

## **Visualizing the Gaps between Feminist Pedagogical Theories and Practices: Essentialism and Binary Thinking about Pedagogy and Power**

by Peiling Zhao

In challenging the prevailing educational system that supposedly reinforces status quo, excludes students from the knowledge construction, and oppresses students with teacher authority, feminist pedagogy has invested its most committed effort. “Feminist pedagogy encompasses a wide range of responses to the challenge of restructuring education;” “there are as many answers to the question ‘What is feminist pedagogy?’ as there are feminist teachers” (Penn 217). As diverse as it can be, one of its most frequently discussed and widely acknowledged goal is to empower students by creating a democratic learning environment where students could actively participate in the construction of knowledge, come to their own voices, speak with more authority, consciously challenge “various structured power relations and systems of oppression and privilege based on gender, race, class, sexual orientation,” and critically analyze their positionality in the world in which they are living (Tisdell 141). Dovetailing with highly-acclaimed student-centered pedagogical theories and practices, this goal is driven by its strong impulse of empowering students through transforming them from passive knowledge consumers and potential preservers of status quo to active knowledge makers and agents of social change. Thus, as widely and firmly believed, feminist pedagogy has strong potentials for reforming education into a practice of democracy and freedom.

To achieve such a revolutionary goal, feminist pedagogues approach the classroom not only as a place of knowledge-exchange but also as a site of meaningful and powerful struggle. Hence, they avoid the traditional pedagogical practices—such as lectures and tests—because they are notoriously authoritarian and depository. Instead, they tend to use feminist pedagogical practices—such as assigning group work or project, holding student-led discussions, and allowing students to greet teachers with their first name, etc— which could, as believed, maximize students’ participation in and responsibility for their knowledge making. As widely debated and frequently confirmed, such feminist practices could diminish teacher authority, allow students more authority and freedom, and ultimately help consciously create a learning environment “as a counterhegemonic act of resistance to oppression” (Crabtree and Sapp 132).

Despite the compelling potential of empowering students for social changes, and despite the reported success stories of applying the feminist pedagogical theories into practices, feminist pedagogical theories present myriad challenges. Feminist teachers run the risk of being disempowered or professionally debilitated by these methods and practices. An unintended consequence of the practice of a student-centered power structure in the classroom is that some students – those less vocal or with less liberatory agenda – become dis-empowered in the process. In the past decade, journals and books are teeming with reports of such disempowerment and painful feelings accompanying it. Sharing their struggles to ‘walk the walk’ as feminist teachers, Robin D. Crabtree and David Alan Sapp report that putting feminist

theory into practice raises a number of pedagogical challenges. They argue that these challenges “in turn, create a gap between what feminist teachers believe is the best educational approach and what they actually manage to practice in their everyday experiences (133). These challenges “bring additional political and professional consequences for teachers who practice feminist pedagogy, which could prove detrimental to the teachers’ success in the academy, a social context where innovative teaching often is neither valued nor rewarded” (133). As the experiences of Crabtree and Sapp and the confessions of many other feminist teachers suggest, most of the gaps that feminist teachers face in practicing feminist pedagogy come from their essentialist and binary assumptions about feminist pedagogy—or to be more specific, about the issues of pedagogy and empowerment. In order to help visualize the gaps between feminist pedagogy theory and practice, I open up several lines of inquiry to address in more specific terms the binaries and essentialist assumptions that feminist teachers make about feminist pedagogy and empowerment.

Line 1: feminist pedagogy assumes that like other critical or liberatory pedagogies, feminist pedagogy can be empowering to *all* the students in the same classroom. In theory, such a revolutionary goal sounds rather rewarding to the feminist teacher who takes pains and spends extra time to make sure that she is creating a learning environment that is democratic and egalitarian for all her students. However, in the feminist classroom, for instance, that of bell hooks’s, some students (especially those who are marginalized in one way or the other) feel liberated while others (those who belong to the mainstream) feel ignored and oppressed. Such a gap between the theoretical empowerment of the feminist pedagogy and its potential oppression may originate from the essentialist notion of learners. The specific positionality of individual students in the classroom needs more attention if feminist teachers want to liberate *all* students; otherwise such a universal notion of learner will turn feminist pedagogy into a disempowering experience.

Line 2: another naïve assumption is that feminist teachers are always powered and students are absolutely powerless. Such an assumption not only essentializes teachers but also characterizes the student-teacher relationship as a binary one. A more realistic picture is that while no student is totally powerless or powered in the power structure of the classroom, not all feminist teachers enjoy the same teacher authority in the classroom. In practice, feminist pedagogy can be oppressive to many feminist teachers because their positionality in the society and in the classroom determines that they are perceived as deviation from the norms as a teacher. There are some disabling factors. The first factor is the teacher authority. Because of their marginalized status, students challenge their teacher authority, oftentimes not allowing them the necessary authority to carry an effective classroom teaching, and consequently turning the classroom into a depressing experience for both the students and the teacher. Second, their different social, sexual, gender, racial, linguistic, and cultural background oftentimes makes them less credible before the students when the class is focusing on racism, gender, marginalization, injustice, and discrimination because students, especially students who are not exposed to multiculturalism, diversity, and critical

thinking, whose status is closer to the dominant discourse, who think that the teachers are just offering one-side view of the issue, self-obsessive, etc; therefore such a situation creates more resistance from the students than when the teacher is a male, white and authoritative teacher who chooses to advocate equality for those who are marginalized. Finally, students tend to attribute their difficulty in transforming themselves or any discomfort they feel toward the feminist pedagogy and theory and ideas to the feminist teacher.

