Presumed Incompetent

The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia

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Meeting Audre

I first "met" Audre Lorde in the late 1980s while attending a midsized liberal arts Lutheran university on the West Coast. Because I grew up in a predominately white working-class town and attended college with mostly white middle-class students and professors, Audre Lorde's work was my introduction to multiracial feminism; she was also one of my first loves. My love for her was abstract because I only knew her through her writing, but she danced into my life at a critical crossroads, sang to me about the "erotic as power," and made me hungry for more. I was a senior in college, writing my thesis on what I called the "evilization of sexuality"— attempting to understand how and why religious and cultural texts so often demonized earthly and bodily matters. Why were the body and sexuality seen as evil? Why were women and people of color so often cast as the source of this evil? Why did religious and cultural texts so consistently associate mind and spirit with maleness and whiteness?

In my own life, I was questioning taken-for-granted knowledge and wondering if anything I had been taught in church was true. As a child and a teenager, my (mostly white, middle-class, college-educated) church had given me a sense of identity and community: one that offered a welcoming space outside of shopping malls and the cliques of my (mostly white, working-class, non-college-bound) high school, a space where I could develop an inner sense of self, mind, and

spirit. While I was a basketball and track athlete and a drum major for the school's marching band, I kept myself planted on the sidelines of my high school's social events, playing the role of spectator and social commentator. Tall, shy, and religious as a child, I watched the social/secular world from a distance. I had my small gang of friends—all college-bound white girls like me—but peers also told me regularly that I was too tall. (To which comment I silently wondered, "too tall for what?") Perhaps understandably, I had little desire for dating or taking risks that involved my heart.

But in college—with my expanded intellectual and social repertoire—my church community became increasingly cramped for my growing humanist, pragmatist, and feminist consciousness and my burgeoning sexual appetite for both women and men. Lorde invited me into a fresh intellectual and spiritual space, a way of thinking and living that entailed freedom, creativity, passion, and embodied feminist living. It was a place where the erotic was not a source of shame, isolation, and fear but, rather, a source of power, creativity, community, and an integrated life; a place where hierarchical dichotomies like superior/inferior, good/evil, mind/body, man/woman, and white/black were exposed as man-made justifications for privilege and inequality.

Writing Alone

I went to graduate school for the same reasons many intellectual feminists do: a love of learning and a life of the mind, and a belief in social justice and the radical implications of intellectual thought. I imagined graduate school would bring me closer to purpose, love, and justice politics. My classes would be full of students and professors like Audre Lorde, with whom I would become friends (and maybe lovers), and together we would work for a better world. Since I was going to attend a large, public university in a liberal city, I worried that I would be the most conservative, privileged, and sheltered person in the bunch but hoped that my future intellectual comrades would show me the way toward what Cornell West calls "engaged insurgent praxis" (hooks and West 1991, 144).

Instead, it seemed to me that I was the most radical person in the room. I was surrounded by "cream-of-the-crop" researchers, many from even more privileged class backgrounds than mine. Some of my colleagues were interested in studying social movements but seemed completely disinterested in working for social change. I watched graduate students emulate faculty in public performances of intellectual sophistication and superiority, often, it seemed, at others' expense. My skills in statistics and high theory expanded, but I had to search hard for scraps of radical theory, and even harder for people who were integrating it with action.

It soon became clear that my interests in studying the edges of culture and sexuality through qualitative methods and with a theoretical lens that critiqued structures of power was an awkward fit with my department. I had heard that graduate students were supposed to work with professors, but the process by which faculty chose the students was murky. A couple of male professors took an interest in me but not necessarily in an intellectual way. I became increasingly alienated and deflated. I also became paranoid about the way I was viewed (with my rock-and-roll style and interest in sex workers) by the mostly white male heterosexual faculty. I began to retreat.

Graduate school became an exercise in isolation; my road to a PhD seemed increasingly improbable. My political, social, and intellectual worlds were increasingly

fragmented. I seriously considered quitting school to become a documentary film-maker, where I could be free to practice radical social critique.

