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"Trying to Make the Personal Political" then Pedagogical: Building Writing Classrooms Inspired by Black Feminist Practice

Black Feminist praxis is rooted in a focus on the individual lived experiences of Black women. In order to make progress toward equality and justice, Black women writers and theorists have forefronted their own identities in their work rather than contributing to the feminist discourse through abstractions about a general "sociological phenomenon" (Sharpe 31). Examining *Trying to Make the Personal Political: Feminism and Consciousness-Raising* (an expanded reprint of *Consciousness-Raising Guidelines*) in conversation with Leigh Patel's *Decolonizing Educational Research*, Juan C. Guerra's *Language, Culture, Identity, and Citizenship in College Classrooms and Communities* and central concepts Bernadette M. Calafell unpacks in her essay "Rhetorics of Possibility: Challenging the Textual Bias of Rhetoric through the Theory of the Flesh" could illuminate the ways in which Black Feminist teaching and practices could inform writing classroom pedagogical practices and reshape how we think about identity in higher education writing spaces. Early Black Feminist groups saw the importance of taking hold of their own narratives and forming supportive spaces in order to effectively enact change in their communities and fight for the destruction of the overarching sexist, racist, and capitalist powers to attain freedom. College writing instructors could implement these practices inspired by Black Feminism so that they might encourage students to invoke their own identities in the writing classroom and use such practices to redefine what is valued as writing in academic spaces. Rethinking what constitutes valuable writing in the context of college classrooms allows students to implement their diverse literacies as a means to resist academic hegemony.

In 2017, Half Letter Press reprinted the "Consciousness-Raising Guidelines" section of *A Practical Guide to the Women's Movement* (1975). This reprint, entitled *Trying to Make the Personal Political: Feminism and Consciousness Raising*, includes the original consciousness-raising (C-R) guidelines developed during the women's movement in the 1970s as well as three contemporary additions: an analytical foreword and two supplemental sections, one for teenage women and another for Black women. Mariame Kaba, who wrote the reprint's foreword, refers to consciousness-raising as a "political education strategy" (8), implying that the conversations held within these spaces could lead to enlightenment and progressive action. These consciousness-raising groups, or "rap groups" (9), were formed by feminist communities as "forums for mutual self-discovery" (9). These groups existed as spaces in which women could "be free," "honest," and as places for "self-examination and for exploration" (10) to nurture female identities and personhood within the oppressive patriarchy. The guidelines encourage open conversation wherein participants prioritize discussion of their personal experiences and identities

within the larger sociological context. Some of the suggested discussion topics for these C-R groups include racism, power, and sex, and how these concepts impact the group participants. The authors pose questions that could lead to fruitful conversation grounded in personal connections, consciousness-raising, and potentially political strategizing within an intimate and like-minded group setting. Consciousness-raising is a means through which participants can articulate their own identities, perspectives, and places within certain contexts in order to learn about, and work to destroy, systems of oppression. In the context of writing classrooms, instructors can implement consciousness-raising techniques so their students can draw on their individual literacies to resist academic injustices through their writing practices.

Lori Sharpe, who wrote the "Supplemental Guidelines for Black Women" included in the 2017 reprint, saw both the value in the original consciousness-raising guidelines but also viewed them as but "one model.. (. . .) intended to spark ideas for infinite variations" (31), including one specifically for Black women. Her revised guidelines build upon the ones from the 1975 publication, but center Black women's unique needs in order to avoid projecting "into their C-R what Someone Else thinks they should be talking about" (31), with that "Someone Else" referring to the mainstream white feminists who implemented the original guidelines. The discussion topics Sharpe presents in her guidelines for Black women's consciousness-raising groups focus on the lived experiences of these women of color while making it clear that the feminist movement at large was not necessarily addressing Black women's needs in its original non-intersectional incarnations. Sharpe's new guidelines pose questions about the specifics of Black women's experiences, the place of Black women within and outside of the women's liberation movement, and the collective and individual priorities of Black women, which recognize and forefront intersectionality. Like the original consciousness-raising guidelines, Sharpe's encourage thoughtful and purposeful conversations about the participants' lived experiences and the value of these experiences to the greater movement for women's liberation and equality. Unlike the original guidelines, though, which Sharpe saw as not quite doing enough to meet the needs of Black women and address their positions within feminist activism, her "Supplemental Guidelines for Black Women" ask more specific questions that speak to Black women's unique and diversified identities. She deliberately uses the first person in these guidelines, she says, "to emphasize the concern in C-R for personalizing discussions" (31). This personalization makes it clear that these conversations are not to only be abstract and theoretical, but grounded in the personal.

In "Rhetorics of Possibility," Calafell explains how "theories of the flesh," or discourses based in one's individual experiences, "have been central to the survival of women of color and have been one of the primary ways in which we have been able to theorize about our experiences when we have been denied access to traditional forms of knowledge production" (105). According to Calafell's line of thinking, this centering of personal experiences is not only favorable to processing knowledge but integral to it. Integrating theories of the flesh into academic work is crucial to the survival of women of color within an otherwise oppressive system. The model provided by this Black Feminist praxis and activism speaks to and provides an example for the contemporary college writing classroom because of the ways it places the individual at the center of

the conversation and makes that individual the point of reference for meaning-making. By drawing from an activist and intersectional model, instructors can forefront students' unique literacies rather than emphasize a central academic "correctness" or colonial standardization in writing. A Black Feminist model shows that a writing classroom can be a place of activism wherein students and teachers can engage in conversations about process, literacy, and academic hegemony.

