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Push the Line

By Lore/tta LeMaster, Ph.D.

It's the first day of class and I'm ambivalent, at best, with education. As a first-generation college student, I simply do not have expectations for academe. Hell, I can't quite grasp the importance of college let alone a bachelor's degree—I already work full-time and, to be frank, I'm in school because I need distractions: from my younger brother's sudden death in 1999; from the growing recognition that I am not the "man" my families of origin demand of me nor the "man" expected of me in gay and lesbian spaces; and from ongoing bouts of surgery attempting to reconstruct my mouth and face after a run-in with a man who despised my femininity. After six years distracting myself by taking, dropping, and failing classes at the community college, I learned how to transfer to a university. Today is not only the first day of class; it is my first day as a university student in a university class.

The classroom door swings open, and a Black woman enters, gliding to the front of the room. The chatter murmurs to a slow silence as she reconfigures a desk and chair, creating space conducive to her Black feminist pedagogy: sitting and telling stories. Standing next to the chair, she turns to the class, silently scanning our faces, and taking us in.

"This class is U.S. Women of Color and I am your professor, Dr. Angela Bowen. I am a Black lesbian feminist. If you have a problem with that, you should probably do us both a favor and drop this class." Dr. Bowen takes a seat; the class silent, taking her in. A smile cracks out of the corner of her mouth as she adds, "You don't have to leave now, but think about it before you return. Those of you who enrolled in a Women's Studies course expecting an 'easy A' can think again. This course will demand a *lot* of you."

The class meets a university requirement for "multicultural learning." Save for a handful of majors, most of the students are, like me, passing through the Women's Studies curriculum, with vague conceptualizations of feminism. And save for select sections highlighting gender and race covered in my Sociology courses, this is the first time I have encountered a class in which questions of power, liberation, gender, and race took center stage. While I was privileged to have learned from Black educators starting in 1st grade through community college, this was the first time I had encountered an out *Black lesbian feminist* educator, let alone one who led with her intersecting identities in such a way as to cultivate the space her body required for transformative learning to occur. The question of *to* drop or *not to* drop the class was predicated on our individually and seriously considering the transformative pedagogical challenge that she posed: this course demanded that we commit to the liberation of women of color more than it presented a series of dispassionate lessons to be memorized or regurgitated. This was an invitation not to leave but to commit to transformation of self, of structure, and of culture. Dr. Bowen embodied a blueprint for liberatory pedagogy that was committed to ending oppression over sustaining academe's white liberal status quo.

I came to Angela through her mentoring and pedagogy rather than through her writing and scholarship (see LeMaster). As a result, I came to feminism through Black feminism in the context of liberatory pedagogy, and it wasn't until graduate school—in another field—that I encountered the whiteness of feminism. Though, looking back, I realize now that I had encountered the whiteness of feminism despite not understanding it so plainly at the time. At the time, in the early 2000s, when I was an undergraduate majoring in Women's Studies, questioning the certainty of my sex assignment at birth, white feminism asserted its racist boundaries in attempting to shape my gender becoming as a mixed-race Asian/white-passing trans femme misread as a white feminine gay man. Looking back, these were the same white feminists who heralded biological imperatives about sexed bodies and who were espousing vehemence and hate toward, specifically, my transness and my trans kin.

It was straight white feminist professors, well-meaning as they may have been, who tried to contort my queer femininity into a respectable “male feminist” political formation that fit the biological imperative of white cishetero gender expectancies. Meanwhile, while the straight white feminist professors taught me what it meant to be pro-*choice*, Angela taught me what it meant to be pro-*access*. While the straight white feminist professors taught me that the female form was divine, Angela taught me that divinity is political and politicized in white supremacist heteropatriarchy. While the straight white feminist professors taught me that trans women were men parading as women so as to access women's spaces with the intent to harm (white) women, Angela taught me about racially exclusionary strategies that white feminists use to secure white supremacy, including the weaponization of white women's tears. And while the straight white feminist professors taught me that trans femininity is a sexual perversion and pathology enabled merely by medical technologies, Angela taught me that the white supremacist gaze pathologizes difference through a racialized lens of gender intelligibility that is designed to sustain and grow white supremacist heteropatriarchy. And while the straight white feminist professors often mistook me for a gay best friend, unable to imagine my gender outside of their limited white cishetero imaginary, Angela talked to me as a complex adult, capable of engaging her as a political equal committed to growing our liberatory politics in relationship.