Line 3: an unstated, yet prevalent, assumption underlying feminist pedagogy is that feminist pedagogy and traditional pedagogy are binary to each other and cannot coexist within one classroom; hence pedagogical practices such as lectures and exams used by traditional pedagogies cannot be applied to feminist classrooms. As Sandy Grande critiques in her article "Whitestream Feminism and the Colonialist Project: A Review of Contemporary Feminist Pedagogy and Praxis," feminist scholars and teachers Frances A Maher and Mary Key Thompson Tetreault

. . . tacitly adhere to a rather essentialist notion of feminist pedagogy, one that relies upon classroom practices that are student-centered, nonauthoritarian, and collaborative/cooperative in nature. Similarly, pedagogical practices that are decidedly teacher-centered, authoritarian, and individualistic are implicitly categorized as nonfeminist or patriarchal. (339)

On the one hand, traditional pedagogy is admittedly oppressive and does not create a learning environment that invites students' participation and collaboration, but, on the other hand, lectures and exams used by conventional teaching are not oppressive in nature, and, if well designed, they could serve the liberatory goal of feminist teaching. Meanwhile, we cannot be too optimistic about the assumptions about the liberatory nature of collaborative activities because more and more scholars argue that group work in the classroom reproduces domination and oppression in society. Therefore, it is safe to say that not all traditional pedagogical practices are innately oppressive and not all feminist pedagogical practices are universally empowering in all situations.

Line 4: underpinning the feminist pedagogy is another assumption that teacher authority is oppressive in nature and should be diminished in order to achieve its liberatory goal. In practice, as teachers, we know that teacher authority is necessary for all pedagogies. In a feminist classroom, it is the feminist teacher who is choosing the textbooks and the content of the course, setting up the rules, and grading students' papers, etc. The democratic learning environment does not exclude teacher authority; it only makes the teacher authority deceptively invisible. Instead of creating an illusion both to the teacher and the students that teacher authority does not exist in a feminist classroom, probably feminist teachers should make it visible so that both the teachers and the students can be more aware of their power dynamic and use the power more productively and reflectively.

Line 5: underlying all the above assumptions is another, more fundamental, layer of assumptions: there is a universal teacher and a universal pedagogy. Such assumption is well summarized in the collaborative essay of Brown, Cervero, and Johnson-Bailey: "(a) all teachers enter the classroom on equal terms regardless of their social location; (b) teacher's experiences in the classroom are not connected to their social location; (c) guidelines for effective teaching are the same regardless of the teacher's social location" (274).

These gaps between feminist pedagogical theories and practices challenge us to deal with a chain of questions concerning the issue of empowerment: can feminist pedagogy be empowering to all students in the same classroom? Is teacher authority oppositional to feminist pedagogy? Do all the feminist teachers share the same amount or kind of teacher authority? Could feminist pedagogy be also empowering to teachers? Are students empowerment and teacher empowerment mutual exclusive or complimentary to each other? How do teachers and students achieve dual empowerment?

These questions, imbedded in many of the burgeoning literature in the past decade centering on positionality and empowerment, have never been explicitly stated nor fully addressed. In the existing literature, while much critical attention has been paid to how the positionality of learners could affect their knowledge making, some other scholars begin to realize that the positionality of the teacher affects students' learning. While many have realized the urge to empower students, several scholars begin to see the equal importance of empowering teachers. However, less attention has been given to how the positionality of learners and the positionality of teacher interact with each other while some seem to maintain that empowering students and empowering teachers are oppositional or binary. Still, fewer scholars seem to stress that both the positionality of the learners and the positionality of the teacher are fluid, contingent, unfixed, and reconfigured constantly by the student-teacher dynamic as well as the specific teaching/learning contexts in which the feminist teacher and their students are.

In addressing these questions, this article will first discuss the constant configurations of learner positionality and teacher positionality and how these configurations affect empowerment for both the students and the teacher. Moving beyond the binaries between student empowerment and teacher empowerment, between learner positionality and teacher positionality, this article argues: 1) teacher authority is a necessary condition for feminist pedagogy; 2) empowerment takes place only through negotiation between teachers and students and liberation (freedom or democracy) is not a gift given from teacher to students or students to teacher; and 3) student empowerment and teacher empowerment are simultaneous. This article will also explore strategies that feminist teachers have suggested to achieve dual empowerment.

