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*Cultural Studies <=> Critical Methodologies* 2007 7: 425
DOI: 10.1177/1532708607305123

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Mentoring and Love: An Open Letter

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This essay blends autobiographical performance, performative writing (Pollock, 1998), and theory, in letter form following in the tradition of Madison (1999) and Ono (1997), to argue for the examination of mentoring as a critical act that blends theory and practice. It offers mentoring as a site of embodied resistance and “homeplace” for faculty of color and the students of color they mentor that exists outside of the traditional confines of research, teaching, and service. This conception of the mentoring relationship is driven by a politics of love (see hooks, 2001; Oliver, 2001) that asks us to challenge our understandings of power and hierarchies in these relationships and academia in general.

Keywords: faculty of color; homeplace; love; mentoring; students of color

Resistance consists of loving the unlovable and affirming their humanity. Loving Black people in a society that is so dependant on hating Blackness constitutes a highly rebellious act.

Collins (2004, p. 250)

Making oneself vulnerable is an act of trust and respect, as is receiving and honoring the vulnerability of others.

Lawrence-Lightfoot (1998, p. 93)

There is a place where our professional, intellectual, personal, and institutional lives collide. It is a place where, as a woman, my own experiences resonate with what I read about women who are and what we do and how we think and the ways in which we are oppressed and emancipated; when I resonate, I feel uplifted, understood, powerful. However, it is also in this place that my experiences clash with what I read; I feel alien, remote, objectified, disjointed, and even vaguely betrayed.

Nicotera, (1999, p. 430)

Author’s Note: I thank Norman Denzin, Amardo Rodriguez, Lisa Calvente, and Raymond Raimundi for suggestions on previous versions of this essay. I also thank and dedicate this essay to my loving mentors and mentees throughout the years, particularly Lisa A. Flores, Frederick C. Corey, Thomas K. Nakayama, Kristin B. Valentine, Olga I. Davis, Fernando P. Delgado, D. Soyini Madison, Della Pollock, Maria DeGuzman, Diane Grimes, Linda Martín Alcoff, Raymond Raimundi, Jacqueline D. Smith, Marsha Atteberry, and Kiana Cornish.

Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies, Volume 7 Number 4, 2007 425-441
DOI: 10.1177/1532708607305123
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April 20, 2005

Dear Anthony,

I write this letter just as you begin to leave. I have written this letter so many times in my head and my heart, but now I literally write it because I need to. The time is right. I write this letter because you have taught me so much in this short period of time in which our lives intersected; not just about being a teacher, not just about being a mentor, but about being vulnerable, taking risks, and believing in your worth when it seems like no one else will. I came to this scenario with lofty goals; the idea that I wanted to give back. I wanted to empower students of color. That sort of thing. It sounds so cliché now. I never really understood the reciprocal nature of mentoring until you came along; therefore, I write this letter in respect and gratitude. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1999) once said that vulnerability is an act of respect. I offer you my vulnerable self. I offer you this letter so you might understand just how cyclical this mentoring relationship has been. In getting to know you I have come full circle in understanding the importance of mentoring for faculty and students of color. Too often you tell me that I have done so much for you and you have given me nothing. However, you have given me so much more than you will ever know, and I hope this letter shows you just that. Now you leave, literally and figuratively no longer the student, but as a friend who taught me a great deal about myself, academia, and my place in this space. All I can give you is respect and love.

Do you know it has been almost a year and a half since we first met? Do you know how important your presence has become to me in making this university a place I could live? I mean that both literally and figuratively . . . Do you remember me? Fresh faced, tentative, shy, apprehensive, and hopeful . . . a little like you seemed to me as well. January 2004, after the first day of the class you approached me about adding the course because you had accidentally registered for the wrong section. You told me later that you were so sure that I would not let you in. What was it in my demeanor? What would have made you think that? I still remember you, and I still remember that day quite well. I think I will always treasure that day because it was the moment that this place changed for me. The first day of that class and the first meeting with a group of students that would affect my life forever.1 It was the beginning of my creation of homeplace—a place you would help me create with the ease of your presence and the familiarity of your voice. It was a familiarity I had not sensed in some time. It was a familiarity I needed to survive.

