Voices and Silences in Our Classrooms: Strategies for Mapping Trails Among Sex/Gender, Race, and Class

Elizabeth Bell and Kim Golombisky

If student voices and silences represent strategic performances navigating sex/gender, race, and class, then such performances pose teaching dilemmas for the authors: how to (1) intervene in “Good Girl” silences without privileging masculine voice, (2) celebrate African-American women without reinforcing racist essentialisms, (3) keep class and women’s labor from going “missing in action,” and (4) pre-empt poisonous voices without silencing. This essay explores classroom experiences that road-test theory to map practical teaching solutions.

Before one of Elizabeth’s Friday afternoon pedagogy workshops for graduate assistants, a GTA said, “Dr. Bell, I had my first crying student today.” Elizabeth asked, “Was this a young White woman who makes A’s on quizzes?” Linda nodded slowly. Elizabeth continued, “Did she say, ‘I don’t understand what happened. I’ve never gotten a C on an assignment before’?” Here Linda’s eyes widened in disbelief. “And did she finish her teary story with, ‘Tell me what I need to do to get an A’?” At this point, Linda’s jaw dropped. “Are you reading my mind?” she asked.

We aren’t mind readers, but in 30 combined years of university teaching, we’ve seen this particular performance of shame many times. It is a complex enactment of gender, race, class, and privilege, as well as prototypical of the dilemma of women caught “between voice and silence.” We borrow the phrase from Taylor, Gilligan, and Sullivan (1995), who found that the girls in their study “live in a territory between voice and silence”: “If [girls] continue to speak from their experience they may find that their voice is out of relationship, too loud, off key. If they remain silent they are in immediate danger of disappearing” (p. 202). Although this double bind should be familiar to readers, here we explore the

Elizabeth Bell is associate professor in the Department of Communication at the University of South Florida. Kim Golombisky is assistant professor in the USF School of Mass Communications. The authors acknowledge the following teachers for their mentoring, inspiration, and collaboration: Laura Sells, Marsha Vanderford, Jim Eison, G’han Singh, Dennis Leoutsakas, Michael Arrington, and Laura Ellingson. They are especially indebted to David Sadker, who spent two days at USF in March 2001 at the authors’ invitation, for his groundbreaking and continued efforts to include women in all classrooms.
Elizabeth Bell and Kim Golombisky 295

interstices—“between-ness”—for this enables a more complex understanding of how voices and silences are enacted inside and outside the classroom. While voice is commonly equated with agency, and silence with powerlessness, the lived, embodied voices and silences of our students, exemplified by tearful ones in our offices, deny such easy conclusions. This essay argues that voice and silence are better understood as performative strategies announcing cultural expectations for the feminine, for race, for ethnicity, for labor, and for hegemonic masculinity.

To paraphrase Taylor et al. (1995, p. 8), to discuss women, race, class, voice, and silence is to “enter a difficult conversation.” We enter this conversation knowing that any claims we make are open to charges of stereotype at best and discrimination at worst. Not entering the conversation, however, leaves us as feminist teachers caught between “voice and silence,” too. To situate the claims we make about our classrooms, we take seriously the critical perspective that “teachers’ actions cannot be understood by analyzing decontextualized slices of their classroom behavior” (Sprague, 1992, p. 182), and we adhere to the view that the reflexive teacher is “a classroom researcher—one who is involved in the evaluation of his or her own teaching and learning, even as it takes place” (Cross, cited in Boyer, 1990, p. 61). Lewis’ (1992) methodological goal summarizes ours:

to articulate how, at particular moments in my teaching, I made sense of those classroom dynamics that seemed to divide women and men across their inequalities in ways that reaffirmed women’s subordination, and how making sense of those moments as politically rich allowed me to develop an interpretive framework for creating a counter-hegemony from my teaching practice. (p. 189)

Here we join this feminist pedagogy tradition to use classroom “moments” to make sense of theory, mine such moments for political dimensions, and share “practices” that work for us.2

This essay traces four kinds of teaching dilemmas that travel between voices and silences in our classrooms. We frame what follows as pedagogical “problems” and strategic “solutions.” In each case, we note our goals as teachers and then describe the predicaments these goals create for us: (1) intervention—how to encourage “Good Girls” to recognize the consequences of their feminine silences without privileging masculine
voice; (2) inclusion—how to celebrate African-American women’s voices without reinforcing racist essentialisms and while making White privilege visible; (3) deconstruction—how to keep women’s labor and class from going “missing in action” in making claims about women; and (4) transformation—how to pre-empt poisonous voices, “drops of poison,” without altogether silencing them. The resulting map through the classrooms we navigate is, of course, our own, and we make no claims outside of our classrooms, but we hope it will help other feminist sojourners in the academy whose classroom dilemmas are similar to ours.

Performing Ideal Femininity: “Schooling” Good Girls

With much irony and risk for misunderstanding, we apply the term “Good Girls” to women in our classes who work hard to be perfect. Of course, we never call them (or any woman over 18 years of age) “girls,” but the label seems apt to describe their uncritical enactments of idealized femininity. Of this White, middle-class type, Taylor et al. (1995) describe the “cultural pressure to conform to the dominant conventional image of the ideal, perfect girl—who is always nice and good, who never hurts other people’s feelings, . . . and who contains her feelings, especially anger” (p. 25). Despite the fact that the U.S. ideal of femininity is indeed White, and although White women, as a numerical majority, comprise the majority of Good Girls in our classes, we mark race here hesitantly because women of color in our classes also enact the Good Girl. Nonetheless, we are sensitive to the fact that the pressures and consequences of being Good Girls are very different, mostly exacerbated, for women of color. Bartky (1996) reminds us, as well, that “female subjectivity is not constructed entirely elsewhere and then brought ready-made to the classroom: the classroom is also a site of its constitution” (p. 232). Indeed, the classroom is one important site for “schooling” Good Girls.

Orenstein’s (1994) self-portrait in SchoolGirls describes two lenses for seeing her own Good Girl performances: “There was the lens of success, through which I see the perfect daughter, who always obeyed her parents, was always a leader at school, pulled good grades” (p. xxvii). Orenstein then looks through another lens, “the superficial ideal of woman”:

I wouldn’t look through [that lens] at thirteen, when I lowered my hand in math class, never to raise it again, out of a sudden fear that I might answer incorrectly and be humiliated. . . . I
wouldn’t see it when I declined to try out for my college newspaper, even though I dreamed of becoming a journalist. Nor would I see it at twenty-one, when I became paralyzed during the writing of my senior thesis, convinced that my fraudulence was about to be unmasked. (p. xxvii)

“You feel like an imposter?” Orenstein’s advisor asked. “Don’t worry about it. All smart women feel that way” (p. xxvii). Orenstein closes with a “note to self”: “[O]ur culture undermines smart women, so just shut up and ignore it—it’s normal” (p. xxvii).

This systematic undermining was the subject of an explosion of work on “gender and schooling” beginning with the first of the American Association of University Women’s 1990s studies, Shortchanging Girls (1991). A banner year for research on girls, 1994 saw the publication of Orenstein’s SchoolGirls, the Sadkers’ Failing At Fairness, and Pipher’s Reviving Ophelia, followed by Taylor et al.’s (1995) Between Voice and Silence. Their common themes: White girls begin to silence themselves at adolescence, girls of color are caught in class and racial binds that make them invisible and unwelcome in the classroom, and the education system reinforces this decline.

Schools, according to Sadker and Sadker (1994), participate in undermining smart women, dampening girls’ aspirations through various forms of gender bias, including a lower quality and quantity of classroom attention:

Each time the teacher passes over a girl to elicit the ideas and opinions of boys, that girl is conditioned to be silent and to defer. As teachers use their expertise to question, praise, probe, clarify, and correct boys, they help these male students sharpen ideas, refine their thinking, gain their voice, and achieve more. When female students are offered the leftovers of teacher time and attention, morsels of amorphous feedback, they achieve less. (p. 13)

In their training program for college teachers, the Sadkers (1994) videotaped 46 faculty members teaching, totaling 128 55-minute observations, to conclude, “In the typical control classroom, males dominated discussion... Salient students were usually male and silent students were usually female” (p. 183).³
In the classroom, “quiet” Good Girls don’t talk much, talk long, or staunch uncooperative interruptions. Good Girls don’t blurt out answers without being recognized by the teacher (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). Verbal combat makes them uncomfortable (Tannen, 1990). Flaunting female intellect, equivalent to feminine impropriety, risks social isolation (Gilligan, 1982; Pipher, 1994; Sadker & Sadker, 1994).