### **Reconceiving the Positionality of Learners: The Heterglossia of Individual Identifiers**

In recent scholarship on feminist pedagogy, especially poststructural feminist pedagogy, positionality has gained a lot of attention. As Elizabeth Tisdell carefully examines in her article "Poststructural Feminist Pedagogies: The Possibilities and Limitations of Feminist Emancipatory Adult Learning Theory and Practice," the issue of "positionality" is "particularly central" and affects the three major themes of feminist pedagogy: knowledge construction, voice, and authority (143). More important, positionality is central to the liberatory goal of feminist pedagogy, not only because the "power relationships that structure social life" of the teachers and the students "do not stop at the classroom door," and "these relationships that are structured around class, race, gender, and sexual orientation are also played out in all adult education classrooms and have a profound effect on all teaching and learning processes" (Brown et al 273). It is also because empowerment of both students and teachers need the recognition of changes in their positionality.

Though feminist pedagogy, indeed any pedagogy, involves both teachers and learners, scholars tend to emphasize either the importance of learner positionality, like Knowles and Galbraith, or the significant effect of teacher positionality on students learning, like Brown, Cervero, and Johnson-Bailey. I argue that feminist teachers should examine both teacher positionality and student positionality, and more importantly, how these two positionalities interact and depend on each other to make empowerment and liberation possible in the feminist classroom.

Due to the explained centrality of the issue of positionality to the discussion of teacher authority and empowerment in feminist pedagogy, it seems quite necessary to define what I mean by the term. In both Tisdell's and Brown's articles, positionality is defined as how people are categorized in a Western hierarchical society by race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. These primary identifiers for individual learners have been widely argued as factors that have significant effect on how they construct knowledge, express their own voice, and learn to speak with authority. As Tisdell points out, an assumption underlying post-structural feminist pedagogies is that it is usually those with the greatest combination of systems of privilege (including white, male, upper or middle class, heterosexual) that are more often recognized or given more status in (mostly unconscious) ways in the classroom by both the teachers and other participants. Thus, poststructural feminist educators more directly seek out and validate the contributions of those who have been marginalized by more systems of oppression. (146)

It is true that these identifiers are primarily affecting the learning condition of the individual learners. In a feminist classroom, feminist teachers not only give the marginalized students more attention but also choose materials and course contents that address the marginalized people. Such pedagogical efforts are believed to be empowering to students with marginalized status or background.

However, these same efforts may at the same time turn out to be oppressive to students viewed as "privileged." A student's positionality in the classroom

is neither fixed nor easily identified by the binaries of marginalization and privilege. Very often, in the same course, individual student positionality is reconfigured by the dynamics such as course content and focus, the composition of student population, students' attitudes toward and background experiences with feminist pedagogy, students' expectations about the course, students' conceptions about marginalization and liberation, and finally students' positioning with the teacher. All these factors make students' status in the classroom less stable, profoundly affect their learning experiences, and determine whether such learning experiences are empowering or not. Therefore, categories such as race, gender, class, and sexuality are not always the ultimate determinants of "who typically has status or is marginalized in a particular learning environment" (Tisdell 146).

As bell hooks describes in *Teaching to Transgress*, while she empowers black students by allowing them to use black vernacular, white students feel oppressed: "It was particularly disturbing to the white students because they could hear the words that were said but could not comprehend their meaning" (173). Of course, pedagogically, as hooks argues, the frustration of the white students could be turned into a teaching moment, an opportunity for the white to "think of the moment of not understanding what someone says," "to listen without 'mastery,' without owning or possessing speech through interpretation," and to experience "hearing non-English words" (173).

However, such an opportunity does not necessarily bring liberation to the white students. In reality, they would always become representatives of the white supremacist, of oppression, of domination, of discrimination. Instead of being liberated or empowered, due to the pedagogical emphasis on the marginalized, these so-called privileged students feel marginalized, wishing that they have something that could call attention from the feminist teachers. They feel ignored by the course. When feminist teachers "subvert the tendency to focus only on the thoughts, attitudes, and experiences of those who are materially privileged," they are obviously "granting' authority to some voices than other voices" (hooks 185).

It is important to note that the so-called privileged students also need liberation and empowerment though in a way different from those so-called marginalized students. In C. Alejandra Elenes's class, "Race, Class, and Gender," some white women students complained about being marginalized by the exclusive focus of the course on women of color. Elenes believes that such complaints represent not only some feminists' tendency to "universalize woman" and to see "women's oppression exclusively through the axis of gender," but also their desire to reclaim the central place of white women (696-7). However, if feminist pedagogy means empowerment to all the students in the class, students like Adeline in Elenes's class should also be given attention and liberation. Yet, one can hardly imagine how such students can be empowered if their experiences are not discussed, their voices are not valued, their values are attacked. Sitting in very successful feminist classes such as "Feminist Theory, Pedagogy, and Research" or "Latin Feminisms," or "Transnational Feminism," I, as a minority, female international graduate student, felt empowered because my voice was listened to and my

experiences as a marginalized person were valued, but this was not true to Rachel, a white, heterosexual, young American woman, who felt that none of her experiences except those with gender was on the feminist teacher's agenda. She confessed in the bathroom during the class break that she wished that in such classes she were either black or Asian or Hispanic or lesbian, and that she chose to be silent most of the times partially because she did not have much to say and partially because what she said would not have the same significance as those with marginalized status.

