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Beyond Inclusion: An In-Depth Analysis of Teaching of Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan, and Adrienne Rich

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This capstone will analyze interventions into university pedagogy based on the teaching practices of Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan, and Adrienne Rich. It begins with a historical introduction to the role of these four women in university activism in the late 1960s and early 1970s inside and outside the classroom. Analysis of the development of Black Studies and university pedagogy since this time reveals gaps in the fulfillment of the student-driven movement's goal that are still extremely relevant to questions of institutional power and access today. Next, this paper provides concrete pedagogical and methodological strategies for present day university teaching grounded in the work of these four revolutionary women. This portion will pull from archival research of teaching materials, notes, and correspondence as well as subsequent scholarship on pedagogy.

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I. Introduction

In the 1960s and 1970s students on university campuses nationwide made radical demands of the institutions they were attending (Biondi, 2012). Activists decried the historical tradition of racial discrimination in post-secondary education regarding admissions, curriculum, faculty, and mission (Biondi, 2012; Hong 2007). Those ideas represent a valuable critique of the university's role in reproducing structures of power that is still relevant today even in spite of reforms made in the wake of those same protests (Hong 2007; Ferguson 2012). Protesters demanded increased student and community governance of university programs in order to achieve their desired vision which included: increased accessibility, new opportunities for study, and a renewed sense of responsibility to working class people and people of color (Biondi 2012). While protests were successful in raising the matriculation of Black students and spurring the creation of hundreds of Black Studies programs, their more drastic demands about the function and impact of the university were ignored (Biondi 2012; Ferguson 2012). Since, a number of scholars have written on the ways that selectively implementing protest goals created new avenues for universities to continue similarly exclusive policies without garnering the same critique (Ferguson, 2012; Hong 2007). Understanding this time period and the bureaucratic maneuverings that followed is key to refocusing attention on the fact that universities are using a nominal commitment to multiculturalism to continue practicing hegemonic forms of knowledge production.

Students at City College of New York (CCNY) participated in these protests alongside other schools across the nation (Biondi, 2012). CCNY has a particularly valuable archival record of this time because of the work being done in the Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge program (SEEK). Created to support Black and Puerto Rican students entering the school, SEEK was a hotbed of imaginative thought and action during the 1969 student occupation of the school

(Biondi, 2012). Taught by a remarkable group of professors, many of whom are now well-known writers and academics, the SEEK program employed a radical pedagogy and curriculum very much in line with protest demands being made for change university-wide (Reed, 2012). Analyzing the teaching strategies and curricular decisions of SEEK professors, namely Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan, and Adrienne Rich, offers insight into the historical protest demands as well as potential future interventions attempting to disrupt exclusive university power structures.

Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan, and Adrienne Rich were prolific poets and writers whose work has been met with tremendous critical recognition. In addition to their influential literary careers, each of these women had a life beyond their written work that was deeply concerned with teaching, activism, and community engagement. However, as they are taught and remembered today, Lorde, Bambara, Jordan, and Rich are often not discussed in the context of their radical work as teachers and organizers (Reed, 2018). Put glibly, Connor Thomas Reed writes, “her voluminous legacy may risk becoming a series of slogans, ‘the Audre Lorde that reads like a bumper sticker’” (Reed, 2018). In addition to the fight for Ethnic Studies, Lorde, Bambara, Jordan, and Rich fought against issues that are still present in the field of education today such as de facto segregation, neoliberal restructuring, and racialized attacks on school admissions (Reed, 2018). As a result, the legacy and records of their radical work advocating in their classrooms, in their universities, and in the public sphere are still extremely relevant. Instead of recognizing these women for only their extraordinary poetry and fiction, this project highlights the value of learning from their work in the context of and in harmony with their pedagogical aims.

As a part of their wide variety of experiences as educators, Lorde, Bambara, Jordan, and Rich all taught literature or remedial writing in the SEEK program (Lorde, 2018). This experience

is critical to understanding the contemporary relevance of their work. Each woman supported student efforts during the two-week 1969 student strike and occupation of CCNY: teaching in the reimagined classrooms, hosting panels, and encouraging student self-initiated learning (Reed, 2018). However, the role of Lorde, Bambara, Jordan, and Rich in the student movement began before the protest. In their classrooms, each woman emphasized deep consideration of community issues and critical assessment of the university (Reed, 2018). These four women believed in the radical potential of their remedial students, and refused to participate in the elitist academicism that traditionally excluded them and others from university spaces. Just as protests called for universities to be more inclusive and socially accountable, Lorde, Bambara, Jordan, and Rich created classrooms that reflected those values. The learning environments that these CUNY professors created were both a catalyst for the student protests and a model for their vision. Highlighting these pedagogies now is important for a sustained critique of the way universities have ignored protest demands or superficially adopted them to avoid critique.

Beginning in 1966, the aim of the SEEK program was to support an influx of racially, economically, and educationally marginalized students into the City University of New York (Lorde, 2018; Biondi, 2012). The model of the SEEK program was highly unique—it was the first affirmative action program; it was taught by a faculty that included professors of color (some of whom did not have college degrees); and it employed a curriculum that included the work of radical thinkers and writers of color (Biondi, 2012; archives). Ostensibly a program geared towards remediation, SEEK did much more than that. Savonick writes,

Bambara understood “remediation” differently: ... She made sure that students left her class cognizant of the gaps in dominant, institutional knowledges and mainstream narratives; able to do research and seek out missing perspectives; aware that authority is not synonymous with knowledge and not always legitimate; and with the power to tell stories, rather than be told by them (Savonick, 2018, p. 160-161).

