, *Lotus Sutra*). I thought: *What! You little so-and-so*—especially because I saw her as a student who did not seem to respect herself. She was a Black female who had internalized standards of white beauty to the extent that she wore face powder two shades lighter than her complexion and a long straight wig that she fingered obsessively in class and referred to frequently as "my hair." Since she was African American and seemed to be so lacking in real self-esteem, I felt it was important to bond with her, but I put off by what she said. After while though, I realized that the self-loathing I recognized in her made it doubly important that she get the respect she deserved from me, especially since she saw in me the face of blackness that she had come to despise in herself.

How do we love students who, for us, wear the faces of difference? And how do we know if we're not showing them love? Discussing a study by Shaun Harper of Black men who succeed in college, Estela Mara Bensimon, professor and co-director of the University of Southern California's Center for Urban Education, reports, "Harper's research shows that many teachers and professors 'are not sufficiently conscious about [which students] we notice and who we don't,' and that—given how powerful those signals can be—instructors should be more purposeful about reaching out to students from a range of backgrounds" (quoted in Lederman). "Purposeful." This term takes us back to where we began: to the idea of love as making a choice. We can consciously choose to nurture growth, our own growth in this case, by being more aware and intentional in our interactions with our students.

If we create an atmosphere of respect and trust, through skillful teaching, we can be purposeful about the dynamics in our classrooms and use them as a point of departure for developing a critical consciousness. We can also purposefully seek to expand our definition of who we are and who we identify with, so that we are more inclusive. We can recognize that as teachers and learners, right alongside our students—though our differences must not be dismissed or ignored—each of us embodies the university. In that sense, no one is "other." But each is a part of the other, whom the Bodhisattva Fukyo residing in all of us finds worthy of respect.



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