I did not realize it at the time, but my isolation, fear, and hurt at being excluded from departmental power was not just a result of sexism but also of my race and class privilege. I was well aware of the sexist double standard for appearance: as an unspoken rule, women graduate students and faculty dress and act profession-ally while their male counterparts nonchalantly show up in jeans and T-shirts. I felt angry about this sexist norm and deliberately worked against it. However, due to my own unexamined race and class privileges, I had simply assumed that I could critique social conventions, wear and study whatever I wanted, and still be respected and promoted by senior white male faculty. This was very likely not an assumption shared by my colleagues of color. Additionally, considering an alternative career as a documentary filmmaker also sprang from my class-based security; while nowhere near a trust-fund baby, I knew that my parents would partly protect me from slipping into abject poverty, regardless of my career choice.

Around that time I was encouraged by the faculty hire of an African American woman—the only woman-of-color faculty member in the department at that time. Like me she studied the challenges of oppressed people and worked from a qualita-tive, critical perspective. But in what seemed like the blink of an eye—and before I had even had a chance to take a class from her—she vanished from the department.

I viewed her departure—as did other women in my department—with alarm. The senior-level faculty members were close-lipped about the details of her case, but something bigger than just that was wrong. She was one of three female assistant professors who I had watched just disappear before going up for tenure. Feeling that my position in the department as a graduate student was tenuous, I did not know if I should—or how I could—intervene.

Whereas in the past I had turned to Audre Lorde for guidance on my own and others' sexual and personal freedom, I started to become haunted by the less joyful aspects of her writing: "We have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, *or destroy it if we think it is subordinate*" (Lorde [1984] 2000, 605; emphasis added). The real-world implications of racist and sexist systems of oppression, so vividly described by Lorde, were beginning finally to sink in.

Making Connections

> *When we talk about that which will sustain and nurture our spiritual growth as a people, we must once again talk about the importance of com-munity. For one of the most vital ways we can sustain ourselves is by build-ing communities of resistance, places where we know we are not alone.*
>
> bell hooks, *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life*

It was becoming increasingly obvious that junior women faculty were not just falling through the cracks: those cracks were systemic, and women of color were falling through them faster. There were also murmured concerns about potentially exploitative power relationships between faculty and graduate students. This was prior to any formal policy about sexual harassment in the department but was fresh

on the heels of the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings. In response to these galvanizing departmental and cultural/political events, women faculty started to reach out more directly to each other and women graduate students.

Possibly due to this rearticulation of feminist consciousness, some women faculty started to slip me articles or books of interest to my work. I credit two women in particular, one a senior-level professor and one a recent PhD graduate of the department—both queer/lesbian (and white) like me—for getting me back into the game. They invited me to present at conferences and contribute to special edited volumes, connected me to other scholars, served on my dissertation committee, and eventually pulled me through to the dissertation/PhD finish line. Because these two senior women took an interest in not just my work but my welfare, I was able to finish.

The mentoring that I eventually received is the sort that is necessary for graduate students and junior faculty members to succeed. Professional mentoring involves a personal relationship between two people—their shared interests, hobbies, values, and philosophies—in other words, their sense of a shared culture and community, as well as the ways that their social positions of both privilege and oppression matter. This means that newcomers, who have fewer overlapping sociocultural axes of power and privilege with their seniors, simply are not included in as many valued social interactions and networks. Without any formal mechanisms to ensure equal access to mentors, it is easier for those in power to ignore, systematically disadvantage, or destroy the less enfranchised. It is no surprise, then, that mentoring is critical for graduate students and faculty of color in white-dominated departments and disciplines (Stanley and Lincoln 2005).