bell hooks (1994a) describes homeplace as “the construction of a safe place where black people could affirm one another and by doing so heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination” (p. 449). This space was necessary because as hooks writes, “We could not learn to love or respect ourselves in the culture of white supremacy, on the outside; it was there on the inside, in that ‘homeplace,’ most often created and kept by black women, that we had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture our spirits” (p. 449). Homeplace is about making a “community of resistance” (p. 449). In academia, this homeplace is necessary because of what Tracey Owens Patton (2004a) describes as inferential racism.
which is maintained in the academy under the guise of civility. This civility often manifests itself in the rhetoric of community on campus that then gives rise to the use of terms such as family and home. However, as Patton (2004a) asks, “If a university is ‘home’ and an institution that welcomes a diverse range of people, how do we account for retention rate concerns and the ‘chilly climate’ women experience?” (p. 69). Departments often hire because they desire more diversity, yet they don’t take the necessary steps to adjust the culture in anticipation of diversity (Hu-DeHart, 2000). It then becomes the burden of the new faculty of color to “assimilate” into the existing culture. This indifference displayed by departments is a difficult wall to penetrate as it is often sealed in the language of political correctness (Kersey-Matusiak, 2004). Given this situation, it comes as no surprise to me that you, Jeffrey, and Jasmine became my homeplace. Each of you enabled a community of resistance. I just need to stop for a minute and ask, “Do you know how much you have transformed my space? Do you know how much your presence brings me comfort? Do you know much I needed each of you in this space?”

Digress with me for a moment because you need to understand. I need you to understand. Let me put you in my position so you might see just how important your presence has become to my livelihood as a faculty member of color. I’m sure you will see the necessity of mentoring. It’s much more complex and reciprocal than we typically think, in ways that challenge our assumptions about power. The homeplaces we establish are central to both our well beings.

I came here in the fall of 2003, fresh out of the PhD waiting for someone to tell me how to act. What is the protocol for assistant professors? Bitting (2004) captures this uncertainty quite well: “The young professor is asked to leave the security of a ‘relatively’ known world, a world in which certain tasks have been mastered, supportive relationships formed and maintained, and ways devised to keep self-esteem and identity” (p. 78). I was waiting for someone to give me the instruction manual, wondering if I was playing the role convincingly.

This is all real now, and I can’t go back. At times I can’t believe someone is giving me so much autonomy. Don’t they know I am a fraud or as Enrique Murillo (2004) writes, a “mojado in the academy”? Will the real me be good enough? Much like Bryant Alexander, what I feel is paranoia, “that I live with daily, for while I am committed to liberatory education and democratic practices, I also realize that I am a pawn in the project of multiculturalism” (as quoted in Alexander & Warren, 2002, p. 337). I am part of this system, I am part of this space, but the rules were not made for me. How long can I survive in it? I am embarrassed by all my inadequacies that must be apparent to just about everyone around me. I have a PhD, the degree to validate my presence in this space, but in so many ways I lack the cultural capital. In this class-conscious space, I am so obviously an outsider. My social inadequacies, all my faux pas, my lack of common identification with many of the cultural signs of my colleagues mark me as Other. My age, my immaturity, my naivety, my anger, my desire, my desperation, and my body reinforce my Otherness in so many ways at once. Sometimes it is too much. For me and other women of color academics it’s “a
longer cultural distance must be traveled, with much greater potential for mishaps” (Hu-DeHart, 2000, p. 29). Often the anger and frustration with associated with being defined as Other can lead us to simply deny the significance of race in our self-perceptions, which then leads to the denial of “the relevance of race in daily campus life” (Kersey-Matusiak, 2004, p. 122). I am scared to slip into these spaces of denial.

I’m walking through all of these people talking about Otherness in the experiences of faculty of color, but I think it is time for me to ground some of this in my experience and my body. Where do I begin? Teaching? Research? Service? I can honestly say there is not a moment in which I am not reminded of my Otherness. Whether it be questions asking if I was hired to replace the Chicana faculty member that left before my arrival (I was not and why are they unable to imagine a department with more than one of us?) . . . Whether it be the continual complicity manifesting itself through silence from others who would be allies in the fight against inequality, but have the privilege of choice, I am tired.