I cannot say with certainty whether Angela's Black lesbian feminist politic was or was not trans-exclusionary by today's standards (see Stryker and Bettcher). What I do know is this: Angela's politic demanded *more* of feminism and feminists alike. Rather than abandon feminism as a straight white women's political project, Angela took up space—as she did in the classroom, on the first day of class, as a Black lesbian feminist—and demanded we reimagine and develop feminism's political boundaries to end oppression at the intersections of difference. Angela once said, *I'm a black, lesbian, feminist, writer, activist . . . I see all of those as equal functions*. Angela's feminism centered race as it centered sexuality as it centered sex as it centered gender as it centered political labor and action. Angela's feminism was *radical* because it was *intersectional* and grounded in *praxis*, and, as a result, consistently growing out of the discursive and material tensions that sought to constrain feminism's radical political becoming to meet the ever-shifting political moment. More than that, her Black feminist politic is radical because it marks a commitment to transformation—of self and of structure—borne of political coalition that is derived of incommensurable and non-equivalent differences committed to ending oppression—*our* oppression. Audre Lorde writes, “Change means growth, and growth can be painful. But we sharpen self-definition by exposing the self in work and struggle together with those whom we define as different from ourselves, although sharing the same goals” (123). An Audre Lorde scholar, Angela's feminist politic was committed to liberatory change at “*the edge of each other's*

battles;” a hymn she recited with regularity as if to punctuate the interdependent and transforming ground to her politic (Lorde 123, emphasis original).

I also know that I did not feel compelled to account for myself nor for my difference. Indeed, I did not have to disclose my transness to sense Angela’s tacit recognition through the ways she consistently augmented her communication and her presence to account for my consistently shifting sense of gender. Seeing my gender as more than a “gay male” novelty, Angela helped me, through her political mentoring, to understand and analyze my queer gender as an intersection of difference taken up by others to shape how sexual meaning is projected onto my body and person. In the early 2000s, when our paths crossed, we did not have the gender expansive language we do now. Angela’s resistance to changing the department name from Women’s Studies to Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies marked this contentious moment of growth, not of failure to meet her own politic. Indeed, I do not see her resistance as trans-exclusionary so much as necessarily unraveled in light of a consistently changing feminist politic.

A couple of months ago, I turned 40 years old. And on that day, I started hormone replacement therapy, returning to a step in my own gender transition that I halted nearly 20 years ago, just prior to crossing paths with Angela. This represents a distinct side of my life that I hid until I had the material means to continue this part of my life as I navigated academe—an especially antagonistic cultural site for both me and my trans family. I hid the specificity of my trans/sexuality not because of Angela, nor because of the straight white feminist professors, but because academe is structured to exclude transness and gender non-conformity in earnest, preferring, if anything, respectable trans formations that easily and readily acquiesce to existing structures of whiteness. I learned this well before encountering Angela. Mentored by Angela, I now take up the space that I need to as a mixed-race trans femme navigating the discipline of Communication Studies and committed to intersectional trans/feminism and Black liberation—political commitments in my life that work in concert to liberate, especially, Black and Indigenous trans and non-binary folks of color, women, and femmes, who, across the Americas, have a life expectancy of no more than 35 years of age. While I may have halted a form of my own gender transition over the past two decades, I have never shied away from my transness—indeed, it has served as a core organizing element in my own scholarship and pedagogy. My capacity to pass as a queer feminine white man, despite being mixed-race Asian/white and trans femme, has served as pedagogical grounds for facilitating critical theorizations about, and performances of, political interventions in the cultural sedimentation of power relations as they emerge at individual and structural levels.

I am now a tenure-track professor who works in a department in which my pronouns are blatantly disregarded, on a university campus in which I am, to my knowledge, the only out trans/sexual tenure-track professor in a professorial workforce of over 1400. Above all, Angela taught me that academe is a racist and heterosexist machine designed to exploit and destroy difference; what matters is not sustaining academe’s status quo but pressing it to change and grow so as to enable more access to education and to life chances, especially for the most oppressed. This is hard work that requires a commitment to liberatory ends that far exceed an individualized sense of self—including the individualized, though *very real* and material, coveted tenure and promotion—a denial that fed Angela’s political rage and ambivalence toward academe that I sensed in her mentoring and Black feminist pedagogy after having been denied promotion by California State University. I am reminded of a simple utterance that she left me: *Push the line*. No matter what political power I have, I must push the line in service of liberating those most oppressed. To do anything less would be to fail to hold Angela to her own political challenge: to

commit to transformation of self in service of coalitionally-derived liberatory ends. To that end, I close my brief meditation with the way in which I open my classes still:

“I am a mixed-race Asian/white non-binary trans/sexual femme worldmaker, artist, and activist.” And, like Angela, I *see all of those as equal functions* constituting my mixed-race trans/feminist sense of self. And it is because of Angela’s radical transformative and intersectional feminist politic, pedagogy, and mentoring that I strive to make space for bodies and voices of difference including those of my own and those of others navigating oppression at the intersections of difference.

Works Cited

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