By the time I finally finished the excruciating task of writing my dissertation and earning my PhD, the tenure-track job market in my field was reportedly more fiercely competitive than ever. But for family reasons (my female partner was in school, and we had a new baby), I focused my job search on positions that were either close to home or in known gay-friendly locations. My upper-class, white, graduate-student colleagues thought I was crazy for limiting my geographical options. In contrast, my friends who were women of color, queer, and/or working class (in other words, those who understood the need for home allies in a hostile world, prioritized their family as much—if not more—than their careers, and did not assume that they could just move anywhere and be accepted by any community) supported me in this decision.

Through one of my mentor's connections, I landed a full-time lecturer position at a local Jesuit university. While I would have to continue to search for a permanent job, this was an important and convenient stepping stone between graduate school and the tenure-track job market. It gave me and my family vastly increased economic stability, a chance to live in subsidized faculty housing in a city and neighborhood where we were already welcome, and the social status of an institutional affiliation.

When the perfect tenure-track job for me opened up within driving distance of home, my same two graduate mentors wrote glowing letters of recommendation. This—in addition to the publications I had then in print, combined with my now-extensive teaching experience—helped me get the job. Upon hearing the news that I had been offered the job, my partner—who was not at all prone to supernatural explanations—tearfully exclaimed, "A miracle has happened!" After so many years of toil, near failure, and being told that I couldn't afford to be picky, I was over the moon with gratitude and glee. It did indeed feel like a miracle. But I also knew that

a heavy portion of this miracle had been set up by a lifetime of social connections. And it was with this knowledge that I approached my work as a new faculty member.

Teaching/Learning about Oppression

The teacher, in the flesh, embodies knowledge.

Joanna Frueh, *Erotic Faculties*

As a new assistant professor, I taught classes about a number of socially and politically contentious issues that disproportionately impact oppressed and marginalized populations: sex work, welfare reform, incarceration, teen pregnancy, domestic violence, GLBTQ families, homelessness, and hate crimes. To facilitate productive discussions around these issues, I attempted to create safe and warm classrooms and online discussions. I was consumed with finding and creating assignments to help my students feel connected to both the material and each other. On the eve of every new term, I ritualistically found courage and inspiration in bell hooks's *Teaching to Transgress* (1994). I loved to teach and often felt a deep sense of alliance with and admiration for my students.

My hope in facilitating a warm learning atmosphere was not just for the sake of pleasure and safety (although those are both valuable qualities) but also to help students stretch themselves into new theoretical, empirical, and experiential domains. I hoped that in such an atmosphere, students would examine, rather than defend, their own assumptions and engage in thoughtful dialogue without fear of being attacked. I emphasized to students that they would be graded not on their ultimate position on a topic but on their ability to critically evaluate available evidence, compare and contrast theoretical models, and respond with a comprehensive set of questions and conclusions. I was prepared for conflict and even invited it as a productive process—as long as it did not dehumanize or alienate anyone.

But despite my concern for protecting students and guiding them into discussions that were both rigorous and humane, I neglected to protect myself. Sure, I was aware of the risks of being "out" in the classroom: the national antigay marriage movement was gaining steam, and high-profile hate crimes against the GLBTQ community were on the rise. One of my students brought me a news clipping about a local pastor (whose church was within walking distance of my campus) who was publicly preaching antigay hatred. This student said that she was worried and told me to be careful. However, I assumed that my privileged structural position as a tenure-track faculty member at a top university meant that my subject positions and all that they invoked could stay above the fray, at least in my own classroom.

This false assumption soon rubbed up against my next lesson in intersectional privilege: although I was bolstered by a number of social and institutional factors—including having a position of authority as a faculty member and a reputation for being nice, fair, and attractive (all shaped by gender, race, and class ideologies), and being white with a PhD—this would not spare me from classroom "microaggression" (Pierce 1978) or interactional cruelties inflicted across lines of difference to maintain racist, classist, sexist, heterosexist, and other oppressive social hierarchies.