However, I am the most tired of the blatant challenges to my presence. I hate the high-ranking administrator in my college who each time we meet asks if I have a PhD. In introductions to prospective students of color at recruiting functions she always introduces my colleagues as Doctor or Professor while calling me by my first name. Each time she does this I am embarrassed and angered, feeling used once again. The demand to be both exemplary of diversity and yet “in my place” is taxing. I am reminded of the words of Taylor (2000) who writes, “Being exemplary is a lot of work. Outsiders always feel this pressure. Ordinary is not good enough. If we are to establish our right to exist, we must prove ourselves exceptional” (p. 70). Tired of being exemplary and exceptional, for one moment I would like to know what it feels like to be “normal” like the majority of my colleagues.

I am tired of always being under fire because of my identity. But even more, I am tired of this construction of a culture of complaint “which suggests that anyone who can claim victim status happily does so and proceeds to whine with an attitude of self-righteous martyrdom” (Alcoff, 2003, p. 4). As a result of this construction, what emerges now are whispers about so-called hostile work environments created against the old boys club by Others such as myself. All of these claims are ridiculous as they assume that suddenly as people of color we have gained so much that we now occupy and perform in high levels of power. They are statements of what Collins (2004) calls “the new racism” that assumes that changes in legislation have done away with racism, ignoring the fact that the ideology of racism still exists often in more covert ways. But for me, it’s not just about these daily challenges, it is also about community. In all of this I need a life raft. I need some community.

I have some connections. I have colleagues. I have people I can call friends, but so many times I still feel so lonely. It’s funny because no one tells you about the loneliness you feel once you are out of the protective shell of graduate school. No one talks about it, but once you are there you wonder if others were there before you. Perhaps this feeling is best described by Goodall (1999) who writes of his first academic job and community as “an organized silence, a professional level of personal
loneliness accompanied by an aching, endemic, lack of meaningful talk” (p. 466). This silence and loneliness is all I have had for a while. My experience is “accompanied by vague feelings of everyday emptiness, isolation and inadequacy” (Goodall, p. 467). I thought it was hard being a graduate student of color, but this? This is unbearable at times. The only people like me are the undergraduates, but my connections with them are limited. They have to be, otherwise I am unfairly read as deviant. Those who have community take it for granted and judge others so easily. I have no sense of community. I am part of a culture of silence. I perform strength. I perform hardness, but I don’t know how long this performance can last . . .

These performances are not new to those from historically marginalized communities. I shake my head with the knowledge that “Of course I’m performing. The world does not feel that safe” (Taylor, 2000, p. 60). Taylor speaking of her identity on campus as “exemplary lesbian” is right when she notes that all this performing is a lot of work in a world that regularly attempts to deny the reality of my life and experience, but so far, it is the best way I have found to make space for myself and maintain my integrity in the face of all that denial. (p. 60)

She alludes to the power of performance and the possibility that underlies it. For decades, people of color have performed the trickster role to make do. These performances are informed by the conjoining of our theories of the flesh and specialized knowledges (Madison, 1993). Many of us perform what Scott (1990) calls the public and hidden transcripts. Of the public transcript, Scott writes,

Much of what passes as normal social intercourse requires that we routinely exchange pleasantries and smile at others about whom we may harbor an estimate not in keeping with our public performance. Here we may perhaps say that the power of social forms embodying etiquette and politeness requires us often to sacrifice candor for smooth relations with our acquaintances. Our circumspect behavior may also have a strategic dimension: this person to whom we misrepresent ourselves may be able to harm or help us in some way. (p. 1)

We, those of us in positions that lack power, perform a public transcript that is not positively misleading but “is unlikely to tell the whole story about power relations” (Scott, p. 2). My public performances of strength, hardness, and coldness seem to be convincing enough. Sometimes too convincing . . . I will continue to perform, trying to make sense, and navigate my way through this increasingly hostile space.

