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FRAMES OF POSITIONALITY: CONSTRUCTING MEANINGFUL DIALOGUES ABOUT GENDER AND RACE

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This essay compares two classrooms from an ethnographic study of eighteen feminist college teachers in order to highlight the differences in dialogues about race and gender in one predominantly white and one African-American classroom. While the discussion in the white classroom focused on only gender, the discussion in the African-American classroom emphasized the necessary intersection of race and gender in the examination of women's lives. This observation serves as a reminder to white feminists that we must pay attention to issues of race and racism in order to explore adequately feminist teaching in all settings. [gender, race, pedagogy, feminism, women's studies]

Introduction

The increasing ethnic and racial diversity of the student population in higher education, the feelings of alienation that are common among students, and the current epistemological revolution in the disciplines have all combined recently to generate an impassioned debate on the purposes of undergraduate education on campuses and in the media nationwide. We are currently engaged in an ethnographic study of eighteen feminist college professors who are responding to these challenges by initiating profound rethinking of their goals as teachers. They believe that to educate students for a complex, multicultural, multiracial world, they need to include the perspectives and voices of those who have been traditionally excluded from academic discourse—women of all backgrounds, people of color, and all men and women who perceive their education as at odds with who they are.[1]

This essay uses selected vignettes from transcripts of the classes of two of these professors to focus on the potentialities and limits of dialogues about diversity and difference, particularly those of racial difference. We have found the lens of positionality (our own and our informants') to be particularly useful as we explore how these professors and their students construct dialogues on difference, asking how their own positions in society and classroom shape what is taken up and what is repressed in the complex interplay among and within their particular race, gender, and class identities. By "positionality" we mean a concept articulated by Linda Alcoff (1988) and others, namely that gender, race, class, and other aspects of our identities are markers of relational *positions* rather than essential qualities. Knowledge is valid when it includes an acknowledgment of the knower's specific position in any context, because changing contextual and relational factors are crucial for defining identities and our knowledge in any given situation. The fashioning of one's voice in the classroom is largely constituted by one's position there. The race and gender of the teacher, as well as the make-up of the class, will affect the intellectual focus; in our observation, the class which included a majority of students of color and had an African-American teacher fostered different dialogues about race and racism than one that was predominantly white.

When we began our study we held the abstract notion, fashionable in feminist theory, that we needed to attend simultaneously to the categories of gender, race, and class as we analyzed classroom discourse. Our first sites were four institutions in which all our faculty informants and a large majority of their students were white, like ourselves. It was not until our visit to Spelman College, a historically African-American institution, that we began to understand and want to depict the difficulties in engaging in dialogues about issues of race that both the teachers and we as researchers face. It took us a long time to recognize our unconscious and evolving perspectives and motives as white researchers. We have needed to remind our-

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selves that the dialogues about race that we observed took place in a society where white, middle-class standards are considered the academic norm, where "whiteness" is an ideology, and where the dominant culture has achieved the intellectual feat of erasing African Americans (as well as other people of color) from a society that is "seething with their presence" (Morrison 1989). We have realized that we needed to go beyond our naiveté in constructing race and gender as separate entities. Like many white feminists, who are caught between a racial (and class) position of privilege and a gender position of oppression, we seem to have constructed this separation so as to avoid confronting our racial relations of privilege, while attempting to forge a connection with women of color around a common experience of gender oppression.

For these women, however, race and gender cannot be so separated. As one African-American informant told us, "Being dark-skinned in America, very dark-skinned, and being confronted with the fact that everybody was making wrong judgments about me when I was about seven, I decided well, if this country is wrong about me, they must be wrong about everything else." Women of color see white feminist teachers as obscuring issues of racism even as they attempt to construct a more inclusive classroom community. Bell hooks, a prominent black feminist theorist, described the problem of classroom racism well when she wrote:

> Black students sometimes get the feeling that feminism is a private white cult. The black students' relentless efforts to link all discussions of gender with race may be contested by white students, who see this as deflecting attention away from feminist concerns. And so suddenly the feminist classroom is no longer the safe haven many women students imagined. Instead it presents conflict, tension, hostility (hooks 1990 :29).