I will highlight two classroom incidents here. One prolonged situation occurred in a sexuality class that I was coteaching. Midway through the term, someone in the

class anonymously posted on our online discussion board an article about the so-called gay agenda that referred to gay people as less than human and responsible for the demise of western civilization. Shortly thereafter another online post specifically named me as a "feminazi." The note was accompanied by an image of a swastika dripping with blood, framed by a pink triangle, and signed by Fred Phelps (the leader of the God Hates Fags movement). The actual author of the second note and image later voluntarily identified himself and said it was meant to be a joke. However, the student who posted the "gay-agenda" article never identified her/himself, and the incident sparked fierce debate among the students. One student (a heterosexual woman with gay friends) threatened to file a lawsuit against the still-unnamed student on the basis of creating a hostile learning environment; she demanded that the student either delete the gay-agenda article or reveal his or her identity. A few others in the class countered with a free-speech tactic, arguing that the student had the right to remain anonymous and the article should remain online. The bulk of the class were silent and/or neutral observers.

As the only acknowledged queer person in the class (of ninety students, two professors, and one teaching assistant), I felt the entire episode was a directly personal and hostile act. And as one of the professors of the class—and an untenured one at that—I also found myself in a very awkward position about how to respond. I shared my sociological analysis of the deleterious impact of hate speech with the class but then ducked and prayed for the term to end. Each remaining moment that I was required to stand in front of that class felt like torture. (After that quarter, I revoked the option of anonymous postings and emphasized the importance of personal accountability for all discussions of course material.)

The second prolonged incident stemmed from a popular course that I taught on social inequality. Using an intersectional framework to discuss a range of social issues, we came to a unit on hate crimes, which included not just violence against GLBTQ populations but also targeted crimes against women and people of color. For this particular class session, I brought in examples of recent local cases of hate crimes and/or discrimination based on sexual or gender orientation and asked for volunteers to read the stories aloud. One story was about a lesbian high school student who had been prohibited from using the girls' locker room. Even though she had no record of causing trouble inside or outside the locker room, some of her classmates and their parents had circulated a petition to ban her from using it; the petition was signed by the principal, and the student was banned.

After hearing this story, a student—a white woman who was approximately my age—raised her hand, looked directly at me, and said, "I sure wouldn't want to get undressed next to a lesbian." I calmly replied that if she was worried about being checked out in the locker room, she could also be concerned about the straight women next to her and that it is possible that those who are most identifiable as lesbians are more likely to keep their eyes cast down, knowing that they are already seen as sexual suspects. Other students in the class (all of whom identified themselves as heterosexual) then jumped in and argued passionately against her position. (Meanwhile, as a lifelong athlete, I silently worried, Does she go to my gym? What if she sees me in the locker room? Will she start a petition to keep me out?)

The next day I received an email from this student requesting a meeting to discuss the "unfair treatment" she felt she was receiving from other students in my class. With extreme trepidation, I set up an appointment for a few days later. My

concern was not about meeting with her but about the timing of her request: over the course of the term, she had taken the most extreme position in the class on a number of issues, including affirmative action, corporal punishment in schools, and homelessness. In every case, her discussions with classmates were (in my opinion) vigorous, but civil. Why was it only now that she wanted to complain to me in person? In agreeing to this meeting, I knew that I would be expected to listen compassionately to her desire for locker rooms segregated by sexual orientation (with the subtext that she needed to be protected from people like me). And I knew that if I did not do this, I risked being called biased. I started to become very concerned and wondered, Should I invite another colleague to the meeting? Should I prepare myself for a case of reverse discrimination? Should I hire a lawyer?

This is where the story takes a turn for the worse. Remembering the trauma and isolation of being the only visible gay target in the previous classroom incident, I decided to reach out to my network of feminist academics, a group that was largely dominated by white, nonqueer women with PhDs. I might not always be safe to facilitate critical discussions of homophobia and heterosexism in my classroom, but at least I could do it there, I thought. I sent out a request on the group Listserv for support and advice on the way to approach my upcoming meeting.