This literature helps us make sense of a variety of Good Girl performances in our classrooms, and we regularly see three different enactments of idealized femininity: self-imposed silences, learned helplessness and concomitant pleas for help, and nurturing urges to serve and protect. Our goal in each of these performances is intervention to encourage Good Girls to make the critical shift to Smart Women. Our dilemma is challenging idealized femininity while respecting the female/feminine. Our strategies are to recognize these feminine performances as survival strategies, to counteract the pre-eminence of and deference to male voices, and to question gendered notions of voice as masculine.

**Intervening in Good Girls’ Silence**

The performance of “silence” is one common enactment of femininity in our classrooms. When we scan the room during quiet moments, the women sitting in front of us are reminders that we were Good Girls, too, and we genuinely appreciate the benefits of remaining silent in the classroom. But we also recognize that silence often does not serve them, or us, well. “Nice girls fulfill other people’s expectations” (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986, p. 206). Indeed, the classroom never taught us that self-effacing obedience and silent industriousness might work against us as women. Working conscientiously and earning good grades are not necessarily preparation for success outside the classroom.

As feminist teachers, we intervene in the “typical” college classroom described by the Sadkers (1994) by consciously inviting the quiet Good Girls to participate—out loud and often in class. We do this by interjecting writing probes throughout class discussions to give students time to consider and reflect: Think/Pair/Share, Write an Example, Make a List, Think of Everything You Know About. These strategies level the playing field between students who always answer out loud the moment we ask a question and those who need or want more time to think.

As the semester progresses, we may do a “talk-time tally,” literally counting who speaks, how often, and for how long. And we share the results of these tallies with the class. Although we are suspicious of
methods that only count numbers, it is often a revelation to students when we announce, “Last Thursday, three women talked out loud in class” and then invite students to look around at the ratio of men to women. This strategy, especially in classes with seemingly “apolitical” or “neutral” content, is one way to make apparent who takes the floor in the classroom and to begin to raise the consciousness of all students about their participation.

If a few individuals continue to dominate some classes, we may have “pay to talk” days. Distributing three pennies to each student at the beginning of class, we announce, “To talk in class today you must pay a penny, and you must spend all your pennies. So think about what your comment is worth in the culture of this classroom.” Our most vocal students have to weigh their contributions carefully when limited to three chances to speak. The reticent Good Girls squirm at suddenly being thrust into this new market, but, because they are good, they comply. We then encourage students to explore the underlying economic assumptions about voice as an economy of exchange—in classrooms, organizations, families, and the media. Our market, unlike those others, begins and ends with the teacher creating equal opportunity and worth.

Wandering the classroom with a bucket to collect “a penny for your thoughts?” is great fun, but managing the give and take of classroom interaction makes difficult teaching. In their analysis of oral feedback to students, Sadker and Sadker (1994) list four kinds and their typical percentages: praise 10% (“Good answer”), acceptance 50% (“Okay”), remediation 35% (“Almost right. Have you thought about . . . ”), criticism 5% (“That’s wrong”). In their analysis of videotapes from over 100 classrooms, they discovered teachers tend to “Okay” females but give males responses “that foster student achievement”: praise, remediation, and criticism (p. 55). They found Black females “were least likely to receive clear feedback” (p. 55). Initially surprised by this data, elementary and middle school teachers said, “I don’t like to tell a girl anything is wrong because I don’t want to upset her” (Sadker & Sadker, p. 55).

In classroom discussion, we push Good Girls by refusing to resort to acceptance as feedback, even if it is uncomfortable and upsetting. Jessica took her turn to answer in an advertising copywriting class. But it was a superficial response. Staying her urge to say, “Okay,” and move on, Kim pushed Jessica, who turned red and faltered. Kim, feeling cruel, pressed again. The class shifted, something was up. Visibly confused and embarrassed, Jessica tried again. “Yes! Brava! Class, Jessica’s answer is excel-
lent because...” Kim wondered if Jessica heard the praise. Later, as Jessica fought tears, Kim apologized and explained about feedback. Jessica’s eyes cleared; she got it. But both women were bruised.

Our most successful strategy for soliciting Good Girls’ voices is the closing ritual, borrowed from Laura Sells. At the end of class, each student has the floor, uninterrupted, to comment. We use this strategy in all classes—graduate and undergraduate—small enough to accommodate it. All revelations, confusions, and observations are welcome. We participate, too, sitting in a desk to take our turn. Everyone has the option to “Pass” or offer “Ditto.” Cross talk and negative responses to former remarks are verboten. Safe from debate or censure, Good Girls often use this opportunity to say the smartest things we hear that day. At the end of the semester, we allow an hour of the last day to “close” for the semester. This is the only day students are not allowed to “Pass,” and they come to class prepared to summarize the entire semester. Again, the quiet “Good Girls” shine in these sanctioned spaces for voice.

**Intervening in Learned Helplessness and Shaming**

A second performance we regularly see is an ironic one: When quiet Good Girls do speak up for themselves, it is often a plea for help. In teams, their helplessness manifests in questions (“What do you want?”) and commands (“Tell us what to do”). Individually, Good Girls ask, “What do I have to do to make an A?” Those A’s represent the bedrock of their “goodness.” Too long rewarded for being “good” in educational settings—that is, for following the rules—Good Girls are at a loss when the rules for earning A’s become nebulous and open-ended in the college classroom. Their faith in meritocracy suddenly is shaken. Every semester after the first graded assignment, Good Girls with their losses line the hallways outside our offices. With her C critique in her shaky hand, Stephanie explains with choked voice and watering eyes, “I’m an A student. What am I doing wrong?”

Bartky (1996) asserts U.S. female students are subject to a “pedagogy of shame.” Of her adult students, Bartky (1996) writes, “[T]he men regarded me as a rival or as an upstart who needed to prove herself, the women as potentially a very punitive figure who needed to be placated and manipulated” (p. 231). The placations and manipulations, reflecting the women’s sincere desire to do well, manifested as “rituals of self-shaming undertaken in order to bear more easily a shaming they anticipated from me” (p. 231). She contends that students self-deprecating their work is a
strategy to garner pity and easier grading. We also see this: “I know you’re going to shred this.” While we recognize the painful self-doubt, softening our judgment is not an option. In her office, Kim listens carefully, waits for the tears to subside, and then coaches Stephanie, “It’s about what you learn, not the grades you earn.”

Our challenge is to distinguish between Good Girls’ “learned helplessness” and the need for “real help” (Felman, 2001) and to ask Good Girls to rethink their “bargaining” with us. Thinking critically, questioning the taken-for-granted, taking risks, and challenging authority are not encouraged in an educational system based on “bargains” between teacher and student. For young women, this bargain re-instantiates femininity as compliant and deferent to authority. Not questioning feminine performances leaves young women unprepared for the precarious negotiations necessary for all women in the U.S. workplace—where the rules are also nebulous, open-ended, and without guarantees. Yet the dangers of enacting the “assertive woman” are real as well. Crawford (1995) notes that women being assertive in the workplace, where superiors are likely to be male, “may have important, and negative, interactional consequences” (p. 65). She writes that “nonassertion may sometimes be a positive and adaptive strategy for women” (p. 65). This transparent knowledge, rehearsed in Good Girl classroom performances, must be articulated as a strategy. Otherwise, the gendered double standard also remains transparent.

Intervention here is always difficult, especially when the tears are flowing. So we try to set the stage early (and often) for our standards with each assignment we make. Elizabeth explains that “C” work successfully fulfills the requirements of the assignment: if a student does exactly what was asked of her, then that work earns a grade of C. Students struggle with the concept: “But I did the work required, isn’t that an A?” “No,” she responds. “When you exceed the expectations for an assignment, that’s a B. When you surprise me, delight me, and teach me something new, then that’s an A. And I always share A work with the entire class. We know it when we see it.” With standards and models of excellence made explicit, the new bargain we make with students is not about shaming; it’s about the work.