Do you remember in class when we discussed Black Sexual Politics? I have to tell you when Collins (2004) talks about the archetypes of the new racism I felt like I was looking in the mirror held up before me . . . especially when she writes about the bitch (with a capital B) and how it relates to the professional Black woman and the modern mammy. Collins writes that maneuvering through the image of the modern mammy is a delicate balance between subordination to White and/or male authority while still holding onto the level of ambition and aggressiveness needed for middle-class occupations (p. 140). She argues that
aggression is acceptable just as long as it is appropriately expressed for the benefit of others. Aggression and ambition for oneself is anathema. Modern mammies must be aggressive, especially if they expect to achieve within the male defined ethos corporation, government, industry, and academia. To get ahead, they must in some fashion be bitchy often with a capital B. Yet because these same qualities simultaneously defeminize Black middle class women and mark them with the trappings of working-class, authentic Blackness that is anathema in desegregated settings, middle-class Black female aggression must be carefully channeled. (Collins, p. 140)

Reading Collins I was so empowered because once again I knew I was not crazy!!! My so-called aggression, as it informs my performances of identity as untenured woman of color faculty, goes against dominant modes of femininity in the classroom and in faculty interactions.

hooks (1994b) also brings me comfort:

I came to theory because I was hurting—the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing. (p. 59)

Their words resonated so much with my own experiences in so many ways—in the classroom, in faculty meetings, in committee work. hooks and Collins (2004) were my salvation. In this class-conscious site of the private university, my ambition and “bitchyness,” the very things that led me from a community college to a research-centered university are now deemed as abject. Too often students have read my aggression, ambition, and assertiveness as “having an attitude” or simply rudeness while they never are reflexive enough to question how their economic privilege and cultures play into their assessment of my “unfeminine” performance. I have worked so hard to get here, but the same qualities that got me here are the now the ones that people use against me. We are emotionally, ideologically, and structurally oppressed for decades and then we are not supposed to have any lasting or residual effects?! We learn to make do and are then punished for those very strategies of survival? The images described by Collins perpetuate and legitimate violence such as sexual harassment and discrimination against middle-class professional women of color. Sadly, I have only been 2½ years out of graduate school, and it seems to be so clear in academic culture. I was the angry woman of color before I even opened my mouth.

But then you came along . . .

Love heals, when we are wounded in the place where we would know love, it is difficult to imagine that love really has the power to change everything. (hooks, 2001, p. 209)

I know you were taken off guard when I approached you about the independent study. You must have been thinking to yourself, “This woman is crazy—doesn’t she know I have already had enough of her this semester?!” What you didn’t know
was just how much I admired your intelligence and how much potential I saw in you. You made me remember why I had wanted to be in the classroom in the first place. Don’t you remember how often I asked for your opinion? Didn’t you know there was a reason why? Your papers gave me hope each time I read them, and I was amazed by your ability to work through and synthesize the literature while adding your unique perspective. I literally needed that connection with you. I was intrigued by your intelligence, possibility, and your voice. What you didn’t know was I needed that space just as much as you did—maybe even more. I needed a bridge. I needed something to look forward to. I needed a reason to return, and I don’t just mean for another semester. My broken spirit, feelings of inadequacy, and uncertainty were finally being healed.

I remember the day in class when we talked about *latinidad*, the theorization of a pan-Latina/o identity. You came up to me after class and you said, “You know when you speak we can really see your passion and it helps us learn.” Those words meant so much to me and stayed with me even after that incident. It was so ironic because the emotion and passion I had been punished for by others were rewarded by you and other students of color who welcomed the fact that, for once, the professor was a lot like them and not afraid to embrace their identities. Recently, an African American student from a different section of that class shared with me a story about her experiences in another class this semester. She said that when she would make comments in the class (which was ironically about diversity) the students and the instructor would look at her like she was crazy. The instructor had even asked her if she was racist. She told me, “Sometimes I forget I’m not in your class.” Her statement performed for me the necessity of the safe space, homeplace, and my presence as a woman of color in the classroom. Exchanges such as these are what have healed some of the pain I have felt.

In coming to this space I yearned for familiarity. As you can see from the stories I tell, I began to see it in the faces of my students when I could not find it in my colleagues. After being in such a space of isolation, without community against the rhetoric of affirmative action and neoliberalism, I realized as Alexander (1999) that as faculty and students of color, “we were all involved in a collective struggle of performing legitimacy in which our co-presence reinforced and challenged the other” and that we “[... ] are involved in a form of covert community building” (p. 314). The realization of this bond and the way we are viewed with suspicion began to make me reflect on my vision of community once again.