Over the next two days, more than a dozen feminist colleagues from around the United States responded to my request. However—to my surprise/shock—most of the advice seemed to lack understanding that this was not just an abstract teachable moment but a live-time, embodied enactment of intersectional systems of power and oppression. A few provided much-appreciated sympathy/empathy. However, the bulk of the responses focused on at least one of the following themes: (1) personal showcasing: using my problem (framed as an individual and classroom-management issue) as an opportunity to showcase their pedagogy and describing ways they (all nonqueer-identified faculty) successfully avoided and/or navigated antigay sentiments in the classroom; (2) gendered instructions: telling me simply to listen and validate the student's concerns, including a suggestion to offer her cookies and tea; (3) blaming me: some questioned why I took this issue personally; others insinuated that I was responsible for the entire incident and had clearly failed to make my class safe for this white heterosexual student. One colleague (whom—prior to this email exchange—I had never met or had any interaction with), scoldingly told me that I was "on the offensive" and had "allowed no room for opinions other than [my] own" in the classroom. This colleague told me to conjure up some sympathy for minority perspectives, saying, "Imagine if it was you—as the only minority view in the classroom."

Such advice tasted like cups of poison disguised as feminist tea. From my perspective, I had spent years bending over backward to make the most conservative of my students comfortable by emphasizing points of common ground, including my love of children, my commitment to parenting, and my recognition of the social function of religious institutions. At the core of my pedagogy was a commitment to ensure that no one ever felt excluded or alienated in my classroom. My teaching evaluations consistently described me as fair, open minded, and supportive of students' opinions and contributions. As a white, middle-class, (former) church girl, I had plenty of experience in playing nice, fair, and sympathetic; what I needed now was a lesson in self-defense. But ultimately what I wanted from my feminist family— my chosen safe community—was an acknowledgment that this was both a personal

and political situation; both an act of microaggression against me and a situation that was embedded in a larger system of power and oppression directed at entire categories of people.

The meeting with my student passed without undue pain. Neither of us spoke about locker-room politics; she mostly needed reassurance that I was not going to allow other students to gang up on her. I did not offer her cookies and tea, but I did listen closely, and I empathized with her stress about feeling attacked in the classroom. I carefully assured her that I was committed to making the classroom safe for everyone, both students and faculty. I arranged for a separate meeting with the three other students she named to review expectations of classroom civility.

Ironically, my best self-defense lesson in this case came from my own aggressor; unlike me she felt entitled to speak up for herself when she felt individually targeted. Unlike me, she was confident that structures of power (in this case, me, and if not me, my colleagues and superiors) would protect her. While I understood that a legacy of institutional/cultural protections can create elevated self-confidence, I also reevaluated my own assumptions about what I could and could not say to demand safe spaces for myself and other institutionally and culturally marginalized faculty members. I knew that I needed to become more proactive in my self-protection. I also realized that faculty members who come from the outskirts of dominant power can only be safe from bias-based aggressions if they are embedded within supportive communities.

Shortly thereafter—feeling betrayed and heartbroken—I quietly removed myself from the feminist listserv and distanced myself from that community.

Reassessments

> *Once we realize that there are few pure victims or oppressors, and that each one of us derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression that frame our lives, then we will be in a position to see the need for new ways of thought and action.*
>
> Patricia Hill Collins, "Toward a New Vision: Race, Class, and Gender as Categories of Analysis and Connection"

On the heels of these experiences, I felt the air seep from my love of teaching, as well as my overall joie de vivre. I felt traumatized and fearful and realized that maybe I was naïve in believing that I could invite emotion into the classroom, that I could teach about oppression without directly placing my human rights (as well as those of entire categories of people) on trial, and that I could rely on any community to back me up if things got rough. Who was I to think that the classroom, and academia as a whole, could be a safe space for me?

Here was my next embodied lesson in multiracial feminism: faculty of color have a long history of being targets of racial microaggression in their classrooms, disciplines, and universities. Faculty of color are regularly accused of being biased when they teach about inequality and, in particular, racism (Messner 2011), and for that matter are more likely to be presumed incompetent to teach any subject at all (Stanley 2006). Suspicions over their qualifications are often compounded for faculty of color, who may be subjected to assumptions about being token affirmative-action hires (Niemann 2003).