**Intervening in Urges to Serve and Protect**

The third performance of ideal femininity we see is helpfulness to others. Good girls volunteer first. They do “housekeeping” work in team projects by organizing meetings, taking notes, typing, proofing. Good Girls also
defer to the men while serving as class homemakers. We utilize strategies to make this work visible as well as to undermine gendered divisions of labor. In a class of 16 women and four men in Kim’s copywriting course, after five teams gave oral status reports, the speakers numbered four males and one female. A teaching moment, Kim stopped the visiting TA after class to highlight what he had witnessed. She told the TA that, in the future, the teams would rotate presenters.

In *Oral Tradition*, a 100-student lecture class, Elizabeth divides students into permanent groups. At each meeting, groups answer specific questions during lectures—to democratize large-class participation and introduce voices other than Elizabeth’s. Instead of rewarding the group *speaker*, however, Elizabeth gives participation credit to the “Group Reporter,” the person who fills out the group attendance sheet and writes the group’s answers for the day. In this way, the *invisible* housework of group work, not the visible work of public speaking, is rewarded.

Another favorite strategy for subverting gendered roles is to begin group work by asking students to assume a letter: A, B, C, D. After students choose letters, we announce the tasks associated with each letter. Class participation takes many forms; rewarding those different forms takes creativity. Gendered assumptions about who is good at what also need rethinking.

Part and parcel of Good Girls’ helpfulness to others is an urge to protect, which manifests in three ways. First, Good Girls “serve and protect” men. Lewis (1992) writes that women “wondering and worrying about how the men were feeling” as a “protective posture” is “a common drama played out in many classrooms” (p. 174). After a lecture on feminisms, a White female graduate student asked, “Where do men fit in feminism?” Kim answered, “Think about what you’re meta-communicating if that’s your first question about feminism?” One “pay to talk” day in *Women and Communication* was particularly revelatory of this protect and serve urge. Elizabeth, who prides herself in being unflappable in the classroom, came the closest ever to losing her temper. A Good Girl, seeing that the vocal man next to her had already spent his three pennies, passed one of hers to him. “No!” Elizabeth barked as she slapped the coin back on the woman’s desk, “It doesn’t work that way.” Elizabeth’s anger subsided quickly, but the episode left her shaken for the rest of the day. That this Good Girl would break a rule, literally, to give voice to a man in the classroom, is testimony to the deference awarded male voice, opinion,
and experience. Serving and protecting, in this instance, also empowers male voice at the female student’s own expense.

Second, because they don’t recognize asymmetry in female-male relationships or heteronormative marriage, Good Girls insist their own fathers, brothers, sons, and heterosexual partners are exempt from sexist structures and enactments. “Do you believe in soul mates?” a White, middle-aged Good Girl asked Elizabeth before class one day. Sensing a husband-story rearing its bald head, Elizabeth did not take the bait. “I really admire couples who name their relationship that way,” was all she said. Dropping the subject, however, is not intervention. All classrooms can be sites to explore how “heterosexual life is reduced to the core components of normative myth—formalised romance as a route to marriage, procreation as a socially necessary outcome, lifetime monogamy as the domestic building block of social stability” (Bhattacharyya, 2002, p. 22).

Good Girls seem to serve and protect everyone but themselves, especially when the privileges of White, male, and heterosexual are questioned. Reframing our exasperation at this phenomenon, we have come to realize that siding with White men is a survival strategy. Don’t ruffle feathers, tug on Superman’s cape, or invite trouble. Those are hard-learned lessons, and the typical classroom is one more place where they too often apply. Working to make serving less gendered, we also are proactive about calling out such behaviors before they arise.

We begin each semester by soliciting concerns about the class. Students write them down, discuss their lists in groups, and then create a corporate answer to share with the class. This strategy is especially important in the courses Women and Communication, Gender Communication, and Communicating Race. On the first day of Women and Communication, when Elizabeth solicits questions, a brave group always asks, “Will this be a male-bashing class?” “Absolutely not,” Elizabeth responds, “because there are women in this class who won’t let that happen.” She then points out that most students know not to pick fights with a boss more powerful or a coach whose word is law. This makes sense in any superior/subordinate relationship. “The question for this class is,” Elizabeth pauses dramatically, “why do some women see the men sitting in this room as superiors who need to be placated?”

Teaching Good Girls to use their voices from a place of strength instead of shame, service, and protection poses a paradox. If we leave the bargain in place to validate Good Girls’ faith in femininity and meritocracy, then we deskill them. If we ask Good Girls to be more like men, to embrace
risk-taking and competition, then we ask them to reject feminine performances carefully crafted and successfully tested their entire lives. Our solution is to intervene to make the dilemma explicit, giving Good Girls, as well the rest of the class, understanding of the gendered heteronormative forces at work and, thus, re-skilling Good Girls to make informed choices. If Good Girls become aware of their performances within the structures of family, school, personal relationships, the media, and work, they can begin to intervene when those structures invite Good Girl performances. We also encourage all students to value women, the female, the feminine, as well as women's cultures and creativity in a system that requires women to negotiate double binds. Transforming Good Girls into Smart Women starts with understanding that the rules they follow so carefully do not guarantee recognition, merit, or success.

Performing Black Womanhood: Negotiating Voice and Silence in “Hostile Hallways”

Moving from the subordinated female/feminine to White women teaching race, we shift the discussion to self-identified African-American women. We do so with much trepidation and, again, much potential for misunderstanding. Mara Benitez's 1991 program, "Sistahs," at the Satellite Academy High School in South Bronx is one entrée into this discussion. She wanted to create "a space for young women to talk about competition and sisterhood, to find out what are the issues getting in the way of our communicating with each other as women" (AAUW, 1995, pp. 6-7). We, too, explore issues that "get in the way" of communication in our classrooms. Moreover, our attention to Black women has everything to do with criticism that feminist movements have been about White women, and civil rights movements, African-American men. In both women's studies and Black studies, "because of white women's racism and Black men's sexism, there was no room in either area for the consideration of lives of Black women" (Hull, Bell-Scott, & Smith, 1982, p. xxi).

Informed by three broad research conclusions about African-American women's talk and schooling, we deliberately make "room" for Black women and their voices in our classrooms. First, African-American women mostly have been ignored in the research traditions of communication (Allen, 2002; Houston & Davis, 2002; Scott, 2002) and education (Hrabowski, Maton, Greene, & Greif, 2002; Irvine, 1990; Ogbu, 2003).
This lack of attention is mirrored in K-12 classrooms: African-American girls, according to Irvine’s (1990) summary of empirical classroom studies, receive significantly less positive feedback than any other gender/race group, are more likely to be rebuffed when seeking teacher attention, and represent the group teachers are most likely to ignore.

Second, when African-American women are not ignored in research agendas, they are too often caricatured “as an obstreperous ‘Sapphire,’ a nagging, verbose, emasculating woman” (Scott, 2002, p. 65; see also Allen, 2002; Davis, 1998; Houston, 1985; Smitherman, 2002). This caricature also plays out in classroom research. African-American girls are perceived as “assertive and bossy, rather than submissive and cuddly” (Lightfoot, 1976). Teachers tend to praise these girls for social skills instead of academic accomplishments (Irvine, 1990).

Third, communication and education research now recognize that mostly White classrooms and workplaces are hostile sites for African-American women, for whom the rewards and costs of silence or speaking up are constantly negotiated. “‘Those loud black girls’ is a metaphor,” Fordham (1993, p. 10) notes, “proclaiming African-American women’s existence, their collective denial of and resistance to their socially proclaimed powerlessness, or ‘nothingness’...They are doomed, not necessarily because of academics, but because they will not comply with the view that as young women, they become silent.” Fordham and others observe that, in contrast, academically successful Black girls may adopt silence to avoid drawing the “anger” and “hostility” of peers and teachers toward Black girls’ defiance of stereotypes; the heavy cost— isolation from teachers and Black and White peers—may persuade these students to give up on academic success (Fordham, 1993; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Taylor et al., 1995). Scott’s (2002) study of African-American women’s everyday talk provides examples of courageous communication strategies in a “world of predominantly White classrooms and meetings” where they feel “invisible and raceless.” “In this study, it appears that the women not only call attention to themselves by ‘talking like a Black woman’ in such settings, they also use that time as an opportunity to assert their ideological position about that identity, often pointing out or correcting what they perceive as erroneous information their White classmates may have of Blacks and their experiences” (p. 64).