### **Coming to Terms with Teacher Authority: The Intersection of Gender, Race, and Power in the Feminist Classrooms**

In the last three decades since Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, scholars have tended to believe that radical pedagogy or feminist pedagogy can free students from the oppression of teacher authority and have power in the classroom. As Gary Olson notices, "scholars in literacy studies and in rhetoric and composition have recognized that traditional power arrangements in the classroom are counterproductive and that learning is much more likely to occur when students are active participants in their own education—that is, when a significant portion of the teacher's 'authority' is transferred to the students themselves" (GaleVii). Diminishing the teacher's classroom authority, as Olson reminds us, has recently become the focal of scholarship in the field of rhetoric and composition (Gale vii). As an alternative pedagogy challenging traditional pedagogy, feminist pedagogy sees education as practice of freedom and uses classroom as sites to resist all forms of oppression. Therefore, feminist teachers believe that diminishing teacher authority would open up space for honest dialogues between students and teachers. To achieve the liberatory goal of feminist pedagogy, feminist teachers like bell hooks enter the classroom with a fear that using their authority would "perpetuate class elitism and other forms of domination," a fear that they might "abuse power," a fear that their authority might work against their goal of empowering students (hooks 188).

Could such a fear of authority or such a willingness to diminish teacher authority lead us to say that feminist pedagogy does not need teacher authority?

The truth is that feminist pedagogy cannot abandon teacher authority; it is the feminist agenda and feminist pedagogical practices that make teacher authority hidden. As Elenes argues, teacher authority is deeply imbedded in every moment of the feminist classroom:

Although it is not always clearly articulated (or perhaps even conscious), pedagogical orientation and epistemology are also connected. What texts will be used, classroom dynamics, content of the course, assignments, and methods of evaluation are all connected with the teacher's own epistemology and ontology. Indeed, the teacher, not the students, sets the political perspectives that are "valued" in the classroom. (693)

As many scholars and feminist teachers witness in their own classrooms, it is not only impossible to diminish teacher authority but also naïve to say that all teachers have the same amount or kind of teacher authority in the classroom.

The issue of teacher authority is brought “to the limelight of the composition arena” (1) when the writing instruction is moving away from a teacher-centered pedagogy to a student-centered pedagogy, as Xin Liu Gale rightly points out in her book *Teachers, Discourses, and Teacher Authority in the Postmodern Composition Classroom*. Gale examines how the current composition theories and pedagogies treat the issue of teacher authority problematically. As she argues, in spite of the attempts of the current four major pedagogies—cognitivist, expressivist, social constructionist, and critical—to challenge, critique, and abandon teacher authority, this authority is a necessary condition for any teaching to be possible. Borrowing from Bourdieu and Passerson, she believes that any teaching requires institutional authority as a precondition for any pedagogical communication to take place (37). In other words, teaching demands and depends on the existence of institution and its authority as well. Though countless studies have called our attention to downplay institutional authority so that we could empower students in our classroom, we need to be always reminded that classroom writing instruction is impossible without the support of the existence and authority of the institution.

As Gale goes on to articulate, whether a theory or pedagogy is traditional or radical, teacher authority or expertise cannot be legitimized by teachers and scholars themselves. The teachers can change its pedagogical orientation, but they could not change the fact that “it is the institution’s acknowledgement of the teacher’s knowledge as legitimate that gives the teacher the authority of expertise” (Gale 48). Whether the teacher uses current-traditional or process pedagogy, a teacher’s authority does not solely come from his or her own expertise in theories and pedagogies. Teacher authority is therefore a composite of the institutional authority, the authority of expertise, and personal authority, as Gale concludes (57).

Though a teacher’s authority demands and depends on institutional authority, Gale seems to fail to underscore that not all teachers are given the same authority or power by the institution, the dominant discourse, and culture. Because they are positioned differently within the dominant discourse, some teachers dominate the center while others are marginalized. In other words teachers at different rank or from different cultural backgrounds have different levels of authority or power. Positioned at one of the lowest rungs on the ladder of teaching professionals, graduate teaching assistants, for example, certainly do not have the same authority as full-time or tenured professors even when they have the same authority of expertise. To say that the authority of all teaches has the same power is, therefore, to essentialize teacher authority and consequently teacher identity and to write off the different social and cultural positions of teachers.

To challenge this tendency to essentialize teacher authority, we then find Ferganchick’s discussion of authority and gender very useful:

Although teacher authority has been at the center of our discussions in teacher training, work-shops, conventions, and publications, little attention has been paid to the different social and cultural positions of men and women. As a community, we have taken for granted a stable and single definition of teacher authority that does not account for gender, racial, cultural, or other differences. I am certainly not arguing here that these various movements to alter our conceptions of teacher authority are invalid, but I do think that we have missed a crucial aspect of this conversation. Particularly in a field where the majority of practitioners are women, we should be taking these differences into account when we discuss issues of teacher authority. (331)

Because male teachers and female teachers are positioned differently within the academic discourse, women teachers are many times in a more vulnerable position than men teachers and are usually not given the same authority or power by the institution, dominant discourse, culture, and society.

Ferganchick further points out that liberatory pedagogy may be difficult for female teachers and put them into a very vulnerable situation. Drawing upon the results of a survey on nine hundred female teachers of college composition teachers across the United States, she finds that women's attempts to use liberatory approaches in their classrooms are often met with aggressive student response. Student-to-teacher aggression, which she termed as "contrapower harassment", has become one of the major contributors that are endangering and frustrating female teachers who are trying to implement liberatory composition pedagogies.