Alongside Bambara, Lorde, Jordan, and Rich shared these goals and implemented them in the pedagogy of their classes. For example, both Bambara and Jordan included their students in decisions about readings, class procedures, and evaluation metrics (Savonick, 2017). Their intention was to challenge colonial student teacher relationships and give students agency in guiding their own learning (Savonick, 2017). Another unique pedagogical decision common in the program was assigning papers that required critical evaluation of a student's education as well as external structural forces in their lives. Examples include writing on a problem in their neighborhood or an assessment of their education in response to work written by an education philosopher (Savonick, 2017). The work educators were doing in SEEK classrooms was deeply in conversation with demands of students at CUNY and nationwide around access, representation, and student voice in the university.

II. 1969 Student Protests

The SEEK program and student protest at CUNY were deeply interwoven into the history of the national student-driven struggle that demanded inclusivity in university spaces for economic and racial diversity (Biondi, 2012). SEEK students, with the wholehearted support of professors in the program, were the locus of the 1969 student protests at CCNY (Biondi, 2012; Savonick, 2018). Demands at CCNY echoed those of the national movement, calling for more widespread access to universities, curriculum relevant to students of color, increased faculty of color in departments across the university, and most radically student governance of programs and faculty selection (Biondi). This movement that famously produced "Black Studies" had an expansive vision of what that entailed—it was not just the creation of a department but rather a restructuring and repurposing of the university with a serious emphasis on building connections with communities of color (Biondi, 2012).

Access to higher education was a key demand of both the CCNY and national protests which questioned existing university admissions processes and understandings of merit. Student protests shifted the narrative around educating underserved students from placing blame on high schools that failed to prepare them for college to demanding more from the colleges that were ill-equipped to receive them. Protesters pointed out the contradiction of community tax dollars funding public universities even while their admissions protocols excluded so many applicants who had attended segregated and insufficient high schools. Simultaneously, at private universities, protestors raised questions about the goals of elite education (Biondi, 2012).

CCNY, a prestigious CUNY school situated in Harlem, exemplifies this tension. During the 1969 protest, the surrounding neighborhood was 98% percent Black and Puerto Rican while the student body was 4% Black and 5% Puerto Rican and out of that 9%, 5% came through the SEEK program (Biondi, 2012; “Five Demands,” 1969; Reed, 2018). In 1969, one of the students’ five central demands was that the percentage of Black and Puerto Rican students at CCNY reflect that of the New York City Public school system which they estimated at the time to be 42% (“Five Demands,” 1969). Nationwide activism around expanded affirmative action and financial aid programs had concrete consequences. Between 1970 and 1974 college enrollment for African Americans increased by 56% compared to a growth of 15% for white people (Biondi, 2012). The push for access was intimately tied to advocating for changes to the university spaces to adequately support diverse racial and economic groups once they had been accepted.

Student demands for representative curriculum and faculty go hand in hand with more radical claims for self-governance and a sense of university accountability to surrounding communities. At CCNY, the first of the five demands raised by student protestors was the creation of a school of Black and Puerto Rican studies (“Five Demands,” 1969). However, this demand

was not just about studying for the sake of recovering the past (“Five Demands,” 1969). There was a strong emphasis on using a historical lens to better understand structural exploitation that was occurring in the present. Further, the demand reads “This school will be controlled by the community, students, and faculty. The courses and programs offered at this school will be completely geared to community needs” (“Five Demands,” 1969). Not only radical in purpose, this demand would necessitate a complete restructuring of university governance. Direction by community members and students, two parties with very little say in the historical or contemporary university model, would constitute a seismic change to higher education. This was reiterated in the third demand, which advocated that SEEK students have the power to set guidelines for the program including the hiring and firing of faculty (“Five Demands,” 1969). While this student movement led to the creation of hundreds of African American Studies programs and departments across the country, perhaps unsurprisingly, the radical vision of Black and Puerto Rican Studies envisioned by CCNY students was in many ways rejected (Biondi, 2012).

The successes of student movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s should not be dismissed, even though institutional response prevented more widespread change to university priorities. In spite of inconsistent institutional support, Black Studies has gained a hard-fought place in the academy. By 1979, 1,500 students had graduated with B.A. degrees in Black studies, and there were over two hundred degree programs nationwide as well as a number of professional organizations in the field of Black Studies (Rojas, 2007). By 2007 there were at least seven doctoral programs offering degrees in Black Studies, and the field gained legitimacy through its implementation at elite universities (Rojas, 2007). However, the discipline has not been ubiquitously adopted, and some critics argue that its institutional incorporation necessitated a

depoliticization and deradicalization of the original intentions of protesters (Rojas, 2017; Ferguson, 2012; Biondi, 2012).

III. Institutionalization of Protest Goals

The initial proliferation of Black Studies did not see the same explosive growth after the public outcry for its creation died down. In spite of the surge of Black studies programs following the wave of student protests, only 120 of the over 200 programs created were still offering Black Studies degrees in 2007 (Rojas, 2007). Only 9% of four-year colleges have formal Black Studies units leading to undergraduate or graduate degrees, and often Black Studies programs that do exist are small (Rojas, 2007). Scholar Fabio Rojas estimated that on average programs employ around seven professors, some of which are joint appointments, and some programs only consist of one faculty member who facilitates the cross-listing of courses in other departments (Rojas, 2007). The initial creation of Black Studies programs was an incredible victory in expanding study and knowledge production at universities, however in the years that followed obstacles have hindered the continuing growth of Black Studies as a discipline (Rojas, 2007; Biondi, 2012).