Against this backdrop of neglect, misinterpretation, and hostility, we make our classrooms places where Black women feel valued and see both Black women and Black experience embedded in course content. Yet this
attention courts criticism. Our peers have charged us with essentializing U.S. Black female identity and placing our African-American women students in the position of helping White people “get it.” Our attention to African-American women also invites the accusation that we are rendering invisible other women of color and obfuscating class issues. These charges are difficult to counter without enlisting the multiple projects of third wave feminism. First, taking the “risk of essentialism” is necessary for making any claims about systemic oppression, objectification, and violence common to all women; otherwise, feminism collapses as a movement for collective political action and individual agency (de Lauretis, 1989; Sandoval, 1995). Second, most feminist movements assume a mission to “help men get it”—even if that work is always difficult, often distasteful, occasionally impossible, and enacted differently across ideological agendas; indeed, how can cultural, institutional, and individual change occur if half the world maintains the status quo? Helping all “privileged” people understand their privileges is important feminist work. We enlist all students to help all of us understand the situatedness of race and its privileges and oppressions. Finally, rendering one group—African-American women—visible need not render other women invisible. Isn’t this the familiar line we repeat to charges of “male bashing”? "Attention to women does not mean inattention to men." Similarly, our attention to African-American women does not come at other students’ expense.

Our deliberate focus on African-American women, then, serves many purposes and chances many critiques, once again catching us as White feminist teachers between voice and silence. Refusing “okay” as an impervious response in the classroom and in this essay, we invite African-American women to take center stage even as we recognize the tensions among essentializing, educating, and making any construction of race and ethnicity visible. As sloppy as these efforts might be, we work for hooks’ (1994) “honorable sisterhood” and take Houston’s (1997) advice “not presume to understand all, just to respect all” (p. 193).

If our goal with Good Girls is their transition to Smart Women, then our goal with African-American women is inclusion and celebration to “illuminate the strengths and pleasures of Black women’s communicative lives without erasing its difficulties and struggles” (Houston & Davis, 2002, p. 12). Such a goal comments on our power as White teachers to direct attention to or away from race and ethnicity. The difficulty is to honor and respect African-American women without deferring our responsibility to expose the construction of race. Our strategy is to teach all students to
read their own and others’ voices and silences as communication strategies deployed amid the politics of identities, power structures, and social contexts. Inching toward “honorable sisterhood,” we attempt to transform the potential for “betrayal” into “honest confrontation, and dialogue about race, and reciprocal interaction” (hooks, 1994, p. 106).

Including Dynamic Voices and Silences

Black womanhood is performed in our classrooms across a continuum of voices and silences, each tied to cultural expectations for race, class, and educational horizons. If all girls are “schooled” in the feminine, then the classroom is a particularly important site for lessons directed at African-American women in U.S. culture. May, Trina, and Denise are African-American women enrolled in Kim’s Publication Design course. May is a delight; she is not a quiet Good Girl. She is the first either to raise her hand or to call out an answer. Her willingness to share her ideas facilitates productive class discussions, and the class enjoys her wit, though sometimes she is painfully honest. May sits in the front row with Trina, a Good Girl who is so quiet and so self-sufficient that it is easy to forget she is present. Trina’s work, however, is spectacular. Then there is Denise. Always late or absent, she sits in the back of the room reading the paper unless the discussion turns to politics, about which she is sharply critical. Despite her silence, Denise doesn’t miss a thing. Still, her mounting list of zeros is alarming. Although she edits the Black student literary magazine, her journalism advisor says he can’t get her an internship because she is too “militant” and has “a chip on her shoulder.”

Three women, three performances hovering between voice and silence. Black women embody the impossibility of isolating social differentiation, “that is, an individual is not identified as gendered in one instance, and then racialised in another. These forms of identification work simultaneously to produce specific subject positions” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 112). If there is one constant among African-American women, it is experience with sexism and racism—Beal’s (1970) “double-jeopardy”—and, for African-American women, voice and silence are always already political: Black women are already Smart Women. They know their positions are produced by violent and oppressive power structures. Rather than “loud,” “quiet,” and “sullen,” a more complex reading of May, Trina, and Denise recognizes the classroom as a potentially hostile environment and asks what strategies these women are employing and why.
When we teach women’s communication, we begin with women as a “mute group” (Kramarae, 1981). We talk about women “telling it slant” as they try to translate female experience into “man-made language” (Spender, 1980). A few light bulbs pop on. We talk about “rapport talk” and “report talk” and cooperative versus competitive conversational styles (Tannen, 1990). Recognition flashes like paparazzi. Then we move on to Houston (1985, 1997) and African-American women’s “double consciousness” and “bistylism.” We talk about African-American “signifying,” “calling out,” and “smart talk.” Then we quote Russell (1985):

> When black women “speak,” “give a reading” or “sound” a situation, a whole history of using language as a weapon is invoked. Rooted in slave folk-wisdom which says: “Don’t say no more with your mouth than your back can stand,” our vocalizing is directly linked to a willingness to meet hostilities head-on and persevere. . . [In the classroom, teachers should] emphasize how [black women activists] transformed personal anger into political weapons, enlarged personal grudges to encompass a people’s outrage. (pp. 159-161)

Over the lectern lies nuclear devastation. White students are stunned at this new news. Black students are stunned to hear this old news in a classroom.

Then we watch the literature come alive. Some Black women begin to nod, “Uh-huh.” They grow “loud,” in their laughter, their examples, and their feedback. They offer nuances of interpretation. In trying to reframe “loud” as “ordinary,” however, we have difficulty finding words with positive connotations as gendered binaries become evident and crossing gender lines signals classed opprobrium: noisy/quiet, rowdy/gentle, brash/muted, showy/modest. Skipping the sound metaphor altogether, Houston (1997) chooses another descriptor: “dynamic.” In describing their own speech, Houston’s (1997, p. 189) African-American female respondents valued “being very sure of yourself,” “not being afraid to speak your mind,” and “getting down to the heart of the matter.” This “dynamic” talk results from socialization emphasizing independence, strength, and resourcefulness in order to survive (Houston, 1997; Phillips 1998; Taylor et al., 1995). But African-American women “speaking with a strong sense of self-esteem,” as Houston (1997, p. 189) puts it, can be a perilous strategy, risking the “loud” label, or worse, even as these women cross into the
masculine territory of the orator by "speaking with authority, intelligence, and common sense" and "being very distinguished and educated."

Furthermore, a Black woman speaking her mind, like May, is not always the rule, for silent women of color also enroll in our classes. Compared to "dynamic" styles, Trina's Good Girl performance—quiet, obedient, and "nice"—is not necessarily rewarded. Instead, she gambles the race traitor label—"acting White"—from Black peers. Among White teachers and classmates, women like Trina fly under the radar, but, by dropping off teachers' radar screens, they are in danger of neglect. Compounding this dilemma, Houston's (1985) research shows middle-class African-American women, expected to be proficient at Black English Vernacular and African-American male-female communication parity, also experience pressure to be less "contentious" and more like "ladies" in both White and Black middle-class social contexts.

At the same time, silence may be a strategy having less to do with middle-class propriety than rejecting the scene altogether. But such strategies risk other labels: sullen, "a chip on her shoulder." Students like Denise, bright, coming from well-educated, economically comfortable households, mystify educators. But Ogbu's (2003) study of "academic disengagement" among affluent African-American secondary students describes a White education system out of touch with its Black students. Because they have experienced racism at school and witnessed its effects on Black adults, Ogbu's respondents questioned the point of education. At the same time the student respondents often had "inadequate knowledge about educational requirements for future jobs" (p. 254). The students tended to admire their role models for their leadership "against White oppression or in the civil rights movement rather than because of their academic and professional success" (p. 255). The students valued teachers for "caring" ("nourishing, supportive, protective, and encouraging"), not credentials or expertise; they held teachers accountable for students' academic success or failure; and they did not perceive "the inclusion of their experience and perspectives in the curriculum or pedagogy" (p. 257).

