

# SUBSTANCE OF FIRE

Gender and Race  
in the College Classroom

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**T** O PARAPHRASE Kwame Anthony Appiah, race is a story, a story we tell each other, and tell ourselves, so often and so vehemently it becomes the world.<sup>[1]</sup> Higher education is also a story we tell ourselves: that does not mean that what we teach, and learn, in four-year colleges is false, made-up, or fabricated. Rather, it is held in place by beliefs and assumptions about who should and could be enrolled and teaching in the university. These beliefs and assumptions are also stories we tell ourselves, and that telling can make them real. In this essay, I want to comment, through memory, on some small part of that story. But I am not a linear storyteller; my mind works through parables,<sup>[2]</sup> and parallels. Writing this essay, then, I am mindful that memory is a one-sided wall, and I am writing from memory. If I offer parables about myself and about my experience teaching, the heart of *Substance of Fire* appears in the words and photographs of my former students, Blakeley Calhoun, Riley Blanks, and Rox Trujillo, and in the words of colleagues R. Joseph Rodríguez, and Richard Delgado.

## PARABLES

a background about where I came from, when I found myself teaching, as a non-tenure-track lecturer, in a prestigious, four-year university in the American Southeast. I was, by then, almost forty years old, and had spent my adulthood avoiding the Southeastern United States as much as possible. Moreover, I spent my adult life ambivalent about teaching and the academy by living a bohemian, avoidant life, living off the grid at times. To begin the story in the middle, I was, a middle-aged university lecturer, back in the Southeast, and teaching college students who were privileged, well-educated, and in most cases white.

### Teaching College

Having previously had an oblique relationship to the academy, I was unprepared for the way that college students interacted with female faculty. (I had earned my doctorate while living in New York City and during that time did my work and kept my nose down, not interacting with or learning about departmental politics, earning my living outside the university system.) To be sure, most of my students at this Southeastern research university were and are great people—smart, polite, good-hearted, and inspiring. Make no mistake: some of my former students at the University where I taught changed my life, much for the better. But I was shocked to find that a small number of male students would try to flirt with me, while some women students would confess incredibly personal details during routine office hours, seeking motherly care.

These behaviors made it clear to me that, by such students, I was not seen as a professor but as a woman: either a woman with whom one could want to have sex or a woman who should behave as one's mother. I resisted both roles, but in that refusal was often made to feel I was coming up short: Why not be friendly and light-hearted in rebuff-

ing male students? Why make a big deal of it? (This was a suggestion made to me by a male colleague.) Why not be a shoulder to cry on for women students in trouble and who confessed their lives traumata? (This was a suggestion made to me by a female faculty member.)

I felt the unjust gendered weight of these student-professor interactions. It was clear this small subset of students, who saw me as a woman foremost and not so much as their professor, were acting on blatant gender bias that, because of their status as students, was difficult to unmask. When I brought up behavior I thought inappropriate to some of my supervisors over the years, several of them suggested that my attitude was the problem, not the inappropriate boundary-crossing behavior of the student. "Just be a nice (white) woman," was the underlying message.

One benevolent consequence of the inappropriate behavior of a small subset of my students is that I began to really enjoy and look forward to students of diverse backgrounds in the classes I taught: Because boundary-transgressing behavior of students almost always came from students who were white. This pattern was both painful to me and also eye-opening, making me understand better how structures of power, interlocking through codes of race and gender, give permission to some people to transgress others' boundaries. The structures of racial typographies being what they are, students of color oftentimes did not immediately see me as an oppressed class (woman), to whom they could unburden themselves, or onto whom they could project their erotic desires. But even if this connection with students of color derived from some complicated power dynamics, I think it led to some fruitful moments in teaching—for me—and hopefully in learning for my students.



Some white students, male and female alike, expressed sexism toward me. In contrast, subtle effects of racism likely shaped non-white students' sense that they would be more cautious about transgressing boundaries with their professor. Apart from the obviously racialized problematic of the pattern I describe above, what I learned from this racialized difference is that real teaching happens only when you are able to be a professor, not a woman, in your students' eyes.

As noted, most of the students at this university were white. However, in the Feminist Theory class that I will discuss now, for the final parable of this essay, the class was not majority white. The class appeared under the rubric of Sociology, and the Sociology major, at the university where I teach. To its credit, the Sociology major is one of the most racially diverse in student population. The enrollment for the specific class I am now discussing was extraordinarily cosmopolitan, with students from Greece, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and the Caribbean as well as students who were African American, Asian American, Native American, and white.