The development of a Black Studies department at CCNY exemplifies some of the institutional barriers other similar programs faced in their early years of development. At CUNY, the Board of Higher Education rejected the demand to create a separate school of Third World studies, but did approve Urban and Ethnic studies departments. Further, no input from Black and Puerto Rican students or professors was considered in the planning for the Urban and Ethnic Studies department. This decision is particularly egregious considering that City College hired two professors, Christian and Cartey, to design such a program and then ignored their input. Carty denounced the department CCNY did create, which offered only two courses, as disrespectful to Black and Puerto Rican students as well as the college itself. This example is one of many in which

institutions approved Ethnic Studies programs and then actively denied them support. In 1972, a Black Studies department was created at CCNY after students rejected the insufficient Urban and Ethnic Studies department and continued fighting for substantial university buy-in. The events following student protests at CCNY demonstrate how the process of institutionalization was treacherous for protestors' visions and goals. Universities were given tremendous control over the ways Black Studies programs were implemented, and, additionally, departments had to carefully self-manage in order to establish their legitimacy and continue to exist (Biondi, 2017).

Scholars have charted how the institutionalization of Black Studies constituted a shift in university management of knowledge, power, and radical potentials following the student movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Ferguson, 2012; Hong, 2008). Before the student protests, university thought production blatantly upheld imperialism, white supremacy, and racial capitalism (Hong, 2008). Student protests envisioned a university that could function to redistribute resources and produce counter-knowledges that did not blindly uphold U.S. state power (Hong, 2008). However, after the protests, universities deployed an acknowledgement of racist structures, superficial recognition of "diversity," and nominal valorization of Black intellectual production as a placeholder for concrete redistributive action (Ferguson, 2012; Hong, 2008). Given a place in the university and the academy, scholars of Black Studies were then confined in their work by what are considered valid forms of scholarship in those spaces (Ferguson, 2012; Hong, 2008). However, in spite of the obstacles to radical thought that institutionalization posed, scholarship coming out of the field of Black Studies since the 1960s offers a site of inquiry to investigate how university power reproduces itself and envision disruptions in that cycle.

Original protest goals viewed expanded access to higher education as inseparable from redistributions of power that would make attending universities meaningful and sustainable for

students of color and low-income students. However, universities responded with a commitment to representation that quelled dissent without substantially reorganizing power structures. Ferguson explains that the creation of Black Studies departments, alongside other interdisciplines like Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies "connoted a new form of biopower organized around the affirmation, recognition, and legitimacy of minoritized life. To offset their possibility for future ruptures, power made legitimacy and recognition into grand enticements" (Ferguson, 2012, p. 9). Hong expands this argument to say that that black feminist theory is not only superficially valued, but rather fetishized in a university system that still allows the exclusion and "extinguishing" of black feminists (Hong, 2008). This point is crucial to seeing that university commitment to "minority representation" following student protests upholds the same structures of power that denigration of black feminism and black feminists did in the years before (Hong, 2008). Limitations on scholarship coming out of newly created interdisciplinary departments facilitates this nominal recognition of "diversity" without material or social redistribution.

The conventions of academia as well as the lack of university support for alternative modes of research confines scholarship coming out of Black Studies departments. Not only a recent concern, in her 1996 essay "Diminishing Returns: Can Black Feminism(s) Survive the Academy?" Barbara Christian, who directed the SEEK program at CCNY asked, "Can we think how narrowly defined our definition of scholarship might be?" (Hong, 2008, p. 103). Hong and Ferguson echo this question in thinking of how Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies expanded the fields of acceptable research, but in doing so subjected those areas of study to the rules and regulations of academic thought production. More subtly than which works get published and recognized by the university, "Derrida points to the fact that institutions are not simply things that are embodied externally in the form of buildings and paperwork. Institutions are also modes of interpretation

that are embodied materially, discursively, and subjectively, modes offering visions of community and communal engagement” (Ferguson, 2012, p. 10). Just the fact of inclusion in the unchanged university framework deeply affects the modes of thinking being employed by scholars of Ethnic Studies and Women’s Studies. However, it is perhaps through attention to work coming out of these disciplines, impacted as they are by university modes of thinking, that barriers to revolutionary interventions into the university space can be broken.

Both Ferguson and Hong locate thought production coming out of Black Studies programs as a source of hope even if it is limited by lack of university support and flexibility. Ferguson identifies the potential for a powerful counter-archive in the study of social movements that can undermine the way “power worked through the “‘recognition’ of minoritized histories, cultures, and experiences and how power used that ‘recognition’ to resecure its status” (Ferguson, 2012, p. 9). Similarly, Hong points out that in Black Feminist thought not only are there examples of radical thought production coming out of the university, but there can also be found a vision for a redeemable university. Analyzing the implications of the pedagogy of Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, Jordan Jordan, and Adrienne Rich on the current university landscape is an attempt to learn from the subversive thought production at the origin of Black Studies and recover its more radical vision.