Denise's withdrawal begins to make sense, as do May's exuberant and Trina's duck-and-cover styles. Appreciating May's "social skills" is not the same as "encouraging" her scholarship. If Trina's work is superior on her own, and if she disappears in class, then she is not getting the "nourishing" attention of a first-rate education. Denise need not self-destruct to be political. Her raised consciousness and journalism skills
need to be channeled productively. She needs a "caring" mentor and some of hooks' (1994) "honest confrontation."

Our strategies for empowering voices of quiet Good Girls still hold—across race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status—but we also attempt to counteract years of educational neglect suffered by African-American girls in K-12 classrooms. A hard and fast rule, we learn the names of African-American women first. Once, when a student in the hallway shared her surprise at how quickly Elizabeth had learned names, Elizabeth corrected her: "I'm really not very good at names, but I always learn the names of African-American women first. That's my rule." The shock and delight on Shawna's face were blatant, and Elizabeth explained the research findings about teacher attention. Shawna nodded knowingly. We are also on high alert during discussion to make sure we immediately call on these women when their hands or eyebrows go up. We avoid "okay" as a response to either classroom answers or graded assignments. Our classroom radar constantly monitors their efforts to participate or disengage. Praise, remediation, and criticism, too often denied to African-American women in educational settings, counteracts a history of second-class educational status. Most importantly, we work hard to communicate that we "care," inviting these women to our offices to continue discussions and encouraging their participation in departmental functions. These pedagogical strategies feature interaction between teacher and student, regardless of course or curriculum, but they also do the work of inclusion to celebrate African-American women.

As we try to elaborate and expand the spaces "between voice and silence" that African-American women in our classes inhabit, we deal with our own dilemmas, such as a keen awareness of the arrogance of White women, empowered as teachers, deciding African-American women are important. Our reflexive unease is one defense. Our emphasis on respect is another. Our simultaneous commitment to making Whiteness opaque is yet another.

**Including Hypervisibility of Blackness and Invisibility of Whiteness**

Attention to these multiple performances of Black womanhood means attending to the politics of racial and ethnic visibility in the classroom. "How, or whether, blacks are seen depends upon a dynamic of display that ricochets between hypervisibility and oblivion," writes Williams (1997, p.
If oblivion, acting as if social constructions of race don’t exist or matter is not an option, then perhaps our attention to Black women makes them hypervisible. But hypervisibility may burden them and open us to charges of racial voyeurism. Prioritizing African-American women obliges us to make Whiteness hypervisible, too. The tension is how to do so without eclipsing Black experience or reinforcing White experience as normative (Dyer, 1997). We offer two exercises to underscore the educational dilemma.

First, we borrow Michael Arrington’s exercise for demonstrating Whiteness as disappearance. “Someone you’ve never met is picking you up at the airport. Write down a description of yourself so this person will recognize you.” Students of color always begin that description with gender and race. White students never say, “I’m White.” This is an excellent illustration of Whiteness as hyperinvisibility. Dyer (1997) writes, “Whiteness is the sign that makes white people visible as white, while simultaneously signifying the true character of white people, which is invisible” (p. 45). In fact, we have to point out to White students this absence in their answers. Thought-provoking as this exercise is, we ask for whom is it instructional.

Second, we borrow another exercise from G’han Singh. After reading McIntosh’s (1988) “White Privilege and Male Privilege,” in which McIntosh unpacks the multiple ways White privilege (always coded by class) operates daily as entitlement, we ask Singh’s question: “If you had to, which White privilege would you give up?” White students ponder this question: the privilege of not being followed in department stores? The privilege of knowing courses, books, popular entertainment will reflect your daily reality—as mainstream, rather than a special case? The resulting discussions are lively and productive, but White students rarely make a choice because they don’t have to. Furthermore, like the first exercise, this one is instructional for White students, however gratifying or tedious it may or may not be for students of color to witness—or coach, as they sometimes do. A variation asks students of color, “Which White privilege would you take?” In this case, answers are more forthcoming, and while students of color are engaged and appear to enjoy themselves, we ask, “Who is learning what?”

Teaching race requires teaching Whiteness, but teaching Whiteness not only hazards reinstating Whiteness as “normal” but also means channeling our energies back toward White students. For us, this has
been an insurmountable classroom dilemma, even as we pay attention to Black women's performances, include Black women in syllabi, cover Black experience, and try to "mitigate bias and prejudice" (Dunlap, Woods, & Colón, 2003). One strategy is to make the dilemma explicit and pose our questions to students. Yet our predicament is not solved because students of color already understand the dilemma and know the questions.

**Including ClassMates: Black Women and White Women Talking**

Black womanhood meets White "Good Girls" in our classes, and both kinds of performances coincide with and against performances of class. Socio-economic status is very much coded into each: White doubling for middle-class, Black over-determined as underclass (Williams, 1997). Middle-class "good" manners mean taking care not to offend. Williams (1997) describes how, when African Americans point out racist acts, well-meaning White folk "are instantly suffused with apologies" (p. 27). Williams and an African-American colleague confess "weariness with such apologies. Both of us had been in so very many situations where white people just didn't know, had just never thought about it" (p. 27). "When black women talk with white women," writes Houston (1997), "dialogues are difficult" because of cultural differences and a history of White racism. Socio-economic status, however, also "colors" interpretation. Here the tension involves qualifying for class as we make claims about women's communication ingenuity. As hooks (1994) notes, there is opportunity for empathy across race among women who share backgrounds of deprivation and exclusion. Additionally, the college classroom silently signifies its own elite (and masculine) heritage, even when such heritage is illusion, as on our campus, and voice in the college classroom pretends to class, too.

As we intervene in Good Girls' silences, include and celebrate "black women's talk," and make the luxuries of Whiteness visible, we also mark the ways class constructs sexed/gendered expectations for race and voice. First, we upset unspoken notions of universities as White middle and upper class and expose "standard English" as code for voice. As hooks (1994) relates, "Those of us from diverse ethnic/racial backgrounds learned that no aspect of our vernacular culture could be voiced in elite settings" (p. 184). Second, the subordinate group bears the burden of understanding this rule. African Americans may code-switch between
White Standard English and Black English Vernacular (Baugh, 1983; Houston, 1985, 1997; Hudson, 2001; Smitherman, 1977; [Houston] Stanback, 1983). But, as a peer points out, “Poor White people may be bi-stylistic, too.” Third, by making class and race politics visible, we may make dialogues a little less “wearisome” or “difficult.”

In an exercise for the course Women and Communication, students improvise conversational contexts. Two African-American women, setting their imaginary scene in the mall, began their dialogue with a series of comments on each other’s appearance. As the observations grew more outrageous, Elizabeth watched students divide along race. “Who thinks these women don’t like each other and this sounds like a fight?” she asked. Only White hands went up, White women wide-eyed in dismay as Black women shook their heads in disgust. “Who thinks these women like each other and this is fun?” Only African-American hands went up, followed by much laughter from this group. Here the teaching moment involves the African-American tradition of the Dozens, hyperbolic verbal dueling, as well as an opportunity to expose White, middle-class constructions of college classrooms as places where decorum expects women to be “nice.” Middle-class Good Girls are flabbergasted at the notion of “language as a weapon” that they may add to their own arsenals of communication strategies or rehearse in duels as play between friends. They are incredulous that some women might value “being respected” more than “being liked.” Women who do not practice middle-class Good Girl strategies puzzle over the claim, “White women avoid conflict.” If we’ve done our job, someone will retort, “Only some women have the luxury of avoiding conflict.” “I have found that students from upper- and middle-class backgrounds are disturbed if heated exchange takes place in the classroom,” writes hooks (1994, p. 187). “Many of them equate loud talk or interruptions with rude and threatening behavior. Yet those of us from working-class backgrounds may feel that discussion is deeper and richer if it arouses intense responses” (hooks, 1994, p. 187).

In another episode of the exercise, four White women sat in their improvised office. One loudly denounced an absent coworker, who then walked in. The four women greeted her with smiles, quickly changing the subject. “Who thinks these women are hypocrites?” African-American students raised their hands. “Who thinks these women are being nice?” . . . you get the picture. But the picture is more than stereotypes of Black women and White women. Despite too easy conclusions about talking Black or White, vocal African-American women in college classrooms are
caught in the gender trap of not enacting White femininity and caught in
the class trap of not enacting etiquette expected in middle and upper-
middle class circles. "Indeed, black females from working-class back-
grounds who have been raised to speak openly and honestly find these
traits a social handicap when dealing in bourgeois circles," hooks (1993,
pp. 26-27) notes. "They will be encouraged, usually by forms of social
exclusion (which serve as punishment), to change their ways."