The problem of silencing issues of race and class identifications in predominantly white college classrooms is attributable in part to the common feminist pedagogical practice of evoking students' "personal experiences" as a means to come to mutual understandings. As Diana Fuss has noted, "The central category of difference (in any given situation) blinds us to other modes of difference and implicitly delegitimizes them . . . a hierarchy of identities is set up within each speaking subject" (Fuss 1990: 116). If some aspects of students' identities, such as gender, determine the unconscious choices they make about the personal experiences they want to explore, then other important identifications—around whiteness or race and racism, for example—may be buried.

One of our teacher-informants cogently described how this played out at Lewis and Clark College, her predominantly white institution:

> The culture of our Gender Studies program validates personal experiences *and* suppresses the expression of difference that challenge[s] other peoples' perspectives. People feel empowered to speak of their own experiences, and construct theory on that basis, and that is good. But they do not feel impelled to include other peoples' experience in their explanatory frameworks, and when other people insist that their experiences too must be taken into account, they respond with hostility. This is not feminist; it is a white, middle-class mode of behavior, and it is racist to the core. It passes as feminist because it seems to be supportive and sisterly. It is also hallowed by the haze of liberal ideology because it appears to be culturally relativist. But in practice it reinforces the exclusion and domination of women of color.
>
> As long as we merely integrate the experiences and voices of people of color into our courses, but fail to modify our paradigms to encompass the perspectives of people of color, we will not challenge the racist assumptions that whites set the standard for humanity and that people of color are different, that whites construct theory and people of color merely have experiences, that fundamental structures of society such as gender exist independently of race and class (Osterud 1987).

In other words, our explanatory frameworks are too often falsely constructed out of only white women's "gendered" experiences.

In this article we juxtapose three dialogues on gender and race from two classroom contexts in order to explore how two teachers and their students construct the relationships among these "fundamental structures of society."[2] We first look at a class on Women Writers at Lewis and Clark College, where an Asian-American student undertook an interpretation of Emily Dickinson, then at a treatment of Alice Walker's *The color purple* in the same class. Finally we look at an African-American teacher's exploration of another African-American woman's novel, *The women of Brewster Place*, in a Sociology of Women class at Spelman College. We ask: 1. How does the racial and gender composition of the classroom influence the process of knowledge construction? For example, how do white feminist teachers in predominantly white classrooms deal with race and racism within feminism? By contrast, how does a black teacher allocate her treatment of these issues? 2. How do the relational race and gender positions of the students and the professor intersect with and reproduce power relations in the society at large, influencing

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which issues are taken up, which ignored, which repressed or silenced? 3. How has our understanding of our own position as white researchers changed over time, as we have struggled to explore these issues?

An Asian-American Student and Emily Dickinson

A coeducational liberal arts college in Portland, Oregon, Lewis and Clark has 1800 undergraduates, 85% of whom are white. Of the rest, 4.5% are Asian, 1.2% are African American, 1.3% are Hispanic, and 6.3% are foreign-born. Lewis and Clark has a strong Gender Studies program, and the feminist faculty there have a persistent concern with the social construction of knowledge from new and different perspectives, particularly those of women but including those of students as well. Women Writers, taught by Dorothy Berkson, included seventeen women, three of whom were Asian American, and five (white) males. The following discussion of the poetry of Emily Dickinson provides a striking example of the ways in which a student's ethnicity and gender can intersect with a text to produce new meanings and new dialogues about difference.