IV. Lorde, Bambara, Jordan, and Rich

Individually and in collaboration with each other, these four women developed strategies for teaching at the university level that are groundbreaking in their rejection of university power structures and emphasis on student driven learning. Certain progress has been made on issues these women advocated for, such as the proliferation of Ethnic Studies departments and curricular representation of writers of color in K-12 education (Biondi, 2012; Kynard, 2013). However, that

does not mean that the radical reimagining of education spaces that they envisioned has been achieved. Lorde, Bambara, Jordan, and Rich taught at CUNY schools during a pivotal moment of widespread student activism at their universities and around the country. They were instrumental in advocating for and embodying the changes to university structure and authority for which those student protests fought. Tracking the implementation and rejection of goals articulated during the university protests of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in the evolution of Black Studies, reveals the need for a pedagogical intervention across disciplines to which the teaching work of Lorde, Bambara, Jordan, and Rich has much to contribute.

The urgency of this project is to push back against the superficial inclusivity of representation that is the result of reading figures such as these women without confronting their critical engagement with teaching and issues of race-conscious education. Scholars in the field of multicultural education have put forward critiques of what is now considered “inclusive curriculum” as not only insufficient in its engagement with histories of people of color, but insidiously structured to uphold existing structures of power (Carby, 1992; Castagno 2013). Carby points to the ways in which championing Black women authors in schooling environments absolves students and teachers from guilt or action to combat present day structures of racism (1992). Castagno also highlights that teachers who self-identify as proponents of multicultural education resist scrutiny without actually acknowledging race or structural barriers to equity (2013). Learning from the pedagogy of Lorde, Bambara, Jordan, and Rich disrupts the practice of aestheticizing the study of Black women authors at the cost of more concrete engagement with their work

In contrast, Lorde, Bambara, Jordan, and Rich were deeply invested in how writing and academic work was valued, particularly regarding the place of working-class Black and Latinx

students in higher education (Reed, 2018). For example, the aim of Ethnic Studies according to Bambara was not just the inclusion of one or two Black literature classes but instead combatting “the deeply entrenched notion that Anglo-Saxon literature is THE LITERATURE.” Going beyond comprehensive course offerings and allowing the opportunity to engage with ethnic studies as a legitimate discipline, Bambara envisioned a “Black University” as more than Black courses, students, and teachers. It instead entailed a radical reimagining of who’s knowledge is valued, regardless of university credentials. One such example was the idea of a “skills bank,” or a database of community knowledge in the areas of music, business operation, activism, car mechanics, and media literacy among other topics, which students in the SEEK program could mine to learn skills from experts not recognized by the university (Reed, 2018). Instead of using these remarkable authors as a placeholder for concrete actions to combat racist systems of thinking in schooling, educators can learn from and emulate the methods of teaching they used. This project is not just about combating multicultural education that depoliticizes events and texts, but more specifically about how the study of Lord, Bambara, Jordan, and Rich is currently ignoring a rich trove of information on radical teaching itself. This aim of this project is to reunite the study of Lord, Bambara, Jordan, and Rich and the radical pedagogies with which they taught in a way that can be transferred to teaching in the university context more generally.

Now, fifty years after the student protests at CUNY and across the country, it is crucial to reassess the state of university access and power. The pedagogy of Lorde, Bambara, Jordan, and Rich encouraged their students to look to their schools as a site for constant improvement and change. That lesson stays relevant as the institutionalization of Ethnic Studies has given Universities immense powers over study in those fields. Drawing from archival syllabi, teaching

notes, and correspondence as well as secondary analysis, the sections that follow draws from the work of Lorde, Bambara, Jordan, and Rich to create suggestions for professors teaching today.

V. Educational Visions

Like the intentions of the 1969 student protests, the teaching work being done by Lorde, Bambara, Jordan, and Rich expanded the boundaries of what was accepted in academic spaces. They successfully changed the structure and content of their classes to promote accessibility in addition to student buy-in. Echoing the protest demand to create a school of Black and Puerto Rican studies, these SEEK professors used writing prompts that allowed their students to reflect on their own lives and communities. By accepting these assignments in many different media, Lorde, Bambara, Jordan, and Rich broke down rigid academic expectations in favor of promoting student learning in collaborative, flexible forms. Finally, echoing calls for increased student governance of universities, SEEK professors actively sought student input on the material and structure of their courses. Critical to understanding this educational project was the fact that these four professors were teaching remedial writing. Traditionally a space of exclusion and regressive teaching, the pedagogical decisions of SEEK professors created remedial writing classes at a standard to which all courses can be held. Fifty years later, universities can still learn from these democratizing teaching strategies in remedial and traditional classrooms across departments.

Approaches to Remediation

In spite of their stated purpose, remedial courses in higher education have historically functioned to create barriers to college entry and graduation for predominantly Black, Latinx, and low-income students (Hanford, 2016; Jones, 1993). Students assigned to remedial classes spend extra time and money to participate in coursework taught with outdated pedagogy on material that is not always applicable to their future success in college (Hanford, 2016). This was not the case

in the SEEK program at the City University of New York. Created in 1965, the SEEK program offers a snapshot of remedial education that values the knowledge of incoming students, avoids error-centered pedagogy, and offers students the tools to critically engage with their university. Acutely aware that writing education can be a restrictive experience that reinforces racist standards of excellence, Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, Adrienne Rich, and June Jordan fought academic gatekeeping with an expansive understanding of literacy during their time as professors in the SEEK program. They also saw tremendous opportunity in the act of writing to combat these same toxic systems. In their notes, correspondence, speeches, and writing, these four writer-teachers reflect on their concerns, hopes, and strategies for literacy pedagogy that challenges structural barriers often found in remedial coursework as well as general composition education.