In Copywriting, as Kim invited her daily "Questions, Comments,
Concerns?" Latonya broke her semester-long silence to challenge Kim
about the homework load. Though taken aback, Kim was pleased with
Latonya's questioning, at the opportunity to argue the value of individual
feedback on homework, and to demonstrate lively debate. Kim and
Latonya's relationship went to a new more comfortable place in that
moment. But the Good Girls were clearly uncomfortable, shooting each
other covert looks at the perceived breach of etiquette. For weeks after-
wards, White Good Girls "protected" Kim in private with unsolicited
sympathy: "I don't agree with the way some people talk to you." Unwill-
ing to leave Latonya snared between voice and silence, Kim exhausted
herself trying to explain.

Despite the tensions of celebrating Black women, teaching construc-
tions of race, and qualifying for class, African-American women on our
rolls like being included and celebrated in the curriculum. In Kim's design
courses, advertising, journalism, and public relations undergraduates read
Sylvia Harris' (1998) "Searching for a Black Aesthetic in American
Graphic Design" early in the semester when they are still trying to answer
the question, "What is design?" Harris not only reveals the politics of
canon to students but also represents a Black female authority. Harris'
essay, like all Kim's weekly "critical reading," demonstrates "inclusion,"
"covering the undercovered," and "mitigating bias and prejudice" as

In Elizabeth's Oral Tradition, the class reads three novels during the
semester. The third, Octavia Butler's (1987) Dawn, is introduced with a
PowerPoint presentation on Butler with accolades from published reviews.
"Butler is the best science fiction writer alive today." "Butler wins
MacArthur Genius Grant." Including and celebrating this African-Amer-
ican woman's work is easy in this general education course in the com-
munication curriculum and need not wait for a class on communicating
race or gender. Discussing Dawn's protagonist—a strong, African-Americ-
an woman placed in an untenable position after apocalypse—invites
questions and answers about communication, race, ethnicity, class, and sex/gender.

In these discussions, we constantly qualify with three well-known caveats: no one person should be asked to represent all of any group's experience, to serve as a "specimen" for group dissection, or to explain her experiences of discrimination while classmates naively continue to believe they are exempt from participation in institutional and cultural racism, sexism, and classism. So we try to expose the ways race is constructed differently for different peoples, work the interstices between individual histories and phantom demographics, expose class and White privilege, ask all students to examine where they are coming from, and qualify every claim. At the same time, we question ourselves for those "racist assumptions" all White people must acknowledge and deal with (hooks, 1994, p. 106).

Deconstructing the Missing in Action: Women’s Work and the Wheel of Fortune

On the first day of Writing for Public Relations—a field dominated by women except at upper management levels—Kim had students introduce themselves by bragging about something. The first student said she was proud to be the first in her family to attend college and that she has been totally self-supporting in doing so—not remarkable for our campus. Fully two thirds of the class then “bragged” similarly with one or both statements. Several women then added they also cared for children and/or parents or grandparents.

We find several things missing in discussions of women and work. First, women’s labor is generally trivialized. Second, women’s relational labor at work and at home is excluded from definitions of work. Not only is housekeeping and familial homemaking women’s unacknowledged “second shift” (Hochschild, 1989), but also in the workplace women’s subordinate status requires a similar additional labor scrutinizing and managing relationships (to serve and protect or for self-defense in a hostile environment). Furthermore, in the workplace, women also are expected to perform the undervalued, invisible backstage labor of organizational hostesses (guests, food, and social niceties), homemakers and housekeepers (creature comforts), and mothers (nurturing). Third, education is an unacknowledged “third shift” for self-supporting students who work first shift jobs and their families’ second shifts, too.
In our classrooms, discussion of women's labor sometimes unites male students—across race, class, and ethnicity—against women to create a hegemonic front in support of binary sexual difference and a hierarchical pairing of male above female. This masculine bloc may adopt an attitude that Allison (1994, p. 28) explains so well in her vivid description of her "poor White trash" Southern upbringing: "When the women in my family talked about how hard they worked, the men would spit to the side and shake their heads. Men took real jobs—harsh, dangerous, physically daunting work." Although most of our male students will never engage in paid physical labor, they believe men's work is harder, more valuable than women's. That is why women "may aspire toward upward mobility in masculine fields," but "discussion rarely suggests elevating low-status, low-wage pink-collar work" (Golombisky, 2002, p. 57). Additionally, there is a bitter irony in African-American men joining the male front against valuing women's labor. As Houston points out in her 1985 discussion of "the second shift," "both black men and women were brought to the United States as workers," and "the boundary between 'domestic' and 'public' spheres has always been more permeable for black than white women" (p. 181). Moreover, across race and ethnicity, women excluded from the luxury of staying at home have always worked in the public sphere doing low-status, low-wage work.

In Elizabeth's office, Gloria, a self-identified Latina, painted a vivid picture of the intersection of ethnicity, class, and women's labor. In Women and Communication, students had discussed the AAUW's (1991) Short-changing Girls. Privately, Gloria shared that her mother worked as a maid for a White woman high up in the AAUW echelon. Gloria and her sister often accompanied her mother to work, helping with the cleaning and the laundry. For some reason, their White employer singled out Gloria's sister as too good for this work and talked with her frequently about grades, career aspirations, and "moving up" through education. Gloria, however, was never invited to join these conversations, never offered books from the woman's well-stocked library. As she related this story, Gloria's tears were copious, and her anger, so well bottled, overflowed: "I scrubbed her underwear! Her filthy, blood-stained underwear! And she ignored me. I don't think she even knew my name. I was never good enough for her attention."

In the classroom, Gloria was a Good Girl, quiet, obedient, competent. But, unlike middle-class Good Girls, Gloria brings the lived experience of physical labor and servitude to her identity and an understanding that
“merit” and mentorship are a roulette wheel, along with the hope that a
degree will make the wheel less capricious. In cultural constructions of
Latina femininity, where la familia remains central (Gangotena, 1997;
Reyes, 1997), to be pitted against her sister, su hermana, was unconscio-
nable; that she shared this experience with another White, elite, profes-
sional woman—her professor—is ironic and hopeful. Still, Gloria shared
her experience in private, upholding the illusion that all students come
from material privilege.

If middle-class Good Girls bring to us their tearful distress over grades,
then working-class women bring to us their distress over life. Russell
(1985, p. 155) describes her class at Detroit’s Wayne County Community
College: “We have an hour together. The course is a survey. The first topic
of conversation—among themselves and with me—is what they went
through just to make it in the door, on time. That, in itself, becomes a
lesson.” Such lessons are difficult for economically comfortable teachers
with their deadlines and rules for attendance and tardiness. How to
account for difficulties making it in the door, on time? Elizabeth received
a note from a domestic shelter for abused women explaining Susan’s
absences. Weeks later, Susan explained still another absence: She had
gone to Chicago to tape The Oprah Winfrey Show. Susan was part of a
program in which hotels offer empty rooms free of charge to families
escaping domestic violence. Elizabeth swallowed her sentimental urge to
cry as she watched Susan and Oprah hug on television, two African-
American women with decidedly different material circumstances.
“Oprah’s not as big as she looks,” was Susan’s unsentimental assessment.
Still another woman, White, comfortable economically, married with a
child, explained to Elizabeth in her office: “I left my husband last night.
And I didn’t have time to take anything. I’ve got to start gathering some
stuff—especially a crib for the baby.” Changes in socioeconomic status
can and do happen overnight.

Here our dilemmas are to avoid eliding race or ethnicity with class
while noting where they interact and to unveil and value all women’s
backstage familial labor—both the mundane and the critical care. Eliza-
beth’s identity “Wheel of Fortune” exercise helps students understand the
“identity cards” fate deals everyone. (See Figure 1.) It is a bait and switch
strategy because our ultimate goal is to deconstruct the wheel altogether.
Most students locate themselves quickly. A majority falls completely on
the left-hand side of the circle, giving them seamlessly privileged identi-
ties before accounting for "gender." Just one identity point falling on the right-hand side will "fracture" the comfortable contiguity of those unmarked positions. Moreover, the upper-right and lower-left quadrants feature bodies, markers for sex and ability; the lower-right and upper-left quadrants feature the political economy of the first world. The wheel is an excellent vehicle for explaining jeopardies, marked/unmarked positions, and double- and triple-consciousnesses and need not be limited to courses such as Women and Communication. The wheel also deconstructs "objectivity" in journalism courses and highlights audience identification in advertising, public relations, and media writing courses.