I contemplated community a while back in North Carolina when my friend Mario said to me, “You are my Chicano space” (Calafell, 2004). His words helped me through a difficult transition and allowed me to find homeplace. Now 5 years later I was ready to tell you, “You, are my Latino space.” Maybe you wouldn’t even ascribe that label to yourself, but that is what you became to me. I like to think that I was sort of a bridge for you also, to connect to your Latino identity; an identity which I do not think was particularly salient to you when we first met. Once again, my politics and identification had shifted, and you helped me make that shift. In Arizona, I was Mexican American or Chicana. In North
Carolina, I was Chicana even though no one there knew what that was. Now in the Northeast, I am Latina, and a big part of that is you. Placing these connections within the context of discussions of academic communities, we must remember as Goodall (1999) writes, “Communities are not stable, nor are they ‘great places’ to come to, or to join. We don’t so much live within them as we make them a space for our evolving, complex, often conflicted selves” (p. 488). My making of a space was a strategy of survival, and it was a step toward homeplace. Ahmed (2000) writes, “The forming of a new community provides a sense of fixity through the language of heritage—a sense of inheriting a collective past by sharing a lack of home rather than sharing a home” (p. 85). Although she writes of migrants, I believe her words apply to us as well as we are looking for a home. We are looking for “the potential to remake one’s relations to that which appears as unfamiliar, to reinhabit spaces and place” (Ahmed, p. 93). I wanted to make that connection with you, and the other students of color. I needed that bridge and you enabled it for me.\(^4\) We were each looking for a homeplace.

I had that bridge once before, a long time ago. He had no reason to love me, but he did. At least I like to believe that.

The loving eye is a critical eye in the sense that it is necessary, crucial for establishing and nourishing relationships across difference. (Oliver, 2001, p. 219)

August 1998 I showed up at Arizona State University in the very department I had just left as an undergraduate to start an MA program in communication. The professor who had recruited me to the program, my Chicana mentor, was leaving and my fate and possible success was questionable. How was I going to study Chicana/o rhetoric without her? Then he took me under his wing. He was such an unexpected ally. He studied performance, something I had initially dismissed rather quickly because of my lack of knowledge about it (little did I know that later it would save my life, save my sanity, and help me find my place and voice in the field). Quite frankly I was intimidated by him. In addition to his charm and brilliance, he seemed so worldly to me or should I say so many worlds away from me. In my mind, he belonged in this space and I did not. He spoke the language, looked the part, and exuded such confidence. He was elegant, charismatic, and at times melancholy. Everyone in our cohort was seduced by his presence and what he represented to each of us. This was my introduction to graduate school—the required introduction to methods and he would forever shape my self-perception, self-confidence, and critical epistemology. To this day when I write, I write for him. My mentor who encouraged my struggling and developing voice still whispers in my ear whether he knows it or not.

It all began with a simple short essay. I still remember the terror of that assignment. It was my first graduate course in my master’s program and he asked us to answer in a two-page essay the following question, “What is communication?” For the week prior to the due date all of us in this class sweated over the dilemma of defining our discipline, a discipline some of us were just beginning to know, in
a matter of two pages. Did we have the right sources? Were we on the right track? Was this a test? Was this a trick question? In interactions throughout the week we cautiously gave each other glimpses of our answers, always holding back just a bit for fear of response. Finally, the day of class had arrived when we would sit in a circle and each of us would share what we had written. As we begin, the answers varied from the standard, “Communication is the process of relaying a message from a sender and a receiver” to “communication is everything.” Making our way around the room, I suddenly realized with intense fear that I was next, and my heart started pounding. The professor had cautioned us to please not read our papers, but the fear in me took over and when called upon with my voice shaking I nervously read my introduction: “Communication is a field which is designed to be non-inclusive of Others in its ideology, history and methodology . . .” and with that I continued my tirade against the field for its various crimes against people of color and gays and lesbians using various scholars to speak the words and feelings I was grappling with—questioning whether or not they were justified. Having said that, I put my paper down and let the next person speak. When class was over I turned in my paper wondering whether my professor would see me as a radical bitter woman of color or for what I was—a Chicana trying to find her voice in a field that while seeming to welcome the possibility of politicized or marginalized identities didn't necessarily seem to reflect this work in its journals. The next week returning to class, shy and embarrassed to even look at my professor for fear that he had seen through my paper, noting the inadequacies I feared in myself, I nervously sat in the circle. Three hours later, after having discussed the history of the discipline of communication studies we received our papers. Slowly I turned the pages of my paper until I had reached the last page and there they were, comments that changed my shaky perception of my place in this new space. Comments that assured me that the anger I felt was indeed justified, and comments that urged me to continue to make the accusations I was making. So many words, but five remain etched in my mind, “You are a beautiful writer.” Words that would guide me through an MA, a PhD, and even now as an assistant professor . . . So many years later I send my own student, James, back to him for an MA, and I keep the circle of love alive. “In the caresses of love, there is no subject or object/other” (Oliver, 2001, p. 216).