In "Theoretical, Political, and Pedagogical Challenges in the Feminist Classroom: Our Struggles to Walk the Walk," Robin Crabtree and David Sapp have explored how their different genders as feminist teachers have affected their teacher authority in the classroom. In their common feminist practices with naming that are used to "recognize that the classroom is a social as well as an academic setting" where "interacting on a first-name basis will result in more equalized authority" (136), Crabtree, the female teacher, notices that allowing students to call her by her first name instead of Dr. or Professor "created an opportunity for students to objectify me, not as an authority in my field or as source of wisdom (the bearded, white-haired male with leather elbow patches is that object), but in traditionally gendered ways, as a sexual being" (135-6). In contrast, Sapp, the male teacher, tells a different story: despite his efforts to encourage students to call him "David," "many students still refuse to call him 'David,' preferring instead to call me 'Dr. Sapp'" (136).

Teacher authority is gendered, and it leads to a contradiction between feminist pedagogy and classroom practice of female teachers. In "Revisiting Liberatory Pedagogies: Questioning Assumptions," Velvet Pearson and Anne Thorpe contend that even though numerous articles have been published on *Writing Instructor* to share teachers' experience in sharing power with their students, even though student-centered pedagogy has been declared imperative, there is a danger for us to neglect to "interrogate the assumptions

that student-centered pedagogy can often be quite difficult to put into practice” (3). Whether students can be really powered or not, we cannot assume that the same pedagogy—student-centered pedagogy—will produce the same pedagogical effect regardless of the gender, cultural, and racial background of the teacher. Whether student-centered pedagogy is good pedagogy or not, the same (or good) pedagogy does not work the same way with all teachers in all teaching situations. Though liberatory as has been theorized, feminist pedagogy will not necessarily lead to the liberation of the students.

Teacher authority is also racialized. Teachers of different racial backgrounds are positioned differently with the dominant discourse and within the social and cultural contexts. The often-marginalized positioning of minority teachers and teachers who are nonnative speakers of English determines that their teacher authority is invisibly but severely diminished by the very institutional authority and dominant discourse through which their expertise is legitimized. Their skin color, cultural difference, their accent in speaking English, their “foreign” names, and their not-so-aggressive behaviors partially if not completely cancel out the expertise that they have worked so hard for so many years to gain.

This marginalization of minority and nonnative speaker teachers both within and without the teaching profession makes Jacinta Thomas lament that nonnative speakers are not only strangers in the academia but also strangers on the periphery (5). Even though she knows that she can openly respond to the challenging questions of her students, “Yes, this IS an ENGLISH class and I AM the teacher,” she is fully and annoyingly aware that teachers who are nonnative speakers “often find ourselves in situations where we have to establish our credibility” as teachers of English “before we proceed to be taken seriously as professionals” (5). Evoking colleagues like her, she says that “I sometimes feel that I have to do twice as well to be accepted” (5). Her accent, as well as her skin color, has cancelled her credibility and competence as a teacher of English. Though linguistic competence is a problem to many nonnative speakers of English, Thomas argues that this problem is constructed on the fallacy that there is only one kind of English, the English spoken by inner circle (7) of the English speaking worlds, and that other varieties of English are not standard, and therefore are accents that have to be reduced or eliminated if nonnative speakers want to teach in the United States.

Sheila Minn Hwang explains how feminist pedagogy or liberatory pedagogy works differently and oftentimes against the teacher who is marginalized and helps understand how important and necessary it is for teachers of color to claim their authority as teachers when their authority is threatened or deprived. In “At the limits of My Feminism: Race, Gender, Class, and the Execution of a Feminist Pedagogy,” she recounts how she is first fascinated by feminist pedagogy, then how her authority as a female graduate teaching assistant of color is threatened to a degree that teaching is almost impossible, how finally how she has decided to assert her authority as a teacher as a necessary act to enable her teaching.

At the beginning of her class, being fascinated by the radical pedagogy, she rejects “the premise that instructors traditionally wield unquestioned power and authority over their students”:

As an instructor, I must attempt to readjust the balance of power in the classroom through strategies that lessen the degree to which students are force-fed truths universally acknowledged. Although many students demand that instructors digest the material and give them the right answer, liberal instructors struggle to help students learn to think in a critical fashion. For people interested in feminist pedagogy, there is no such thing as a right answer in interpreting literature. (Hwang155)

Determined to empower her students by encouraging them to challenge her interpretations, she experiments with strategies that are meant to help students develop critical thinking:

Common teaching strategies include having students search for faults in instructors’ arguments and having instructors play the devil’s advocate so that the students learn to work ideas out through debate. Feminist pedagogy involves asking many open-ended questions without settling on “correct” reading of a text, thereby allowing students to voice their own thoughts. Inviting students to doubt their instructor’s interpretations begins the process of student empowerment. (155)

As she passionately plays the devil’s advocate to implement feminist pedagogy in the literature class she is teaching to undergraduate students, she encounters challenges that are not described in the scholarship advocating feminist pedagogy. An unstated assumption that radical or liberatory pedagogies are based on is that teachers naturally and automatically have authority—so much so that it oppresses students and impedes their learning process. However, we cannot make the same assumption about authority when it comes to a Chinese American woman who teaches English Literature as a graduate teaching assistant like Hwang.