The language of remediation is based in medico-scientific jargon of deficit, an indicator of the lack of respect for the robust knowledges and potentials of participating students. Statements from SEEK professors challenge these assumptions. The linguistic origin of remediation is inherently medical, “people tried to *diagnose* various *disabilities, defects, deficits, deficiencies,* and *handicaps*, and then try to *remedy* them” (Rose, 1985). The scientific connotation of language used to discuss remediation manifests in a programmatic emphasis on objectivity, accuracy, and measurability. This myopic focus results in regressive pedagogical decisions such as an over use of out of context grammar drills and workbooks. Even though remedial classes were one of the primary functions of SEEK, the original faculty rejected the notion that their students’ writing skills were “lacking” or in need of “repair” (Patterson, 2017, p. 3). The program director, Mina Shaughnessey, challenged composition teachers reading the writing of their students to consider “the intelligence of their mistakes,” and to interpret them rather than circling them (Rose, 1985, p. 357). This more holistic mindset encouraged a pedagogy in which professors had expectations for

students that were more in line with conventional college-level classes while still offering the supports their students needed to participate in that environment.

Critiques of remediation highlight regressive behaviorist composition pedagogy as well as its rushed “fix-it” mentality. These characteristics of remedial programs mean that students who would benefit from more nuanced pedagogies are once again being underprepared for college level courses. Popularized in the 1930s during a push for heightened efficiency in education, behaviorism is “atomistic, focusing on isolated bits of discourse, error centered, and linguistically reductive” and pedagogically manifests in “work- books, programmed instruction, and many formulations of behavioral objectives” (Rose, 1985, p. 343). Although many pedagogies since the 1930s have challenged the efficacy of behaviorism in favor of writing pedagogy that takes into account personal development and more explicit instruction on rhetoric, behaviorism still governs teaching today, especially in remedial classrooms (Rose, 1985, p. 343). The use of behaviorist pedagogy is indicative of a larger attitude that Shaughnessey identifies in remedial education of rushing and taking short-cuts with a “fix-it tempo and mentality” that reflects a “misperception of educational efficiency” (Soliday, 1996, p. 85). These pedagogical decisions and attitudes are in line with Shaughnessey’s larger critique that remedial programs isolate students and the skills they are learning from realistic college contexts (Soliday, 1996, p. 85). While these conclusions identify general trends in remedial education, there did exist exceptions, one of which was the SEEK program.

Reflections on the implications of teaching their students grammar and “correct” writing reveal a skepticism among the SEEK faculty around traditional error-centered and formulaic conceptions of remediation. Adrienne Rich commented that she wanted students to “discover for themselves the release and liberation of writing as an activity. The problem of teaching a minimal

necessary ‘correctness’ without impeding this self-initiated process is a serious one” (Patterson, 2017, p. 7). Here, Rich identifies the teaching of writing as a powerful experience that can be impeded by a misplaced emphasis on behaviorism. Notably, Rich’s goals for her students are not limited to successful assimilation into the academy, but rather include bolstering their sense of self-efficacy and giving them access to writing as a way to take care of and advocate for themselves. June Jordan also worries that the teaching grammar has the potential to uniquely harm her students as it is one way that education systems privilege middle class ways of speaking and learning. Savonick writes, “Jordan rejected what she called ‘the devastating tyranny of syntax:’ from how language is organized according to the protocols of Standard (White) Written English to how classrooms are structured to facilitate the success of the few at the expense of the many” (Savonick, 2018, p. 236). In broadly critiquing syntax as a tyrannical way of ordering language, thinking, and even schooling, Jordan shows how language functions as an expression of and a tool for social organization. While not all SEEK professors had such a critical view of teaching grammar, they all understood it with a level of complexity far beyond worksheets and dictated lessons.

Lorde’s enthusiasm for teaching grammar shares none of the rushed, error-centric concern of other remedial programs; instead, she views it as a vector for creative thinking and self-expression. Divulging that she learned the formal rules of grammar in order to teach them, Lorde explains with excitement, “I’d come to my class and say, ‘Guess what I found out last night. Tenses are a way of ordering the chaos around time.’ I learned that grammar was not arbitrary, that it served a purpose, that it helped to form the ways we thought, that it could be freeing as well as restrictive (Savonick, 2018, p. 46). Similar to Jordan, Lorde sees grammar not only as purposeful but also deeply influential to the way people form and express their thoughts. Also, like Jordan,

Lorde acknowledges that this could be restrictive, but she has a vision for teaching grammar that is liberatory as well. Instead of simplifying tenses to rules or drills that can be taught quickly, Lorde presents her students with a complex understanding of how tenses function in writing that could help them to express themselves more clearly. Lorde takes the time to teach grammar in a way that opens up possibilities in writing instead of critiquing or restricting them.