Since that time I have kept that paper not only because I want to be nostalgic about the past but also because it came to represent a physical manifestation of my struggle to find my voice. But more than that, the narrative written by the professor, an acclaimed scholar in performance studies and queer theory, read just like a love letter to me. It was a love letter, a form of support, an endorsement from someone who represented so much what I wanted to be, that urged me to continue my studies and know that there would be a place for me in the field. It was a form of support from someone who could empathize with my position. Later, he would encourage me to write my first book review that was eventually published. In this scenario I was the unlovable Other and his act of love was a political gesture. “Opening a public space of love and generosity is crucial to opening
“a space beyond domination” (Oliver, 2001, p. 221). It was exactly what I needed and I grew to love him as my mentor and friend. To this day I am eternally grateful for his intervention.

I reflect upon this story because somehow it connects me to you and the fact that I seem to have come full circle in this love. But it seems to be even more complex than that because I am both mentor and student...

Do you remember that day when it all changed? I sat you down and said, “You come here every week and we talk for hours, and when you leave I don’t know a damn thing about you.” I broke through your wall and when it came down to it, you and I were really not that different. Perhaps you didn’t say much at first because your story was my story, and it really didn’t need that much elaboration. But in that moment the bond was secured. As you told me about your family and your experiences I heard so much of my own concerns and voice echoing in everything you were saying. Seven months later, I realized that you made me feel something I hadn’t felt in a long time... genuine care. In this hard, cold space I had closed myself off. I sit asking you about what your plans are after you leave, and I am uncomfortable in the knowledge that the plans have not been set. All through the fall we worked on graduate and scholarship applications, and now here we are and all is still up in the air. I am scared for the first time in a long time by the uncertainty of the future, your future. Although I know you will succeed at whatever path you choose, I am still scared and unsettled because I fear that perhaps I have failed you in some way as you have yet to hear the news we have been waiting for from some of the programs you applied to. You, who have given me so much... You gave me a community, a homeplace. When you are a young faculty member of color and there is literally no one else like you in your faculty, where do you turn? Where do you draw strength? The few people who are like you are the handful of students of color you teach, and most of them welcome you with open arms. But being a minority faculty member is a lonely thing. Your allies are few and your mentors are even fewer...

It is the spring of 2003, and I am beaten. I have been on job interview after job interview. I have been frightened by Homeland Security, the desire to “legalize” my Egyptian husband, and the psychic trauma of getting a dissertation approved by a committee. I am tired, torn, and undone, but it is time for my weekly meeting with my advisor. I come to her office as I do every week and experience the comfort of her space and her soothing words. I expect that she will tell me something about my dissertation chapter encouraging me in my writing, but instead the conversation begins in a different way, “Bern, I have noticed that you seem off. You look tired. Is everything okay?” I sit startled wondering if my “offness” had really been that apparent or if it was simply her loving look that had caught it. Caught off guard by her perceptiveness and gesture of love, I didn’t realize I mattered that much. It reminded me of an experience I had in my MA program with a friend. She and I, two of the few Chicanas in the department, discussed our relationships and issues with our classes of predominately White students. In describing some of the problems she was having that others in her cohort were not, she said, “You
know Bern, I think that sometimes we don’t think we have any value, any worth, or anything to offer and we carry that with us.” Her words stick with me today as my very presence is often negated and contested. Her words very much informed the way I felt as I sat in that office shocked that someone had noticed my unhappiness. For the next hour we talked about what was going on. As she validated my frustrations and fears in that moment everything was okay for once and the homeplace was reestablished. But of course another woman of color who had written about theories of the flesh and specialized knowledges could clearly read the pain written on my body. Why was I so surprised? She had walked down that road many times before me and she as my other mother was making that connection to remake my space. So many bridges, so many blessings. I carry that experience in my heart, and I add it to my knowledge of what it means to be a mentor and survivor. Fanon (1963) writes about the psychic trauma of colonialism in terms of the long-term lasting effects on the colonized who must create their own spaces intellectually, emotionally, and physically. These remnants are still alive today as many of us are still trying to decolonize the academy. For some of us we need the possibility of love to continue.