The challenges that she encounters in her attempts to downplay her teacher’s authority and to empower students are not just the usual indifference and resistance from the students; the problems facing Hwang are not what she has expected: “The practical problems I have encountered with my pedagogical ideals is that they have the potential to erode my already tenuous authority” (156). At the beginning of the semester, she assumes that students would give her the same authority as any other teacher. It is not until the moment when she tries to undercut her teacher’s authority does she realizes sadly that the students from the beginning have not bestowed upon her the same amount of power as they would with “traditional” (normal) teachers of English. It is not until this moment that she realizes that as a graduate teaching assistant and as a young female Chinese American woman, she has incredibly meager authority and little respect from her undergraduate students.

Hwang is not given “natural” authority as a “normal” teacher because her “subject position” as an “Asian American woman in the academy is not easily

identifiable” with her field of expertise as a teacher of eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century British literature; she does not match the normal picture of a white, middle-aged, male English literature professor (160). Besides her ethnic background and gender, her position as a graduate teaching assistant is another player in diminishing her authority:

Our illegitimate authority is not only falsely imagined to be illegitimate on the basis of readings of gender and race; unfortunately our authority is “illegitimate” given the structure of the university. In the university’s hierarchy, graduate students stand awkwardly positioned in the both powerful and powerless place accorded to the teaching assistant. (Hwang 162)

When Hwang realizes she is not entitled to the “natural” authority as a teacher traditional teachers are given, she is appalled to see that the lack of authority and respect—the very thing she is generously and passionately “giving away”—is disabling her pedagogy: “When students fail to accord respect to their instructors, feminist pedagogy can not only be ineffective but also be misread as ineptitude, weakness, or inexperience” (157).

The examples of Robin Crabtree, Jacinta Thomas, and Sheila Ming Hwang are not isolated examples in academia. Their lack of credibility, authority, and respect from the students is unfortunately widely shared by feminist teachers who are marginalized by one or more categories.

### **Reconceptualizing Feminist Pedagogy: Empowerment as Negotiation and Repositioning**

Since, as argued before, teacher authority is the mandatory condition for all teachings or pedagogies to happen, one is hardly able to resist the temptation to say that teachers should be empowered before they are able to empower students. If the teacher is oppressed, probably we need to liberate the teacher first before we liberate the students. If empowering students mean that teachers share with students their power, then does it mean that to empower teachers we should ask students to share their power with their teacher? The example of Hwang seems to suggest that in a given teaching situation, the feminist pedagogy has the ability to empower either the teacher or the students.

Such a view seems to me to endorse the assumption that power is a possession. This assumption is famously critiqued by Foucault, who sees power not as repressive but as productive. The Foucauldian notion of power reinforces the idea that teacher’s authority is not necessarily repressive; a certain amount of authority is not only necessary but also enabling and productive. Foucault also sees power not as “a domination of one group over the other” (*The History of Sexuality* 92). This helps us come to see teacher authority not as domination of teachers over students. More importantly, Foucault insists that:

power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations. (95)

This notion of power is also stressed in *Discipline and Punish*, where Foucault contends that power is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the “‘privilege,’ acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions—an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated” (26).

Sharing Foucault’s notion, Freire reminds us that “freedom is not a gift” (29). In a similar vein, he argues that freedom must be “acquired by conquest” and “pursued constantly and responsibly” (29). Drawing upon Foucault and Freire, we could conclude that student empowerment cannot be achieved by a generous gift—diminishing of teacher authority—from the teacher. Students must pursue their freedom. A freedom or democracy endowed by the generous feminist is not empowerment.

The either/or view of authority and power also dichotomizes students as outsiders to normal discourse and teachers as insiders. This dichotomous view leads us to conclude that pedagogy cannot empower both the students and the teacher at the same time. Consequently, the dichotomy leads us to oppose student-centered pedagogy against teacher-centered pedagogy.

Arguing that we need to develop a new concept to look at the student-teacher relationship, Gale maintains that neither the teacher nor the students can reject the normal discourse because she insists that we see normal discourse as a connecting point between student’s discourse and the teacher’s discourse. Totally dismissing the traditional binary between “student discourse” and “teacher discourse,” she contends that interactions with normal discourse are the primary conditions for teaching. Furthermore, she innovatively describes how this new student-teacher relationship functions at two levels. At a primary level, the teacher interacts with the students through normal discourse; at a secondary level, the teacher interacts with the students through abnormal discourse in order to develop critical thinking and resistance to the normal discourse. She stresses that the first level is primary because the interaction with normal discourse is the very condition of teaching. The second level is secondary because it is impossible without the intervention of normal discourse (89-90). As she cautions, the secondary interaction cannot become the primary interaction in the classroom because if it did, it would “deprive students of opportunities to experience and interact with normal discourse” and therefore “leave a gap in students’ education” (90-91).