In *Language, Culture, Identity and Citizenship in College Classrooms and Communities*, Juan C. Guerra examines the various forms of writing that occur in college writing classrooms and how these classrooms should be places in which students' identities are valued and nurtured. He advocates for teaching practices that engage students' home discourses in the academic sphere and beyond. Guerra wants instructors to present to their students "varied choices on how to make use of the alternative discourses they bring to and the academic discourses they encounter in any classroom situation" (298). He writes that it is crucial "to consider how an understanding of cultural diversity in particular enhances [students'] ability to write" (Guerra 298-299). Like Black Feminist theorists and other women of color writers, Guerra sees the "theory of the flesh" (Calafell 106) and the intimate connection between one's identity and one's work as a lens through which we should view writing in the college classroom. One of Guerra's goals, which aligns his work in telling ways with Black Feminist practices, is to:

> (. . .) help educators figure out ways to learn about and integrate the plethora of lived experiences students bring with them into classroom activities (. . .) to identify the range of identity markers individuals may use in any community of belonging to represent themselves and to grant value to the kinds of rhetorical and discursive features students would likely display in our college writing classrooms, if these were not continually displaced by our institutional commitment to academic discourses and the English Only language practices that create and sustain them. (Guerra 76)

Opposing pedagogical hegemony and oppression through revised teaching practices is at the center of Guerra's work. He insists that writing instructors not only recognize but value the "range of identity markers" (Guerra 76) that students could bring to their work. These discursive identities are usually devalued or silenced because of the institutional value placed on academic English and standardized writing topics. If we rethink these practices as Guerra suggests, and consider Black Feminist praxis and consciousness-raising practices as one means through which we can do so by forefronting students' individual identities and experiences in the context of college writing, we can work toward abolishing harmful institutional measures that effectively silence students. We can implement instructional practices that place distinct value on student's diverse literacies.

Effective teaching, for Guerra, is based on a centering of students' experiences and languages and a purposeful integration of these facets of identity into college writing instruction. Guerra discusses Stephanie L. Kerschbaum's *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference* to provide an example of revised teaching practices that forefront these values. He explains that Kerschbaum reframes how instructors think about and approach working with their students. She encourages instructors, in their college writing classes, to consider questions that "look at process rather than state of being" (Guerra 90) and elicit more complex responses than "learning about" questions,

which inherently assume that there is a single answer or set of answers toward which students are working. Asking "learning *about*" (89) questions (emphasis Guerra's) generates "stereotypical identity markers" (89). These superficial questions, asking things such as "[w]hat groups do individuals belong to" and "[w]hat names or labels can describe particular individuals or associate them with others" (89) can be harmful in the context of a writing classroom because they elicit surface answers from students. These inquiries do not consider the student as a complex and ever-evolving being, which in turn limits the student's ability to explore their own discursive and rhetorical possibilities. "Learning *with*" (89) questions (emphasis Guerra's), which imply process and evolution, consider students' "state[s] of being" (90) while encouraging them to consider their unique places within a community of learners and writers without "prejudging others" (90). Such questions, which speak to Sharpe's consciousness-raising guidelines for Black women, ask students to consider how they "position themselves alongside others," how they "acknowledge similarities and differences between themselves and others," and how they and their teachers are "learning with others in the classroom" (90). Guerra discusses Kerschbaum's (2014) questions so writing instructors can be mindful of how they attempt to build community and ask students to draw on their own experiences in the writing classroom. Guerra explains the importance of giving students "the opportunity to decide how they wish to invoke their language and cultural differences" (90) as they work to represent themselves in whichever ways they want through their writing, ways that may not necessarily adhere to standards normally considered "academic" or valuable in educational contexts.

Having students invoke their diverse identities in this way requires a reevaluation and restructuring of the power dynamics within the classroom and, more broadly, within higher education institutional spaces at large. In *Decolonizing Educational Research: From Ownership to Answerability*, Leigh Patel unpacks the implications of the relationships between subject and researcher in higher education spaces. Her work seeks to abolish the "settler colonialism" (35) framework that often describes work in academia and to reconceptualize research as a "relational force" (48) that depends on the contexts, material conditions, and what Patel calls the "intra-relations" (51) between subjects and researchers. For Patel, academia is characterized by a harmful binary that exists between those in power (professors, administrators, researchers, etc.) and those not in power (students of color, research subjects, etc.), which resembles the relationship between a colonizer and the colonized. Patel's work has enormous implications for the college writing classroom, mainly for how instructors attempt to value students' lived experiences in their writing. She writes that "the academy and educational research has codified knowledge as ownable, but (. . .) it is only property for some, namely those whose lineages are already readily visible within the culture" (35). It is clear that the culture to which she refers is the white, western culture that holds power over the academic institution at large. Thinking about Sharpe's consciousness-raising guidelines for Black women as a representation of effective identity politics practices that could lead to productive invocation of identity for students embodies Patel's central goal of dismantling harmful hierarchies in higher education institutions.

Consciousness-raising groups centered on the needs and experiences of Black women, like those outlined in Lori Sharpe's "Supplemental Guidelines for Black Women," provide a valuable framework for structuring college writing classrooms. These revised consciousness-raising guidelines complement the strategies for writing classroom pedagogical practices described by Guerra because of how they rely on the students' lived experiences. Both the guidelines and Guerra's work are anti-colonial, to put it in Patel's terms, in that they seek to dismantle the hegemonic structures characteristic of the academy and redistribute power so it falls into the hands of those individuals—the students and learners—that these higher education institutions claim to serve. If we mesh the praxis of Black Feminism with that of decolonizing educators such as Guerra and Patel, we can make the personal both political and pedagogical by redefining what the academy values as acceptable writing.

Works Cited

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