The class was structured around students' journal entries rather than the teachers' questions, and on this day it happened to be a Japanese-American female student whose voice determined the course of the discussion. Nancy, who often sat on the edge of the room and who had not previously spoken during our several weeks of observation, offered to begin the class. She began her journal entry thus,

> (From poem #288): I couldn't help thinking of the idea of a mute culture within a dominant culture. A "nobody" knowing she's different from the dominant culture keeps silent and is surprised to find out there are others who share this feeling.
>
> But to be somebody! How dreary! How public! She says, "To tell one's name the livelong day to an admiring bog!" What is a name? I think she means an easily classifiable public identity. Names don't really tell you anything about what a person is like. So when you become a somebody and buy into the dominant culture, you have to live in their roles. You could call yourself a wife and the admiring bog says lovely, Yes. You could call yourself a spinster even and the bog would still admire you because you fit. But what if you don't want to be any of these things? Well then you stay a nobody. Nobodies, though silent and secretive at least have their peace, their solitude and are free from the judgment of the bog. (This could also be read about genius.)
>
> But looking at (poem #327) it's problematic, there is a price to pay, and it isn't always voluntary. Infinite vision seems to come from suffering through enforced pain. "Before I got my eyes put out I liked as well to see/ As other Creatures, that have Eyes and know no other way." You can run around in ignorant bliss until something breaks through this level of illusion, takes out the "eye" that makes it possible for you to view the world this way and once you see through it, you can't go back, trying to face yourself backwards would "strike you dead." I'm not articulating this well but it's like growing awareness.
>
> A silly example: It's like watching a Walt Disney as a child where Hayley Mills and these other girls dance and primp before a party singing "Femininity" how being a woman is all about looking pretty and smiling pretty and acting stupid to attract men. As a child I ate it up—at least it seemed benign, at the most I eagerly studied it. But once your eye gets put out and you realize how this vision has warped you, it would split your heart to try and believe that again, it would strike you dead. Much safer with your soul "upon the window pane."[3]

When Nancy stopped reading there was silence; it was as if the class itself were "struck dead." Berkson tried to help the students engage with her ideas by asking Nancy to summarize, but her journal entry proved too much for them, perhaps too complex or perhaps too painful. After a few of the students made unrelated comments, Berkson reviewed the concept of a mute culture within the dominant culture and related this issue to the idea of positionality:

> When you have cultures where one group dominates over another group—and this could be men over women, masters over slaves, one class over another class, it doesn't have to be men and women, it can take any number of configurations—any time you have that kind of a cultural situation, the suppressed or what he [Ardener] calls muted culture will often be silent in some very significant and profound way.

By relating Nancy's entry to oppressed groups in general, Berskon tried to help students look at the broader issues implied, but also, perhaps, to help them get beyond the pain Nancy referred to by making a less emotionally charged, more general statement. She next tried again to draw students into a discussion of the ideas. When students didn't respond, she turned again to ask Nancy to restate her ideas and the following conversation ensued:

> Susan [a white student, one whom we later discovered to have been a victim of sexual abuse]: That's 'cause it's like a gift that puts you in the dominant cultural role and then you kind of owe it something. . . . You can't believe in the subculture because you've got this gift and if you want to keep it you've got to stay somebody and that's got a price to pay.

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Berkson: This is really interesting. Anybody else?

Marcy [another Asian-American student]: When I read it, it was more like when you're a nobody, you know she's proud of being a nobody, she's a person, she's someone other than the majority. She had identified with that and she's kind of shocked when she finds that there is actually another person who doesn't want to be part of the majority also. When she says, "Oh how dreary to be somebody," it's like you don't stand out, you just kind of like, go in and mix with the majority. Whereas when you are a nobody you are someone.

Berkson: Think about the person who doesn't want to be a member of the majority and who chooses to be a public flake, etc. but to be nobody is a different kind of choice, it is really to disappear from that public arena into the private sphere or the wild zone.

Marcy: You don't have to answer to anyone and you just can be yourself.

Berkson: Yes.

Nancy: To add to that of what I thought is just to maintain that, to be able to maintain that, you had to be silent, you couldn't let anyone know, kind of. You have to be really sneaky.

In this discussion Nancy's perspective intersected with the poems to produce a journal entry that powerfully stated the position of a woman and a minority person, "a nobody knowing she's different from the dominant culture," breaking through an illusion of "ignorant bliss." The enforced pain of her awakening, the inability to face "yourself backwards" afterwards, was perhaps about confronting both sexism and racism. Her powerful example, described as "silly," implied that she saw through the illusion of a Japanese-American girl patterning herself after Hayley Mills, a prototypical blond American teenager from the sixties.