In line with more advanced composition pedagogy, SEEK professors prioritized teaching their students a strong sense of self and a critical consciousness, ways of thinking that their previous education might have discouraged. Rose's recommendations for a strong remedial writing program include respecting the "cognitive, emotional, and situational dimensions of language" (Rose, 1985, p. 357). Seek engaged with this emphasis on multi-dimensional writing by giving its students numerous opportunities to use writing as a tool for thinking, self-definition, and responding to their environment. Rather than considering the purpose of remediation teaching writing as a rote skill, SEEK instruction emphasized putting writing in context, and particularly in the context of the lives of their students. Savonick identifies this sentiment in Bambaras work, noting that

"Bambara understood 'remediation' differently: what these students needed was a political education that would help them understand the systemic injustices and inequalities in which their lives were unfolding, and allow them to explore their own styles for collective intervention" (Savonick, 2018, p. 89).

The radical vision of SEEK is reflected in this statement as well as the execution of the program. From pedagogical decisions in the classroom to participation in the 1969 student protest, SEEK professors lived by the values they discussed as public intellectuals.

Lorde, Bambara, Jordan, and Rich realized their vision for liberatory writing education by rejecting condescending and ineffective remedial strategies and instead valuing the active participation of their students in shaping their own education. They centered the expertise of

students by creating assignments relevant to their personal experiences, particularly encouraging critique of unjust institutional forces in their lives. They encouraged work in a variety of media, rejecting the idea that academic writing had more inherent value than other forms of creation. Finally, they included students in the decision-making processes of designing their courses, ensuring that students had a say in the content and context of their learning. The sections that follow analyze the revolutionary potential of these pedagogical decisions in light of scholarship that has been published since the years the women taught with SEEK. All of these teaching strategies have the potential to elevate the voices of students who are traditionally marginalized in academic spaces whether or not they are implemented in remedial contexts.

Writing about Topics of Personal and Community Significance

In Mike Rose's 1985 critique of remedial writing instruction he decries restrictive practices in the field particularly because of how impactful he believes teaching composition has the potential to be. The remedial classrooms of the SEEK program take seriously the opportunity for powerful writing instruction that Rose identifies. Lorde, Bambara, Jordan, and Rich recognize writing not as a skill gained by rote drills but rather as a tool for agency, self-discovery, and institutional change. They communicate this vision to students by making their work relevant outside the walls of their classroom. Analysis of their assignments reveals an attention to the interiority of their students as well as an insistence on the ability to critique institutions of power whether they be education, cultural, or political (Rose, 1985).

Rose points out that remedial writing often ignores best practices in writing instruction in favor of outdated behaviorist practices that have results which can be measured. He provides several conditions for writing instruction in line with contemporary research in the field of composition studies. For example, he highlights the importance of natural language use, which

contextualizes writing pedagogy in questions of personal development and the rhetorical-literary tradition. Rose understands language as complex, and insists that writing education is “central to the shaping and directing of certain modes of cognition, is integrally involved in learning, is a means of defin-ing the self and defining reality, is a means of representing and contextualizing information (which has enormous political as well as conceptual and archival importance)” (Rose, 1985). This expansive view of writing shows that it is a way to take in, process, and communicate information. Notable to the work of Lorde, Bambara, Jordan, and Rich is the role writing can play in both self-definition and transforming reality.

These four SEEK professors consider the practice of writing so important for their students because it can function to help them both understand and define many facets of their life. To them, writing is a powerful way to process one’s experiences as a well as transform them. This vision can be seen in Jordan’s understanding of poetry as “emphatically first person, communication-oriented mode of writing. Poetry is ‘how we name what happens to us’” (Jordan, 2018, p. 4). This philosophical view of writing is expanded in Rich’s syllabi, as in the explanation “this class will start from the idea that language—the way we put words together—is a way of acting on reality and eventually gaining more control of one’s life” (Savonick, 2018, p. 101). These visions of writing come directly out of experiences teaching in the SEEK program. Savonick writes, “when students are asked not necessarily to write about literature, but to use what they learn about language through literature to move people to action, Jordan notes that ‘students’ writing leaped into an eloquent fluency that had never even been hinted in their earlier work” (Savonick, 2018, p. 209). While traditional remedial pedagogy emphasizes teaching syntax and form to equip “underprepared” students for academic work, these SEEK professors were also invested in their

students' motivation. They put this priority into practice by creating assignments relevant to the lives of their students that had impacts beyond the walls of the university.

Asking SEEK students to write about their own lives in an academic context was a radical act. Academic writing about Black and Puerto Rican communities was scarce in the 1960s and 1970s, as was the practice of acknowledging personal, affective writing as academic work. This prioritization was not only a casual practice in SEEK classes, it was often the stated purpose. Rich wrote in one of her syllabi, “we will work out of the experiences and feelings of the people in the class with readings in fiction, anthropology, and poetry, and with papers written by students” (Savonick, 2018, p. 100). This ethos can be seen in the work of all four professors. Sample assignments include,

TCB & AR: Read LeRoi Jones’ “Cuba Libre,” and think about inaccuracy in the media that creates misperceptions of groups of people. Rather than analyze the text, use it as a heuristic for describing relationships like this in your own life (Savonick, 2018, p. 102).

AR: Read Richard Wright’s “The Man Who Lived Underground” and write about a moment in your life when you felt radically alone, as the protagonist of Wright’s story did (Savonick, 2018, p. 101).

These two assignments are based in highly regarded texts, but pivot from analyzing their form or content to using them as tools for self-reflection. Rather open-ended, these assignments offer students tremendous flexibility to write on topics that are meaningful to them. Other assignments take a similar broad, affective approach, but also necessitate some form of institutional analysis.