So far the new concept works well if the teachers that are discussed at the two-level interaction are close enough to the normal discourse to interact with the students. As we have come to see, teachers who have been marginalized are positioned differently with the normal discourse than other teachers. Though they are institutionally assigned the role of instructors with authority, neither the students nor the feminist teachers themselves position these feminist teachers as belonging to the center of normal discourse. Rather, they

are marginalized in the normal discourse as abnormal, strangers in the academia, and intruders of the academic discourse. If teachers are not positioned close enough to normal discourse, how could they interact at the primary level as unproblematized by Gale?

What we see is that there is a distance between marginalized feminist teachers and normal discourse, yet this distance is not the critical distance that radical teachers attempt to create in order to resist normal discourse. This distance in other words is imposed on the teachers rather than a careful pedagogical choice of the teachers. Therefore, we are able to say that the primary level of interaction is problematic for marginalized feminist teachers, but it does not mean that their teaching at the primary level is impossible; it means that their primary level interaction will be different from the “normal” interaction described by Gale.

Indeed, a new framework is needed in order to fully understand this different kind of interaction. In order for marginalized feminist teachers to attain authority to enable them to conduct successful classroom teaching, they need first to challenge the oppressive, abnormal, and stereotyped positions assigned by the normal discourse. They need to resist those stereotypes of themselves as teachers who lack the qualifications, credibility, and expertise assigned by the normal discourse and reposition themselves in relation to the normal discourse. Of course this conscious repositioning needs to be recognized by the students; otherwise this repositioning cannot be accomplished. By recognizing the feminist teachers’ repositioning, the students are developing critical thinking about dominant discourse as well. In accordance to the teacher’s repositioning, students are repositioning themselves with the normal discourse and with feminist teachers as well. This kind of interaction combines Gale’s two levels of interaction. In other words, the primary level and secondary level interactions for the marginalized feminist teachers’ classroom may take place at the same time when both the teachers and students are trying to get closer to the normal discourse and at the same time when both are reinventing their own discourse.

Rather than seeing a lack of teacher authority as an enemy, feminist teachers could develop it productively into exciting teaching moments that will eventually reposition both the teachers and the students with the normal discourse. As Hwang finally comes to see through her struggles, “our profession,’ the teaching profession, is a profession of constant positioning, adjusting, and repositioning” (162). This repositioning is not only necessary for marginalized feminist teachers but also for any feminist teacher. Because not all students are positioned the same with normal discourse, teachers need to adjust their positions when dealing with each individual student.

Such a framework of repositioning suggests that the student empowerment and teacher empowerment take place simultaneously in the process of repositioning; such a repositioning needs a meaningful negotiation, a dialogue between students and the teacher. A wishful relinquishing of teacher authority to empower students is only a “false generosity” in Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of*

*the Oppressed:*

the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both. This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well. The oppressors, who oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves. Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both. Any attempt to “soften” the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity. (26)

It is important to note here that both the teacher and the students are simultaneously oppressors and the oppressed. If empowerment means to regain humanity, it is necessary that both the teacher and students enter this negotiation process both as subjects with their humanity. As Freire argues, to rehumanize both the teacher and the students, we need a “humanizing pedagogy in which the revolutionary leadership establishes a permanent relationship of dialogue with the oppressed” (50).

To achieve repositioning, the students and the teacher need to undo dualistic thinking that categorizes student-teacher relationship as oppressed/oppressor, powerless/powerful, marginalized/privileged, unsafe/safe. To undo these binaries, we may find Gloria Anzaldúa’s conceptualization of *mestiza* consciousness very useful. In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa explicitly explains how binary thinking is inadequate for liberation and empowerment:

it is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal white conventions. A counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed; locked into mortal combat, like the cop and the criminal, both are reduced to a common denominator of violence. (78)

She proposes that only a new *mestiza* consciousness can “break down the subject-object duality that keeps both sides prisoners. Borrowing her theory, we can say the answer to the issue of empowerment or disempowerment is not to choose whom to empower, not to categorize who is marginalized or privileged, to decide who has more power over whom, but to transcend these binaries. As she proposes:

The answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our language, our thoughts. A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, violence, of war. (80)

## **Narrowing the Gap: Listening to Multiple Voices and Embracing Multiple Pedagogies**

Even though feminist pedagogy has presented numerous challenges and barriers to feminist teachers, especially those with 'marginalized' status, feminist pedagogy (or other alternative critical pedagogy) might be the only way that these feminist teachers make their students reconceptualize their stereotypical conceptions about gender, race, class, and sexual orientation, and it is only through students' reconceptualization about the teachers that the feminist teachers can reposition themselves in the classroom. Instead of abandoning feminist pedagogy and reverting to traditional pedagogy as an easy exit, these feminist teachers could use feminist pedagogy to reinvent themselves and achieve empowerment through repositioning with the students.

Teaching does not simply mean applying good pedagogical theories and acting like a good teacher. To most teachers, it is an essential part of their identity and a state of being. Being a teacher, as Jane Danielewicz defines in *Teaching Selves: Identity, Pedagogy, and Teacher Education*, is "engagement with identity, the way individuals conceive of themselves so that teaching is a state of being, not merely ways to acting or behaving" (3). This is especially true with feminist teachers with 'marginalized' status. It is only through feminist teaching can they resist the oppression and discrimination imposed on them, can they rehumanize their being.