Berkson's democratic pedagogical style, her refusal here to assume an authoritative role, and her insistence on having Nancy take the lead, evoked speech from other students who themselves had been marginalized. Susan, in her comment about the "price to pay" for being "somebody," might have been referring to white women's reliance on and complicity with white males in the dominant culture. Susan and Marcy were able to claim a voice for themselves, identifying with the "nobody" that Nancy had brought into speech.

But Nancy's empathy here with the situations of those who have been profoundly silenced appeared initially to relate only to her gender. There is no explicit reference to race or ethnicity in her journal entry, while "wife" and "spinster" are mentioned as gender labels. In her interview, when Nancy was asked if this journal entry related to her personal experience, she said she "really didn't think about that." But later in a follow-up interview she said:

You know just even thinking in terms of race, even thinking about different kinds of minority perspectives, I guess, things like that I think I've started to look more into experience instead of just thinking about these theories. . . . *I think that is something that sort of came out of this class.* . . .

I really have grown up in this community where everybody is blond and tall. . . . *We are the only Japanese people and since we never had really any Japanese community I was never aware of that aspect in myself.* Which doesn't mean that that didn't have any influence on the interactions, it just meant that I was not aware of that as influencing.[4]

Nancy's last comment in the discussion, about having to be "silent" and "sneaky," perhaps refers to her silence on this topic. But she began to think later about "looking into" her ethnic experience as a result of this class.

The silence about race and ethnicity in this discussion was probably not only a function of Nancy's reticence. In Berkson's definition of positionality and in the discussion that followed, the idea of being a "nobody" was pursued quite abstractly by all the speakers with no mention of ethnicity, even though Marcy in particular was probably referring to race as well as gender when she talked about "not standing out, mixing with the majority." Another probable reason for this silence, beyond Nancy's own reticence and probably contributing to it, is the frequent difficulty and pain in dialogues about race and ethnicity among whites and people of color, where such dialogues might confront racism and white privilege. When Nancy said "[i]t would split your heart" to try to believe in Hayley Mills again, in what complex ways must the white students, male and female, in the class have reacted? What was their relationship to the symbolism of Hayley Mills? It is noteworthy that of the two students who took up Nancy's themes, Marcy was another Asian-American student and Susan had been in some kind of abusive childhood situation. In this conversation, ostensibly about gender, the intensity of all three voices may well have come from other issues which seemed unsafe to refer to directly. The issues addressed concerned outsider status, but only the kind of outsiderhood—being a woman—that could be named in this classroom, where there were males as well as females but only a few students of color. As it was, much of the class remained silent in the face of what Nancy said that day.

Dorothy Berkson, on the other hand, told us

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that she recognized immediately that the students who had the most profound response to Dickinson were the Japanese-American women. She told the class later that semester that the course was "too WASP, too British-American mainstream writers," and she has since revised the course to center on American and South African black and white writers, drawing in race and racism as one of the central course themes.

The Color Purple

It was not until later on in the course that gender was explicitly placed in a racial and cultural context, and in fact, like many such courses, Women Writers was structured so that a work by an African-American woman was taken up last. In a discussion of *The color purple* Berkson was acutely aware of the special responsibility she and her students had in dealing with texts by and about women of color. This class began by discussing a section of the novel that deals with an American black family's missionary experience in Africa. Berkson said,

> That's interesting. . . . Is it because we're white that we're having some problems with that? I think we have to seriously say, here we sit, a room full of primarily WASP people, OK, *certainly none of us are black and haven't been raised in a black culture. Well, I think that's our problem, it's not the text's problem.* It's because we don't really have a way to enter into the imaginative structures of that particular thing. When we're dealing with texts from other cultures, other races, I think we have to assume an additional burden of responsibility for looking hard at the thing and trying to see if it's somehow our own blindness to certain cultural values that's preventing us from understanding what is going on.