Assignments from SEEKS basic writing sequence show a strong commitment to rigorous institutional critique. This pedagogical decision is particularly important in the context of remedial education as it can so often restrict students in demanding that they conform to academic conventions. In his 1991 critique of remedial practices, William Jones offers a vision of remedial educators that “can counterstate society’s negative assertions, offer honest and humane

evaluations, develop enabling pedagogues that acquaint students with the pleasures and challenges of intellectual labor, and, in turn, repair and resurrect their spirits as bulwarks and shields against the indifference and disdain that racism ensures will always be present in the classroom” (Jones, 1993, p. 79-80). This aspiration underscores the preparatory nature of the work SEEK students did in their “remedial” classes. Their critical skills and commitment to meaningful scholarly work are essential to continued success in academic spaces. Sample assignments include,

AL: Attend an art museum, university art program, performance, or festival and count the number of female artists represented. Then, present a picture of culture in the home you grew up in (Savonick, 2018 p. 89-90).

AL: Keep a journal for three weeks about “Women and something, you fill in the blank” (Savonick, 2018, p. 90).

JJ: Use Anthony P. Dunbar’s “Will to Survive: A Study of a Mississippi Plantation Community, Based on the Words of its Citizens” to write about a local place-based problem that is important to you (Savonick, 2018, p. 204-205).

AL: “Power steps back only in the face of more power. Do you find this an accurate statement in terms of the history of black people in America? Discuss four historical occurrences from Before the Mayflower as examples illustrating your answer” (Savonick, 2018, p. 53).

AR: Read Orwell’s essay “Such, Such Were the Joys” (1945), a critique of his boarding school. Write your own text using his words to reflect on worsening conditions at City College (Savonick, 2018, p. 225).

JJ: Read the British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead’s *Aims of Education* and come up with a criteria for evaluating your own education (Savonick, 2018, p. 204).

These prompts push students to notice, analyze, and act against institutional shortcomings in a variety of settings in their life.

Creating relevant assignments for students moved beyond a radially expansive understanding in the content of student writing; it also included a change in the function of student work. Jordan and Bambara often published their students' work in anthologies, at times alongside the work of visionary writers including Alice Walker and Langston Hughes. Writing destined for

wider audiences took on a layer of meaning beyond honing skills and preparing for academic standards. Anthologizing student work demonstrates a rare respect for students in remedial classrooms. It also lends authority to the themes that they are invested in and writing about. In a final assignment for one of her classes, Bambara reiterates this sentiment in allowing students to compose in any media they chose on any topic relevant to the course as long as “it can be shared with others” (Savonick, 2018, p. 156). This assignment reflects Bambara’s trust in her students as well as her commitment to doing work in universities that has an impact outside of them.

Multi-Modal Assignments in Composition Studies

In their teaching, Lorde, Bambara, Jordan, and Rich challenged academic gatekeeping with an expansive understanding of what it meant to teach literacy. In accepting work in a wide variety of formats, they allowed students to express themselves in ways that felt urgent and engaging without limiting their work to a strictly prescribed essay format. Not only was this a radical departure from formulaic remedial education, in many ways it created more freedom than existed in mainstream courses. While accepting work in different media has become more common in the past fifty years, it is often for the stated purpose of keeping composition studies relevant in an increasingly digital age or teaching students marketable skills (Palmeri, 2012; Bowen and Whithaus, 2013). This narrative not only ignores the fact that educators were encouraging multimedia formats as early as the 1970s but also their subversive motives. The use of multimodal assignments in the SEEK program was for the express purpose of promoting student creativity and challenging structural barriers to student success.

The way that SEEK professors conceptualized literacy, as powerful and expansive, was critical to the pedagogical decisions in their classes. Clearly articulated in their vision for the program, as well as their practice of teaching, SEEK’s vision was to teach the skill of writing

alongside critical thinking and communication skills that would guide its use. Of June Jordan Savonick writes, “Jordan’s advocacy for Black English and multi-modal pedagogy were part of a larger movement to redefine literature, literacy, and learning” (2018, p. 208). Savonick points out that Jordan is not pushing for multimodal pedagogy to keep up with technological developments, but instead to interrogate what counts as knowledge and what is considered literature. Barbara is also concerned with disrupting the way language is used to perpetuate unjust systems of power. In her essay “Black English” she writes,

In school we have focused on language as a noun, not on what or who is named, or on who is doing the naming...in school we do not emphasize the real function of language in our lives: how it operates in courts, in hospitals, in schools, in the media, how it operates to perpetuate a society, to maintain a social order, to reflect biases, to transmit basic values (Bambara, 2018, p. 9).

This astute understanding of language as a practice rather than a skill became a central tenet of the field of New Literacy Studies. In a foundational text of the field, Scollon and Scollon point out that learning a new discourse pattern “involves complicity with values, social practices, and ways of knowing,” using as their example the Western “essay-text” (Gee, 2015). According to Scollon and Scollon, this style emphasizes the internal logic of the text, addresses a hypothetical audience, and hides the individuality of the author. In allowing multiple and non-traditional understandings of literacy in their classrooms, Lorde, Bambara, Jordan, and Rich allowed students to operate outside of the restrictive syntax of western academic writing, and through that avoid complicity with its values.