The reinvention of such a humanized being, as we discuss earlier, cannot be achieved single-handedly by the feminist teachers; it depends on the teachers' "social interaction through engagement in multiple discourses" (Danielewicz 11). There are multiple discourses at play in the feminist classroom: the dominant discourses on race, gender, class, sexual orientation, dominant discourses on student-teacher relationship, pedagogy, education, feminist discourses on race, gender, class, and sexual orientation, student discourse on race, gender, class, and sexual orientation, and teacher discourse on education, pedagogy, democracy, and student-teacher relationship, etc. Therefore, to execute feminist pedagogy, feminist teachers need to listen to and negotiate with various, often competing, discourses. Translated into classroom practice, this negotiation means that the feminist teachers must listen to various voices and embrace multiple pedagogies.

To listen to various voices, the feminist teacher needs to be constantly reflective and aware of her own values, perspectives, power, and limitations. She needs to make it visible to the class that she has power over students, and that her feminist pedagogy is not value free, and how her own version of feminism has been greatly influenced by her own experiences and background. Listening to various voices also means that the feminist teacher needs to resist the temptation to convert all students into her version of feminists, the temptation to see students as either oppressors or the oppressed, either mainstream or marginalized. Instead, as Elenes proposes, the feminist teacher needs to move to "the same side of the river" and "elevate the discussion to a 'common language' of the philosophical

arguments on any particular issue” (695). Listening to various voices also means that the feminist teacher “must recognize students’ perceptions of democracy,” of freedom, of education, of pedagogy, of gender, race, and class—the democracy, freedom, education, pedagogy, gender, race, and class “they have experienced as citizens,” as students, as real human beings—and respond to their possible apathy to freedom, democracy, and education and their immediate reality (Thelin 137). As William Thelin argues through his classroom experiences with critical pedagogy, critical pedagogues must know where their students are:

While critical pedagogues want to prepare their students for active citizenship, most students, like those in my class, do not feel that the trappings of democracy used by our government have given students much of a chance to participate in importance decision making at the local, state, or national level. Why should they automatically gain enthusiasm for democracy at the classroom level? (137-8)

While some feminist teachers are fearful of using traditional pedagogies, Hwang finds that oftentimes she has to rely on traditional pedagogy to gain the necessary teacher authority so that her feminist pedagogy can be enabled.

Forced to the limits of my feminist pedagogy, I willingly assume authority by acting as an attendance cop, taking roll, giving quizzes, being very strict with due dates, and allowing students to believe that I am rather inflexible about my course policies. Sometimes I must use an aggressively Socratic method of teaching, and occasionally I lecture in discussion sections. (160)

Meanwhile, she limits her use of feminist pedagogy to “one-on-one meetings with students” (162). Though liberating in theory, feminist pedagogy Hwang finally realizes cannot be applied equally to every teaching situation. Indeed, it is not just feminist pedagogy that cannot be applied to any teaching situation. To extend it a little broader, any pedagogy, traditional or liberatory, engenders different pedagogical effects in different teaching contexts. The formats of classroom activities, the topics, the discipline, the students—all matter. There are always limits to any pedagogy. What matters more is the practitioner of the pedagogy—the teacher. To be more exact, what matters is how the teacher is positioned culturally, socially, and academically with the dominant discourse.

In her most recent (2005) book, *Revisionary Rhetoric, Feminist Pedagogy, and Multigenre Texts*, Julie Jung argues that feminist teachers need to dismantle a pedagogical pendulum—either a traditional, nurturing mother figure or a “full-fledged bitch” (146). She proposes that feminist teachers need to push themselves beyond this binary, see these identities not as fixed, and revise their “teaching styles—nurturing, traditional, and confrontational—as performance genres and generate disruption by self consciously juxtaposing them within the classroom space” (147). Drawing on Charles Garoian, Jung believes that both students and teachers can “migrate to pedagogical genres previously labeled by many feminist and writing teachers as being ‘off limits’” (148). For example, lecturing, performed in a creative way, does not need to

be a “patriarchal dissemination of information; rather, we can revise what a lecture might mean: it can be an invitation to listeners to question and challenge content as *it is being delivered*” (italicize original; 148).

Finally, to exercise feminist pedagogy as a way of being, the feminist teacher, as bell hooks argues, should bring passions to the classroom and tend to the emotional responses of the students (155). Instead of keeping a cap on emotions (which will eventually erupt in spite of the silence from the teacher), the feminist teacher, as Tisdell suggests:

Should create activities early on that are likely to access people’s emotions. Examples include the use of films, and the writing and sharing of each participant’s cultural story around awareness of one’s race, gender, able-ness, and sexual orientation. Allowing for such expression of personal experience and emotion not only makes visible everyone’s positionality early on, but gives space for the discharge of emotion. Ironically, this gives participants more intellectual energy to deal with the cognitive or theoretical material in the course. (146)

Engaging students both intellectually and emotionally will lead to a complete empowerment for both the students and the feminist teacher. Such is the goal of feminist pedagogy.

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