Then we destabilize the categories by asking students to operationalize each line on the wheel. They quickly discover the limitations of binaries: how to account for bisexuality; for racial categories collapsed too simply as "White"/"Color"; for upward and downward economic mobility; for invisible disabilities? "What is not on the wheel?" the second shift, the third shift, marriage, homelessness. "Anything else?" Nationalisms, first
and second languages, religion, ethnicity, physical attractiveness, age. As the list grows, faith in meritocracy with its "boot strap" rhetoric of individual success becomes more complex and realistic, less guaranteed, and students' interpretations of voices and silences better informed and more cautiously conditional.

If this exercise is instructional for students, it is a constant reminder to us to account for our own "unearned" privileges. Deadlines, attendance policies, late work refusals too often reflect our own comfort and convenience, not the realities of the wheel's vagaries. Our strategies now include many ways to be evaluated in all our courses: choices of tests and/or papers; choices of testing formats—multiple choice and/or essay; individual and/or group work; two-week time frames to turn in assignments; and always opportunities to revise poor work to demonstrate learning. Kim's syllabi contain a description of excused absences ("personal illness, child's illness, religious holiday, family emergency, or act of a supreme being"), along with permission to take one "personal day" during the semester to cover the unforeseen.

Both Kim and Elizabeth had to rethink lecture styles and material when blind and deaf students joined our classrooms. The accommodations were really very simple, but they deconstructed our notions of what students need from us to succeed. Still, when Beth's guide dog had to be "retired" ("She doesn't really enjoy her work any more, and she's very slow" Beth told Elizabeth), Beth missed three weeks of class. She had to relearn all her daily routes with a cane, navigating old barriers anew. Voice and silence took on new meanings when Linda and her tag-team of American Sign Language interpreters joined two of Kim's classes. Kim learned to constrain her roaming lecture style, explain concepts like double entendre that don't translate in ASL, rethink seemingly simple assignments like reporting on public meetings outside of class, and contemplate the fortitude it takes for a deaf student to get an education designed for a hearing world. Calling for help, let alone calling the teacher, is problematic when you're deaf and your car breaks down on the way to class.

All of these accommodations are our attempts to account for the intersections of gender/sex, race, and class, as well as the complex relations of bodies within a political economy that devalues women's labor—even as that labor is exploited. Our goal, to deconstruct the Wheel of Fortune, tries to return women's labor to the picture and to our classrooms.
Transforming Poison: It Only Takes One in the Classroom

Last, we move from the dilemmas of reading women's voices and silences to the politics of silencing. If we encourage our students to understand voice and silence as manifestations of multiple communication strategies implicated with performances of gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, sexual preference, and dis/ability, among others, what ground do we stand upon if we silence any voice in the classroom? In a fascinating case history of "a class constructed around a series of texts and presentations by lesbian subjects," Bryson and de Castell (1997) describe "the disproportionate power of one." "For as long as even just one student 'held the line' in the representation of hegemonic (non)identity, all our actions were inescapably interpolated, were threaded through, with the continuous and inescapable subtext of White heterosexual dominance, the backdrop against which everything else in these institutions happens" (p. 279). The "power of one" is an apt label, but we name such students "drops of poison" because they infect classroom esprit de corps. The kinds of venom are as unique as the individuals who employ them, and readers can probably point to individual students who—across race, class, gender, and sexuality—have poisoned their classrooms. If there is one commonality among these students, however, it is their unwillingness or inability to validate subjectivities other than their own.

Performances by "drops of poison" are always enacted against the backdrop of U.S. hegemonic masculinity, "a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality, and culture" (Connell, 1995, p. 71). Drops of poison in our classes and in feminist pedagogy literature hold true to Connell's description of bodies, personalities, and culture that produce practices of masculinity. In our classes, drops of poison are typically young White males holding the four aces of White race, able-bodied male sex, heterosexual orientation, and socio-economic comfort. Felman (2001) calls this student the "G.I. Joe in the Last Row." Referring to the ever-present headgear, we call them "hats." Hats play the appropriate ace at precisely the moment when those privileges are exposed. Like unruly schoolboys, drops of poison stage demonstrations that bring the classroom community to a standstill. Good Girls protecting men in the classroom occasionally drop poison, too: directing venom at feminists, voicing discomfort at attention on women, and saving the men in the class from having to voice these same objections. We have
fretted about drops of poison, tried to win them over with logic or charm, and confronted them with righteousness. Eventually, we realized these efforts produced the wrong effect, authorizing toxic worldviews by disproportionately occupying ourselves with them.

Some of our favorite theorists explain varieties of poison, from the irritating to the terrifying: me-too-ism, my experience is more important than yours, I feel silenced, and nonverbal dismissal (or aggression). In White, Dyer (1997) describes the “green light problem” with trying to make Whiteness, indeed all privileged standpoints, “strange.” In our case, by asking students to consider their privileged identities, we somehow give those subjectivities the “go-ahead to write and talk about what in any case we always have talked about” (p. 10)—them. Sometimes in our classes, drops of poison shallowly embrace concepts and then attempt to “match stories” (Tannen, 1990). “In high school, I couldn’t start in basketball because I was White.” Of this kind of “me-too-ism,” Dyer (1997, p. 10) writes, “The point of looking at whiteness is to dislodge it from its centrality and authority, not to reinstate it (and much less make a show of reinstating it, when, like male power, it doesn’t actually need reinstating.).”

hooks (1994) describes similarly oblivious students who meta-communicate, “(M)y experiences are much more important than any other group’s” (p. 82):

Certainly many white male students have brought to my classroom an insistence on the authority of experience, one that enables them to feel that anything they have to say is worth hearing, that indeed their ideas and experience should be the central focus of classroom discussion. The politics of race and gender within white supremacist patriarchy grants them this “authority” without their having to name the desire for it. (p. 81)

Furthermore, such a posture often leads to a derivative disaffirming poison: “I haven’t had that experience; therefore, your experience is improbable or invalid,” communicating, “I’m normal; you’re not.” “I’ve never experienced discrimination as a woman,” says one young White woman. A second young White woman answers her, “You’ve never had cancer either, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist.” In a discussion of Allison’s (1993) novel, Bastard Out of Carolina, one White male student said in disbelief, “I just don’t get it. Why didn’t she leave? If I were being
beat up and raped at home, I’d sure get out of there.” A “Smart Woman” pushed to the brink, answered him: “You’re asking the wrong question. The question shouldn’t be, ‘Why does she stay?’ but ‘Why does he hit? Why does he rape?’”

Ng (1997) describes a third kind of poison that manifests as “I feel silenced.” “Liberatory [sic] language is thus normalized, so that the ‘white’ male student, feeling threatened because his taken-for-granted way of thinking and acting is challenged, can assert that he is ‘silenced’ or ‘marginalized’” (pp. 48-49). Indeed, each semester we hear it. “I have to police everything I say in this class,” a White male student complained. “Welcome to my world,” said the African-American woman next to him.

A fourth more insidious poison, however, is nonverbal. Silent resistance is openly expressed in body postures of boredom and inattention, with loud and heavy sighs, and with much eye rolling (Bell, 1997). “We do not have language that can adequately express the social meaning of the practice of relaxing back into one’s chair, with a barely-there smile on one’s face while eyes are fixed on the object of negation,” writes Lewis (1992, p. 175). No one misses these messages, and they poison just as surely as me-too stories. The women in class don’t laugh as long or hard when the hats don’t join in. Closings become perfunctory, with all women reluctant to celebrate themselves. Silences communicating fear, anger, and resignation are thunderous. All these poisonous strategies attempt to return to the Sadkers’ (1994) typical classroom with its prominence of White male voices, heterosexism, and middle-class propriety. Certainly polemics are not productive. Allison (1994) says we must find ways to talk about differences without implying that everyone’s privileges depend on someone else’s oppression.