Before I knew the student composition of the class, I had already written the syllabus for that fall course. That summer I was, to be fair, bored by the thought of teaching feminist theory yet again. As non-tenure track faculty, I did not have the power within the university to voice my desire to teach a different course. So, since I had taught the class so many times before, I asked myself: What do I really care about in the field of feminist thought? I wanted to study theorists and schools of theory that were usually placed as glimpses in mainstream feminist theory courses. Rather than teaching predominantly white feminist theory (Judith Butler, *et. al.* and *ad nauseum*), with just a couple readings and lessons focusing on black feminist theory and/or Asian or Latina

theorists, which is a typical Feminist Theory syllabus, instead I chose two books—not textbooks—to be the centerpieces of our semester's study: bell hooks's *Feminist Theory: Margin to Center*, and Mel Y. Chen's *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*.<sup>[5]</sup>

We read these two books in their entirety over the course of the semester, really getting inside the important work that hooks and Chen were leveraging. We also, later in the semester, did read some white theorists' essays. But I chose these two books mentioned above as the focus because hooks and Chen were theorists whose work I knew but did not know well and yet every time I read a quote, or short piece, by hooks or Chen I always thought, Yes, I completely agree with that insight. I wanted to know more about them. I was excited to center the class on these two excellent books by African American and Asian American feminists. I was not trying to represent race in the classroom. I was trying to keep myself interested and engaged in the books I was teaching, and I was trying to get to the heart of feminist theory. Why do we have feminist theory? bell hooks and Mel Y. Chen give real meaning to this theory.

A small number of white, women students in the class, however, believed they already knew what feminist theory was and believed I was not teaching it. By eschewing, just for one semester, the well-trodden path of white, wealthy, enshrined-by-the-academy feminists, I was upsetting a small number of white women students' sense of entitlement and ownership of feminism. Those two students' anger grew as the semester progressed. They complained that bell hooks was an aggressive writer, a harsh and unkind person. I did not budge: we were getting through that book! It was on the syllabus to stay. I thought, and think, that *Feminist Theory: from Margins to Center*, is a great book.

In their minds, however, the students began to fuse me with bell hooks, and hated me because—as an apparently white woman—they had expected something different from me.

This small group of white women, it seems, had expected that I would put them at the center of the class, not the non-white people who made up a significant part of the class. As white women of a certain income bracket, they felt sufficiently entitled, by dint of their race, to complain about my “harsh tone” in the classroom. This scene also becomes a parable: a parable of how race and gender intertwine with the power structures of the University.

I understand that the ostensible complaint was that I did not allow discussion of the rape of white women to be part of that particular semester’s class.<sup>[6]</sup> But I’m equally certain that this situation did arise because I veered from the acceptable racial script that often calls for white women to teach white feminist theory, at least in a class that is titled Feminist Theory. To be clear, I was teaching in a class that was not by its title identified as intended to teach the work of non-white scholars. I taught a syllabus almost completely without using the majority work of white scholars. By veering from the script of race, I did not back down and thus my actions were interpreted as “harsh.” Lastly, I had also veered from the script of gender, in that I had made clear that I did not want to act as mother to my students, but instead wanted to be their teacher, showing them how to think for themselves and re-think responsibilities and actions. For me, bell hooks and Mel Y. Chen wrote ideal texts for that endeavor.

Since that semester, I have been more careful, sad to say. Today, I still teach texts and materials that are written by, created by, and reflect



histories and perspectives other than Eurocentrism. Nonetheless, I have reverted to the more expected script of having most of the material in classes that are not by their titles indicated to be about race be classes in which a predominance of material taught is written by or created by scholars of European origin. The theory of radical indigenous studies—in which indigenous perspectives are not taught as “samplers” on a table mostly filled with Euro-scholars, but instead are taught as *the* perspective is ultimately one that needs to be circulated and adopted in the university; not just within specialized courses, but also outside of it. This is the key truth that I learned from my traumatic experience teaching Feminist Theory: for a very small but vocal number of white women, being white means being the center.