Because she called attention to their position as mainly white readers, race was no longer the unmarked term, although the positions and reactions of the Asian-American students must have remained confused and ambiguous. To Berkson, what prevented the class from entering fully into Walker's "imaginative structures" was their blindness to African-American experiences, to other "cultural values." Later on the class discussed the ways in which the women in the book exert power. A student said,

> They have supportive power, kind of—being able to hold somebody up and get behind them.
>
> Berkson: A nurturing power? [Using the classic adjective feminists use to describe women's qualities.]
>
> Claire: It's not just support and nurturing though. It's a confidence in themselves. Power is a word where, that there's strength, and I don't think we should portray them as nurturing and supportive only. I mean that's not the only thing they are. There's just a confidence that someone like Sophia has just had to fight tooth and nail to get.

Claire was asking an important question—is the character Sophia's power coming from nurturance or from resistance to oppression? After a long discussion about other aspects of the novel, the class came to the issue of wife abuse and ways to think about Mister, the husband in the novel, and his abuse of his wife Celie. Berkson said,

> I think that in middle-class cultures you may have more—that for men to literally, physically beat their wives is an aberration [in the middle class] but then I think maybe I shouldn't make that generalization.
>
> Claire: My friend is working at a woman's shelter now and she says all her stereotypes of who beats women are broken.
>
> Susan: [herself a victim of abuse] The first time I read this I thought this is what it's like among black people, you know, and this is what happens, the men are always beating them. Now I kind of look at it like it's about men and women, not just about black people, because the whites. . . .
>
> Berkson: That's an interesting issue that you just raised, and it's interesting in two different ways. First of all, Alice Walker has been heavily criticized in the black community—that this book presents what many black men in particular think is a very terrible stereotype of them—and it reinforces that stereotype in the minds of whites.
>
> Susan: The fact is this could be a white household as well.
>
> Berkson: Exactly. And that's the other issue, that *this is a book that is about race, class, and gender, but I think it's most profoundly about gender.* I think that it crosses over the other barriers and that the real cutting issue here is gender roles, and you're right it could happen anywhere.

In this discussion the teacher's and students' admiration of the main female characters was obvious. By acknowledging that battering occurs in white homes too, the class forged a connection between black and white women and enacted their identification with black women's victimization. They also saw variations; they pointed out that the power of women in *The color purple* came not from female nurturance but from resistance to oppression.

Yet they did not really explore white racism as a major source of the oppression the characters faced, nor even focus explicitly on their lives as African Americans. Their enthusiasm for these texts was based on their identification with the charac-

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ters in terms of a common gender oppression, and the hierarchy of appropriate identities to be discussed (in Fuss' terms) privileged gender as the main category of analysis. A focus on race and racism would have meant that the class would have had to look at their own positions of privilege, and recognize their whiteness as a barrier to a common understanding.

Our first analysis of this discussion noted this failure to focus on racism, because we were struck by the teacher's comment that the book was "most profoundly about gender." We now think that it shows the profoundly different ways whites and people of color have thought about race in this culture. We can see the deep limitations of the racially isolated contexts in which many white feminists work. In such environments it is almost automatic to separate race and gender, reinforcing over and over again the assumption that "female" is "white," and making it easy to subsume experiences that vary from or challenge whiteness as the norm. It is also difficult, even in a context where the three students of color happened to be Asian American, not to equate "women of color" with African American, erecting blackness as "the Other" to whiteness and replacing the complexities of race and ethnic relations and positions with another binary opposition. Nevertheless, under Berkson's leadership, the class was struggling with a new consciousness and appreciation of these issues, and their identification with black women writers may have been a first step towards understanding African-American women's oppression as significant on its own terms.

An African-American Teacher and an African-American Text

This last excerpt is from a Sociology of Women class taught at Spelman College. Spelman, whose historic prominence has increased since the accession of Johnetta Cole, its first African-American woman president, has an undergraduate population of about 1700 students, all of whom are young black women. According to our informants, particularly the faculty and students in Women's Studies, the primary purpose of the institution is to develop an education to empower black women, the group always placed at the bottom of the race and gender hierarchy. In this Sociology of Women class all of the fifteen students and the teacher, Mona Phillips, were African-American women. While the discussion was initially meant to be about several theoretical issues in African-American women's lives, it took another direction when a student mentioned that a novel they had all just read was on TV.