In contrast, many students see white faculty, and in particular white male heterosexuals, as being the pinnacle of individual merit and objectivity (Messner 2011). Faculty in socially privileged categories may be rewarded both with better teaching evaluations and special adoration when they teach about the oppression of others (Peretz 2010). While I am occasionally a gay target in my classroom, faculty of color in white-dominated departments and universities are very often in the spotlight (Stanley 2006). And if those faculty turn to white-dominated networks for support, they may be reminded of their need to be objective and/or be dismissively told that they are taking things too personally.

Such stresses, wounds, and betrayals across lines of privilege were indeed the inspiration for much of the writing I have held so dear to the core of my scholarship, teaching, and life. Scholars such as Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa, Suzanne Pharr, and Shane Phelan have long inspired me; they are the ones who gave me the courage to teach about intersectional oppression to begin with. They also warned me about the dangers of sweeping claims about women, feminists, and lesbians and the need to stay vigilant about multiple and intersecting forms of oppression. Despite the fact that I already knew these things, my personal experiences have made these lessons stick. As hooks writes, "Emphasizing paradigms of domination that call attention to woman's capacity to dominate is one way to deconstruct and challenge the simplistic notion that man is the enemy, woman the victim; the notion that men have always been the oppressors. *Such thinking enables us to examine our role as women in the perpetuation and maintenance of systems of domination"* (hooks 2000, 613; emphasis added).

Academia is a complex, contradictory environment, full of privileges and hierarchies but also potential for transformation. As hooks, Lorde, and other multiracial feminist scholars teach, within this environment (and all others), reflection upon our multiple positions is a necessary and ongoing process. Even those who have been victimized by various oppressions are still quite capable of oppressing others, and "as women, we must root out internalized patterns of oppression within ourselves if we are to move beyond the most superficial aspects of social change" (Lorde [1984] 2000, 610–11).

Integrating Life, Work, and Politics

This has not been an easy chapter for me to write. But I am writing it from my position as a tenured professor, which means that I now have more tools, security, and privilege to both protect myself and instigate institutional and social change.

I now understand from personal experience the complex, paradoxical, precarious, and deeply intersectional experience of attempting to maintain faculty authority while also occupying socially stigmatized and oppressed positions. At the same time, I also know that students find it more palatable when I teach about others' oppression, rather than my own. I am still intimidated by discussions of heterosexism and homophobia (and absolutely need allies when they occur), but I find students receptive to my discussions of racism and have never been accused of having a race agenda. This is part of the reason why I see it as my obligation to speak up for others enduring different types of oppression, but I must do that in a way that explicitly critiques the elevated respect I receive when I teach about people in less-privileged categories. I know that when I witness covert (and overt) racism and classism and see my colleagues and students of color retreating or

slipping through the cracks, these things require me to be an active ally, not a neutral bystander (Niemann 2003). I also know that making space for diversity includes cultivating my "decolonized mind" (hooks 1991), as well as creating a welcoming institutional culture, and that diversity thrives when we can encompass complexity, move beyond dichotomies, and honor the expansive creative force of the "borderlands" of identity and culture (Anzaldúa 1987; Keating 2002).

Along with many other faculty who teach from feminist and antioppression frameworks, I share the goals of critical, rigorous, and respectful classroom engagement, combined with a recognition of my position and a commitment to social justice. I do not claim a balanced or neutral view of the social world, particularly about what I consider to be violations of human dignity. (I do not ask my students to be neutral, either; if they insist on striving for this goal, I ask them to recognize that claims of neutrality and objectivity are also social positions—protected by more institutional privilege.) I express my subjective opinions as a starting place, not as a position that rigidly dictates where I stand on any given matter; I see this approach as a way to be honest with students and myself about the production of my knowledge. While I value the criteria for rigorous empirical evidence, gathering that evidence is a political act, full of decisions about what to gather and for what purpose. Through my example, I try to demonstrate that our direct experience mediates the way we construct knowledge (what we know is true), but other sources of information must be considered.