SEEK professors encouraged their students to work in multiple formats because of their emphasis on engagement with the material and student agency in learning above all else. Lorde, Bambara, Rich, and Jordan demonstrated the trust they had in their students by giving assignments such as “Do a group project: an evening given over to something we’ve worked on” (Savonick,

2018, p. 80). This assignment of Lorde's does not specify a medium or even a set topic. Instead of emphasizing the product, Lorde is invested in her students working together and negotiating their diverse schedules, interests, and access to resources. For a final assignment in one of her classes, Bambara told her students not to write term papers for her and instead to work in any of the following media, as long as the work was meaningful to someone else: "individual or collaborative annotated bibliography, performance art, a short story (for TV or radio), a magazine, a puppet show, a street theater performance, a slide show, or a picture book" (Savonick, 2018, p.156). The shift in emphasis from form to content and impact defined the work being done in the SEEK program. However, even if students were not always composing traditional essays, it does not mean that these multi-modal exercises did not strengthen their reasoning, communication, and composition skills. Later efforts to incorporate multi-media assignments into composition studies do so without the same trust in students or the goal of making classrooms more accessible.

More recent justifications for multi-media academic work ignore the radical history of the practice, instead emphasizing ways that digital work can be integrated into existing knowledge systems. Palmeri discusses rising concerns of "making compositions studies increasingly irrelevant to students engaging in contemporary practices of communicating" or the need to "move beyond the printed word to meet the needs of a digital generation" (2012, p. 4; p.5). This insecurity about the obsolescence of academic work casts multi-media in a far different light than its use in the SEEK context. Bowen and Whithaus argue for another motivation behind using new technologies in composition studies, helping students in disciplines such as engineering, architecture, and information technology as they are already familiar with those media (2013, p. 167). These present-day justifications are increasingly oriented towards professionalization and the profitability of academic work instead of interrogating the power structures of higher

education. Palmeri warns against the progress narrative attached to digital multi-modal assignments as they can often perpetuate inequalities along the lines of race, class, gender, and ability rather than challenge them (2012, p. 10). Moreover, they erase a rich history of multi-modal pedagogy used to promote student activism.

Student Agency

Students in SEEK classrooms were given an unprecedented amount of agency not only in content and format of their assignments, as detailed above, but also in the structure of their learning environment. This autonomy reflected a broader opinion held by SEEK faculty that students were responsible for creating the education they wanted for themselves (Bambara, 2018). This attitude reflected a deep suspicion of any form of hierarchical education that foregrounded the role of the instructor or institution. Student voice was included at every step of their class: deciding readings, creating class procedures, determining the purpose of their learning, and electing how they would be evaluated. SEEK professors taught their students a wide variety of skills that would be crucial to their continued success in higher education, including how to engage in self-directed learning and how to self-advocate for themselves in educational environments.

One un measure SEEK professors took to include the voices of their students in the design of their classes was actively seeking and responding to input on what material to cover. A common assignment at the end of a term in the SEEK program was to design a class that a student was interested in taking. For example, Rich asked her students,

“Write a description of a course you would like to take some day— on any subject, or covering any kind of material. Talk about how you feel this material could best be taught, and what you would hope to be doing in the course. . . . Talk about how you’d like this course to be run, under what conditions you would most enjoy and profit from it . . . why this particular course would seem valuable to you, and what you hope to gain from it for your life” (Savonick, 2018, p.105).

This question goes far beyond asking students what content they would like to study. It challenges them to identify the pedagogies that would be fitting. Rich does not just ask how the class would help them learn the most, but is interested in what would make them *enjoy* it. She wants to know the impact it would have not only on their academic experience but also in their life more broadly. Rich, Bambara and others would take information from these assignments to help them design their future courses.

SEEK professors undermined conventions of higher education in the organization of their classes and encouraged their students to participate in the same skepticism of how power is typically organized at universities. Student agency in the SEEK classroom was reinforced by allowing students to establish how their work would be evaluated. In allowing their students to decide if they would receive grades or critical comments, Bambara and Rich were making a statement that the urgency behind the work being done in their classes was more of a motivating factor than quantitative assessments (Savonick, 2018). Rich encouraged the same critical attitude of the status quo at universities among her students. She asked them,

“When you come out of here, who will you be? . . . Who decides what you are allowed to learn? . . . What determines the courses you take each semester? . . . Where is the power that controls your life here? . . . What does quality education mean? What is a university? . . . Can a quality education take place under these conditions? . . . What are your expectations here and what do you have a right to expect? . . . And who makes the decisions that are even now shaping your future life? (Savonick, 2018, p. 108)

Rich and her fellow SEEK professors did not want to have unquestioned authority in their roles as educators. Quite the opposite, they encouraged their students to engage with them and take an active approach to their own education. Promoting student autonomy in the classroom paved the way for student protests by encouraging students to consider their educational rights and promoting in them a strong sense of self-efficacy

VI. Conclusion

It is imperative to continue study of the pedagogical innovations of Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Toni Cade Bambara, and Adrienne Rich. The learning community that they created among themselves and with their students is a model for non-hierarchical teaching. They gave students unprecedented levels of autonomy and agency and in doing so imbued them with a skill set infrequently found in the context of higher education. Their classes went far beyond the “basics” traditionally taught in remedial education and instead prepared their students to enter and transform a university characterized by power imbalances and a tradition of exclusionary practices. Their radical imagination in reenvisioning higher education cannot be forgotten as students and teachers continue to confront seemingly monolithic universities that do not put the same emphasis on pedagogy, inclusion, and democratization that was central to the work of Lorde, Jordan, Bambara and Rich.

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