> Andrea: You know they were playing that movie? ["The Women of Brewster Place"]
>
> Phillips: Oh yeah. OK, did you watch it again? [Murmurs of assent, laughter] . . . OK all of you have seen it, right? If you haven't seen it, watch it. At some point—it was much too painful for me to watch it, again. So I didn't.
>
> [Laughter]
>
> Andrea: I was watching it with one of my roommates, and she'd never read the book, and I was like that's not how it's s'posed to be, you know like I was trying to explain to her. . . .
>
> Phillips: [T]he thing is that it's incomplete, the televised production of "Women of Brewster Place" is incomplete. Why is it incomplete? I would argue looking at the overlapping circles [of race, class, and gender] is that it is essentially, *the televised production is a woman's story?* It's a woman's story, ok, whereas Naylor's book recognizes—all right, here we go—the dark enclosure within the narrow space, she never lets you forget the narrow space. And in the very first chapter she tells you about the historical construction of that narrow space, and narrow space equals the what?
>
> [Students]: The wall.
>
> Phillips: The wall.
>
> She never forgets, she never lets you forget the distance, the distance, right, of the narrow space, and the dark enclosure within the larger space.[5]

Phillips was making the point that the television show was about gender only, whereas Naylor's book was about race and gender, the "dark enclosure." She herself has recently written about the messiness and complexity of the African-American female experience in Brewster Place and other works, seeing it both as embedded within and marginalized by the dominant culture.[6]

> Kim: I just want to [unintelligible: the TV show had?] terrible stereotypes of black women. Someone said, there's not a character on that television that they would want to be. . . . You know, it's, I could not watch that movie.
>
> Phillips: And that is the problem, and what you see in a televised version of this are a lot of problems, as well as being commercializing. You miss Naylor's, you miss the history, and you miss the voice, you miss the language she uses, but you realize *how inadequate it is to just apply gender analysis to black women's lives.* You cannot do it, you cannot do it and end up making some sense.
>
> Manya: When I read it, I found out about CC Baker—the way she describes it he's a victim, and they just leave that stuff out—I mean that's all, [Phillips: he leaves her because he's decided to] that's the only conclu-

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> sion that you get you know, and there you feel that it's just like, you can really see the genocide, you can see how he has to show, "Look, I'm a man, you know, look, respect me."

Her point was that the TV show makes CC Baker, a man who rapes a female character, a villain rather than a victim of white genocide against blacks. The position of black men was a constant theme in the class—as a class they usually resolved these issues by placing males' exploitation of black women within the larger context of racism, rather than focusing on sexism as an issue.

> Phillips: Because he's functioning in that narrow space, because he's functioning in that narrow space, and you can't defend him, there's no way you can defend him, it's a horrible thing, but Naylor makes you understand. . . .
>
> Andrea: I could watch the movie but it was just hard to just take in, instead of wondering why it was the way it was. Why is it that they did what they did?
>
> . . .
>
> Wednesday: Well then what about the institutional constraints? Now I don't know what station this was on—it wasn't by any chance NBC? [No's, ABC] because, the reason I asked that is because I always hear people talk about NBC as the Negro Broadcasting Company, [laughter] because they always tend to try, well this is a stereotype, they try to cater to black struggles, but even though they do cater to black struggles, it's not necessarily that realistic, because we go from "Good Times" to "Cosby," and there is no, there is no middle. You know, it's just so *extreme*, you're either at the very end or the very top, [Phillips: Yeah, yeah] and in talking about, you know I didn't see [unintelligible] yesterday but in thinking about it I started thinking about well *they're trying to do this carefully for white people*, you know trying to--you know what I'm saying?—it frustrates me—it frustrates me how—oh, God—[in an exasperated tone]).