Crucial to this entire learning process is allocating space and legitimacy for personal reflection. All of us—university students, faculty, and staff, and those outside university walls—can benefit from reassessing past assumptions against current evidence and then revaluating future commitments, goals, and strategies. This sort of multilayered reflection facilitates both personal growth and institutional/cultural change. I credit and thank the editors of *Presumed Incompetent,* the book where this chapter is published, for prompting this valuable reflective space in me.

Reflecting on my personal and professional lessons and my approach as a scholar, instructor, activist, and community-based researcher has evolved from assuming that any religious, activist, scholarly environment or classroom is safe (and then feeling shocked when it is not) to understanding that all communities contain multiple visible and invisible subjective ideas and agendas. Given this complexity, my focus has turned to finding and creating workable, pragmatic, conscious coalitions. Shane Phelan (who in turn credits Bernice Johnson Reagon) summarizes coalition strategy as "not about nurturance but . . . about stretching past the limits of comfort and safety to the work that needs to be done" (Phelan 1994, 74).

What would a coalition approach to classroom, departmental, and university-level dynamics look like? As a start, Patricia Hill Collins emphasizes that we need to "recognize that our differing experiences with oppression create problems in the relationships among us" (2003). In response to this recognition, the "work that needs to be done" entails finding common causes and also building empathy (Collins [1993] 2003). An example of a coalition that has been helpful in decreasing the hostile climate of many high schools (and perhaps also universities) is the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) (Goodenow, Szalacha, and Westheimer 2006). While each GSA chapter is unique, what unites this movement is a commitment to

reflect upon the harmful dynamics of homophobia and heterosexism across multiple lines of institutional and social privilege, including faculty, staff, and students and gay, straight, and other sexual/gender orientations.

In the light of the success of the GSA model, I find it curious why similar models focused on race and class have not emerged on high school and college campuses. (To my knowledge, there are no Black/Brown-White Alliances or Upper Class-Working Class Alliances). I mention this not as a directive that race- and class-based alliances should be organized within this same dichotomous (and potentially essentialist) rubric, but I do think that the pros and cons of employing models like these are worth discussing. This discussion might include questions such as (1) has the GSA model not been applied to race and class issues due to white people's discomfort with acknowledging systemic and unmerited privilege across race and class lines? (2) are GSAs successful partly because their members tend to be homogenous in race and class? (3) is it not still important to name, examine, and critique hierarchical dichotomies like superior/inferior, good/evil, mind/body, man/woman, and white/black and reflect on the work of Audre Lorde stating that these dichotomies are man- and woman-made justifications for privilege and inequality? And (4) after critically examining these socially constructed dichotomies, how can we better facilitate cross-category, empathy-building discussions around common human sources of pain, suffering, hope, and love? I believe that these questions are productive beginnings for coalition and empathy building across lines of social privilege and oppression. They may even help us find personal ways to freedom, creativity, passion, and embodied feminist living.

In her 1984 hit single, "What's Love Got to Do with It?" Tina Turner, the iconic African American singer and survivor of domestic violence, asked, "Who needs a heart when a heart can be broken?" In 1989—in a different modality and across different circumstances—the iconic feminist theorist bell hooks proposed a feminist solution for overcoming betrayal, misunderstanding, and conflict. She calls upon feminists to embrace love as a "mediating force . . . so that we are not broken in this process, so that we do not despair. . . . Embedded in the commitment to feminist revolution is the challenge to love. Love can be and is an important source of empowerment when we struggle to confront issues of sex, race, and class. Working together to identify and face our difference—to face the ways we dominate and are dominated—to change our actions, we need a mediating force that can sustain us so that we are not broken in this process, so that we do not despair" (2000, 618). All of us who are attempting to live our lives based on antioppression principles know that this is a tricky and sometimes treacherous endeavor. But I firmly believe now more than ever that this is something worth pursuing with all our hearts.