To return to our question about what ground we stand upon if we silence poisons in the classroom, Lewis (1992) circumvents the dilemma altogether with a strategy that neutralizes. During a student presentation about violence against women, “a frustrated young man demanded to know why we had to talk about women and men all the time, and why the presenter didn’t offer ‘the other side of the story’” (p. 177). In that moment, Lewis knew two things: Her response had to model a way for the women to answer similar challenges, and intimidating him into silence would not facilitate his transformation. Her solution gave us “probing”:

The stage was set for a dramatic performance. Reassuring the young man that indeed he was right—that “other sides” of issues
needed to be considered whenever possible—I wondered if he would perhaps be the one who could tell us about the ‘other side’ of violence against women?... Given the social realities of violence against women, the student was no more able to answer his own question than it might have been possible for the women to do so. At the same time, it remained for him to tell us why he couldn’t answer his own question. He found himself speechless.

(pp. 179-180)

If our dilemma is neutralizing poisons without shutting them down, then our goal is transformation—“the development of a critical perspective through which individuals can begin to see how social practices are organized to support certain interests” (Lewis, 1992, p. 168). We are getting better at treating poisons. We have learned to anticipate the tactics we witness and foreshadow their appearances for students. Our general strategy for responding to drops of poison is “probing,” asking these students to articulate the logic behind their blanket statements of resistance: “Why is it unfair to spend class time talking about women?”

In all our classes, we pre-empt with a heads-up, “This class will challenge your worldview—whatever it is.” We warn Good Girls they may not earn their A’s. We warn students of color that Whiteness will not be invisible. We offer vignettes of me-too-ism, “You haven’t had cancer either,” “Welcome to my world,” and eye rolling. To transform poisonous drops, we expose these too-easy stances for what they are: attempts to “hold the line” in the reproduction of privileges and oppressions.

Mapping the Trails Between Voices and Silences

So many strategic performances of voice and silence confronting us in the classroom: feminine decorum in disappearing acts, helplessness, and serving and protecting; African-American women whose “dynamic” voices read as “loud,” resistant silences read as sullen, and successes read as collusion; disruptive performances from oblivion to nonverbal poison. Then there are the missing in action performances staged by the Wheel of Fortune, including women’s labor. All these performances pose dilemmas that require different pedagogical strategies—intervention, inclusion and celebration, deconstruction, and transformation: how to speak the feminine but not femininity, engage race without being racist, claim yet qualify women’s work, transform without silencing.
“Silence” itself needs refiguring. Silence may be an active choice communicating rejection, compliance, confusion, or culpability. Rethinking silence is not unlike rethinking the gaze, “which places too much emphasis on the eye of the beholder rather than the looking of the seen” (Hitchcock, 1997, p. 50). That is, “even when the subaltern subject cannot speak or is not speaking she is always looking” (p. 50). Speech does not always equal power, or silence, powerlessness. Focusing on communication strategies moves us away from restrictive binaries aligning silence with absence/object and voice with presence/agency. The point is not even about voice or silence per se, but rather the interstitial trails marked between them. Gender, sex, race, class, and culture not only invite different kinds of performances of voice and silence but also force interpretations of voice and silence differentially. We make patterns of voice or silence apparent and the rules that limit or encourage each explicit. Then we look at the incredibly strategic ways individuals navigate their options, given the constraints and privileges suggested by a “Wheel of Fortune.”

In the classroom, of course, this is easier said than done, particularly under pressure not to “crowd out” content. But all classrooms are political sites of knowledge production, and no course content is value free. Supposedly apolitical class titles like Organizational Communication, Oral Tradition, Interpersonal Communication, Writing for the Media, and Publication Design silently shout multiple underlying assumptions about voices, silences, and power. The teaching strategies we offer here are ways to map those assumptions and power relations in all classrooms, making the journey no less difficult, but perhaps marking the trails a little more clearly.

References


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Notes

1To situate the present conversation, we are feminists who teach at a Carnegie Research I institution serving over 32,000 students on a Southern urban campus with a student population comprised of 11.1% African-Americans, 9.8% Hispanics/Latinos, 5.3% Asians, 0.4% American Indians, and 8.4% international students, according to University of South Florida 2002-2003 enrollment numbers. (On this “diversity” list, we find the missing categories, such as White/Caucasian, disabled, and women, telling.) Women accounted for 59.4% of total enrollment in 2002-2003, according to the university’s Office of Policy and Budget Analysis. Students self-registered for disability services in 2002-2003 represented 3.7%, according to Student Disability Services. No data are available on sexual orientations of the student population. Elizabeth’s classes fairly accurately reflect these percentages. Kim’s classes tend to have closer to 70% women and lower percentages of African-Americans at roughly 10%.
2Lewis’ chapter is just one of many examples of feminist pedagogy that situates its insights in specific classrooms. We also recommend Ellsworth (1992), Henderson (1994), hooks (1994), Kramer-Dahl (1996), Ng (1997), Reyes (1997), and Russell (1985) for their eloquent discussions of multiple forms of student resistance in their classrooms.
3Nussbaum (1992) notes that education scholars conducting “real-time, real-context” classroom research “are much more likely simply to count teacher questions, for instance, and code who asked the question and to whom the question was addressed, than communication scholars” (p. 177). The Sadkers’ (1994) research does include content, especially on the kinds of questions typically directed at men and at women. Nevertheless, their results, when they “simply” count questions, find more women than men on the sidelines of class interaction.
4Our sensitivity to these patterns emerges from literature in linguistics (Tannen, 1990, 1994; Spender, 1980, 1982), psychology (Belenky et al., 1986; Crawford, 1995; Gilligan, 1982; Taylor et al., 1995), education (Sadker & Sadker, 1994), and communication (Borisoff & Merrill, 1998; Kramarae, 1981; Mulac, Wiemann, Widenmann, & Gibson, 1988; Wood, 1994), all touching on issues of voice.
5Think/Pair/Share is a terrific strategy we learned from James Eison, former director of the USF Center for Teaching Enhancement. Its three-fold task is simple: Ask students to write down their answers to a question (think); then each student compares her answer to a neighboring student’s (pair); finally each pair shares its discoveries with the class (share).
6For discussions about and examples of talk-time tallies, see Katz and Vieland (1993) and Sadker and Sadker (1990, 1994).
This question deserves its own forum for the ways any positive attention to women is construed as “bashing” men. In lieu of that, it’s fun to offer our colleagues’ responses to the same question. Dennis Leoutsakas, Salisbury University, says, “I think men have done plenty of things in the last two thousand years that deserve to be bashed.” Laura Ellingson, Santa Clara University, unpacks the verb “to bash,” and asks, “Who’s on top if it’s necessary to ‘bash’ men down?” Laura Sells, Louisiana State University, goes a different direction and teases, “Yes, this is a male-bashing class. All the men! Up against the wall! Let the bashing begin!”

See the American Association of University Women (1993) study of the same name.

Focusing on African-American women does not mean that we ignore other Black women (Caribbean, African, Central or South American, for example), women of color, or other groups, such as Latinas, women of Middle-Eastern descent, or Muslims, in our classes.

As Bashi (1998) comments, “It makes a difference who is doing the categorical defining, and who is policing the boundaries of these definitions [of race and ethnicity]. It comes down to a question of power: who holds it, where the power-holders see themselves and others in the existing hierarchy, where they should be in the racial hierarchy . . . , and how they use their power to realize these norms” (p. 965).

Dunlap, Woods, and Colón (2003) contend that “a complete picture” of diversity represents differences as “ordinary.”

See Bell’s (2003) discussion of mentoring between women in the academy and the tremendous burdens placed on African-American women mentors.

These are just two “caring” strategies offered by Cano, Jones, and Chism (1991).

These exercises were developed in two different sections of the Ph.D. seminar Feminism and Performance. Elizabeth always makes “how do you teach this?” a topic in graduate classes—regardless of the subject matter—and asks students to develop and conduct their exercises in the class. Michael Arrington is now an assistant professor of communication at Ohio University. G’han Singh is now continuing education coordinator for Hillsborough Community College in Florida.

This is one example of our attempt to help women in our classes practice the delicate art of self-promotion—something too few women perform often or well.