This is a complex reading of the white media's control and distortion of black lives, arguing that it either makes blacks just like whites or locates them at the bottom, because in any case these images are served up for white people. This passage underscored for us the necessity for the naming of your own reality—being able, in the face of such distortions, to know what you know.

> Phillips: There are certain things in Naylor's book, right, that are disturbing, ok, and that just don't come through in the television production. Like at the end, at the end it is not clear in the televised production that they are dreaming of tearing down the wall. The wall is there at the end of the novel. Now that [laughs] that's a frightening kind of thing.
>
> I mean that whole passage, and you have this wall still there, whereas on TV—I don't want to destroy the end for anybody who hasn't seen it—but they tear the wall down, which is saying? . . . The axes are all there, and the picks and everything, which is a message about what? [Writes on board] The whole notion of free will. You can do it.
>
> Student: [Unidentified] This is the American dream.

We initially chose this excerpt for analysis because it illustrated to us some ways in which Phillips and her students were seeking to build what might be called a black women's oppositional knowledge. Just as in the Lewis and Clark class, the teacher's openness to the students' perspectives and the students' experiences and reactions to the material promoted an evolution of knowledge and understanding based on their positions and their sense of their own reality. Our questions above concerned classroom gender and racial positions and their connections to societal power relations. In the other class, with its white majority, this emphasis on student voices and student perspectives produced erasures of ethnicity and race. But the assumptions of whiteness that the teacher struggled to make visible in the other class became the central oppressive backdrop to this one, which was composed of African-American women. The class was confronting racism in the form of the erasure of their own identities. They faced a medium that, even in the depiction of African-American lives, constructed them "carefully for white people." By tearing down the wall that represented a barrier to the American dream, one TV show seemed to deny that racism even existed. Furthermore, Phillips and her students explicitly objected to the presentation of *The women of Brewster Place* as a women's story, refusing this separation of race and gender and the accommodation of their oppression to gender categorization alone: "You realize how inadequate it is just to apply gender analysis to black women's lives."

Conclusion

If we have gained one thing by exploring such issues in our work, it is how inadequate it is just to apply gender analysis to the lives of women, whether black or white. We began with the importance of noting students' and teachers' gender and race positions as determinants of which issues are taken up and which suppressed in classroom discourse. On that level, it is possible to read the last discussion above as enacting a suppression of gender issues and of black male sexism. After noting

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the racial homogeneity of both of these classrooms, we could simply contrast Dorothy's making *The color purple* "most profoundly about gender" with Mona's rejoinder about the inadequacy of gender analysis for black women's lives. We could then see these classrooms as mirror images of one another, with each one emphasizing one side of the racial/gender split commonly noted by white feminists, and at the same time ignore the complexities raised by Nancy's evocation of her position, and her silence.

However, such an analysis would miss the lessons that our informants have taught us about the complexity of these issues. To "modify our paradigms to encompass the perspectives of people of color" in Osterud's terms means to reframe racial and gender positions as relationships—relationships of power, exploitation, domination, accommodation, and resistance. Looking at our second question, about our classrooms' embeddedness in societal power relations, we can see that these two classrooms do not so much oppose each other as deconstruct each other. They can both in fact be seen as examples of the ways in which whiteness, like maleness, having been constructed as not only the dominant voice but the truth, can then proceed to erase color and ethnicity as any kind of meaningful differences at all (in a society, in Toni Morrison's terms, "seething with its presence"). Thus Nancy evoked her ethnicity obliquely, perhaps even unconsciously; her reference to Hayley Mills was "sneaky" and it did not get taken up. Susan, Claire, and Dorothy recognized the violence in *The color purple* only as it depicted something white people could recognize and share as women. In such appropriations of the experiences of people of color, white majority classrooms erase differences rather than confronting them. The costs of such appropriations are seen in the second class, whose discourse may be read as a running commentary on the first. Phillips and her students were fighting on several levels to constitute their existence as knowers of their own separate experience against its erasure by whites. The wall exists, they said; it cannot be torn down.