For me, a white woman, to teach a class that did not give the perspective of whiteness the center was upsetting to them. If I had been teaching a course that was under the rubric of African American studies, I believe it would have been fine to teach bell hooks. But to teach a course that was titled simply Feminist Theory, well, it was upsetting for some white feminist students to take that class and be taught African and Asian American feminisms first and foremost, and at the center. Certainly, white perspectives matter and need to be taught, but they need to be taught as white perspectives, not as the global holistic truth. They need to be historicized. In my prose poem “Mary Wollstonecraft Died for My Sins,” I try to atone for leaving out the work of early British feminist Mary Wollstonecraft that semester: Wollstonecraft is a great thinker, a great feminist.<sup>[7]</sup> Yes, teach white feminist writers, of course, but that needs to be just one part of teaching all feminisms; that is what feminism is about. I feel certain that were she alive today Mary Wollstonecraft, brilliant and original, would agree.



I no longer teach a course called Feminist Theory. I have retreated, for reasons of personal survival, from teaching any course that specifically and wholly contends with gender and feminism (even as these topics often inflect my teaching of other subjects). But I dream of being able to teach exactly such a course — called Feminist Theory—that makes race and race theory its heart. Because feminist theory has to be about power dynamics, it has to center on race. Such a class does not, in its title, indicate that it will deal with race, but fulfills a great need by dealing with it. As non-tenured faculty and without a stable contract, it would be a risk I am unable to take on anytime soon.

As the intertwining threads of this parable reveal, gender and race, once pulled in different directions, can easily get caught in a nexus of unvoiced and unspoken grief and what the social theorist Pierre Bourdieu aptly called “soft violence”—violence that is not physical but stems from social pressure and social punishment. A male professor would almost certainly not have faced the situation described above. Or, a female professor whose behavior fit gendered expectations (that is, who presented herself as motherly). I tell the parable not to indict specific actors (we are all human and we do the best we can moment to moment), but instead to point out and make clear that whiteness is preserved as a privileged rhetoric and a rhetoric of privilege, a claiming of center stage and central ground, even in the minds of young, apparently liberal, white women students. I learned from these students the most important lesson that I could have learned, as a teacher.

Feminism may not be enough to destabilize this unspoken place of entitlement in liberal studies and the humanities. Only the combination of critical race theory with feminist theory will be able to turn the tide

for deeper thinking and societal change. This book is called the *Substance of Fire* because of the material consequences of gender and race, the way that we can say we are all equal but inequality emerges at the level of materiality: unequal access to power, unequal access to voice, and unequal access ultimately to cultural and "real" capital. The fire of gender and race runs mostly beneath the surface of the twenty-first century four-year university, which calls itself a place of equality. Gender and race are the substance of fire, often suppressed from the dialogue that overtly claims equality has been already achieved, but always beneath the surface, breaking out at points of tension.

#### End Note

I wrote this essay in June of 2017, before Charlottesville, Virginia, the city where I teach, became a national and even international symbol of violence and racism. For me, the events of August 11 and August 12, 2017, among many other responses (principal among them, the emotions of grief and fear), raised the question of what was it that made the "substance of fire," which is racism in America, leap forward at this time and place? What shifted so that racism expressed itself so openly, garishly, even murderously? And why here, in Charlottesville, which is a demographically left-leaning town, overall?

In some of the prose poems that follow, I meditate on these questions. In the prose writings of Riley Blanks and Blakeley Calhoun, alumna of the University of Virginia, the events of August 11 and 12, 2017, in Charlottesville, are thought-through. But, in the end, one is always at a loss for words in the face of violence. Our words approach the events, in hindsight, in aftermath, seeking understanding. ■

## WORKS CITED

1. Anthony Kwame Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).
2. I have taught for various programs and departments over the course of the past eleven years. For me, it is important here to make clear that the class described in this essay was *not* an Art History class, the program for which I now teach.
3. Of course, feminist theory includes more than one strand. I refer the reader to the Combahee River Collective's statement, and also to the inimitable work of Teresa De Lauretis. These writers and workers in the field of feminism establish the kind of nuanced and deeply thought approach that is truly feminist. See, Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Haymarket, 2017); see also, Teresa De Lauretis, *Figures of Resistance: Essays in Feminist Theory* (University of Illinois Press, 2007).
4. Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* Trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010).
5. bell hooks *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (New York: Routledge 2014); Mel Y. Chen *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).
6. Ironically enough, previous to teaching this class, I taught several semesters of courses about gender-based violence, for which I prepared and steered myself to discuss the subject of the rape of women. But for this one semester I did not wish to deal with the topic, as I had just finished an exhausting study, interviewing student-survivors.
7. Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Wollstonecraft Books, 2017)