In our own positions as researchers, our informants' voices of resistance to the dominant paradigms with which we began have taught us some ways to think beyond these frameworks. Our early utopian vision of gender, race, and class equality and harmony in the feminist classroom failed to take account of the ways in which this harmony has often been won by the silencing of certain voices. Our society tends to construct "equality" as sameness, difference as hierarchical and bad. However, these resisters—Dorothy Berkson and her students, Grey Osterud, Mona Phillips and her students, others from many settings, have taught us to respect the complexity that an attention to the relations of difference entails. This particular juxtaposition of classrooms has helped to show us the necessity to confront the position of "white," as well as the various ones of "people of color," in the naming and exploring of white racism as a central relationship and dynamic within contemporary feminism.

By using Mona Phillips' class as a commentary on Berkson's, as well as a vignette in itself, we want to underscore the ways in which women of color have taught us to focus on these issues in our work. As Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, and Cohen (1989) have noted, the evolution of feminist theory in coming to terms with diversity "bears relation to the postmodern deconstruction of the subject, but it stems from a very different source: the political confrontation between white feminists and women of color." Were we to be drawing broader conclusions for teachers, we might recommend acknowledgement of the various sources of our own and our students' positionalities, and a self-consciousness about the many standpoints from which teachers and students could fashion their voices. Reflecting Donna Haraway's point (1988) that only *consciously* partial perspectives guarantee objectivity, bell hooks tells white feminists this in a recent book:

> I would have appreciated hearing a sentence (from you) that might have begun, "As a white woman reading Toni Morrison's *Sula*, I was. . . ." Such a position would allow white women scholars to share their ideas about black women's writing without assuming that . . . they would be trying to be the authority (1989: 48).

We also might ask teachers to pay attention to a Pilipina student from another Gender Studies class at Lewis and Clark, who says:

> In this class we haven't read Asian women. . . . It's just, we've been focusing on Black and White America, and the thing is that Black and White America doesn't exist. And that's been hard and I just wonder if it's because she's really only read Black and White and she hasn't read Japanese, or Korean, or Mexican.

More generally, we might make a statement about what the comparison of feminist classrooms

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might offer to the construction of a postmodern feminist theory. Classrooms are arenas of knowledge construction that are specific, partial, and unique. Yet these constructions represent in microcosm larger societal discourses shaped by their participants' positions in terms of gender, race, and class. Each dialogue, and the juxtaposition of many voices, allows us to see ways in which difference, and the confrontations it produces, can lead to richer complexities of theory. We can also glimpse how naming our positions as multiple, and putting them in relation to each other, can lead to more sophisticated forms of interaction and community.

NOTES

[1]In constructing our ethnography, we have visited six institutions, in each of which we have selected three professors known by their colleagues as committed feminists in their choice of subject matter and their pedagogical approaches. We have spent three weeks at each site, observing and taping classes and interviewing the teachers and selected students. Out of the transcripts of these encounters we create portraits of each teacher informant, which we then share with them, incorporating their reactions into our analyses.

[2]While this paper, for reasons of space, is limited to a discussion of race and gender issues, class is equally important. Furthermore, it has also been pointed out that at least race has become an explicit topic in the college classroom, whereas class, and the position of many working class students in the academy, is still a taboo subject and an unmarked term (Thorne 1989; Gardner *et al.* 1989).

[3]This journal entry was based on poems #288 and #327, both from the Johnson (1967) edition of Emily Dickinson's poetry.

[4]Italics ours, as elsewhere in the text.

[5]The "narrow space" is the life created for blacks by racism in America; the "dark enclosure" is the life of black women "within" the narrow space. This formulation is from Gloria Wade-Gayles' book on black feminist literary criticism, *No crystal stair* (Wade-Gayles 1984). The wall in the book was one that separated the street of black families from the world outside.

[6]Mona Phillips, "Telling the stories of the internal colony: Narrative analyses of embeddedness/separateness in space, history and conduits," Paper presented at the Southern Sociological Meetings, Atlanta, 1991.

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