I checked my messages and I heard your voice. You were so excited telling me how you had received the check from the Hispanic Scholarship Fund. I smiled as I listened remembering my own excitement when I received a check from them and a note of encouragement from the professor who had written me the recommendation letter for the scholarship (the same professor who had written the love letter on my paper). “Dear Bernadette, Congratulations on this wonderful honor. You have a brilliant future. Keep up the good work!” (dated April 3, 1999). I keep that note along with the paper in a folder marked “Professional Development.” These small acts of love mean so much. These small acts of love sustain us. Six years later I write you a similar note as your accomplishment is also my accomplishment. I shift positions from student to recommender in this scenario.

Where do these stories leave me? Leave us? They leave me feeling as if I have somehow come full circle yet even that metaphor fails. What prevails for me is love and its necessity. Elizabeth Bell, Kim Golombisky, G’han Singh, and Krista Hirschmann (2000) alluded to the necessity of love in relationships of mentoring between women. Like me, they point to the ways that literature on mentoring fails to address its emotional aspects.5 They offer a model based on the concept of entrustment as a way to honor power differentials that they claim feminist literature on mentoring sometimes erases. Borrowing the term entrustment from DeLauretis, they describe a relationship in which “one woman gives her trust or entrusts herself symbolically to another woman, who thus becomes her guide, mentor, or point of reference—in short, the figure of symbolic mediation between her and the world” (as cited in Bell et al., p. 29). They argue,

What makes this relationship unique feminist theory is its full recognition of the power disparities and differences among women. The notion of a symbolic mother, within a female genealogy or a female symbolic, “permits the exchange between women across generations and the sharing of knowledge and desire across differences.” This
symbolic mediation is achieved, not in spite of, but rather because of, the power differential between women and across difference of age, class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. (Bell et al., pp. 29-30)

Although this is an important intervention in the literature, I still don’t think it manages to capture some of the issues of power and difference that frame our relationship and the multiple spaces we occupy all at once. How do we account for our various locations at any time in what Collins (2000) terms the “matrix of domination”? I am granted a certain level of institutional authority because of my title of professor, yet at the same time within the institution I am marginalized as one of the few tenure-track women of color. In our relationship and society at large you benefit from your male privilege. Even as Latinos our identities are complex, I would be read as a White Latina and you would be read as a Black Latino. But our identities are never as simple as that. We are always misread, mislabeled, and generally misunderstood. So many layers, so many subject positions that we occupy all at once, and they all come to bear in each interaction. So it is not quite so easy to talk about power when it comes to us, is it?

Addressing the political power of love Collins (2004) writes, “Resistance consists of loving the unlovable and affirming their humanity. Loving Black people in a society that is so dependent on hating Blackness constitutes a highly rebellious act” (p. 250). “The moment we choose to love,” Oliver (2001) writes, “we begin to move towards freedom, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others” (p. 220). hooks (2001) elaborates on these ideas arguing, “The choice to love is a choice to connect—to find ourselves in the other” (hooks, p. 93). Oliver also writes about the recuperative, rehabilitative, and transformative nature of love asking that we see others through “eyes that invite loving response” (p. 19). She argues,

Reconstructing subjectivity entails reconstructing notions of self, self-reflection, relationships, and love. What is love beyond domination? What is love beyond recognition? It is love as working-through that demands constant vigilance toward response-ability in relationships. The loving eye is a critical eye, always on the lookout for the blind spots that close off the possibility of response-ability and openness to otherness and difference. Love is an ethics of differences that thrives on the adventure of otherness. This means that love is an ethical and social responsibility to open personal and public space in which otherness and difference can be articulated. Love requires a commitment to the advent and nurturing of difference. (Oliver, pp. 19-20)

Collins’, hooks’s, and Oliver’s words help frame the way I think about mentoring and the role of love in these relationships, particularly those between faculty of color and students of color. I have been both the unlovable and the lover even at times simultaneously. Love in the context of mentoring, specifically the mentoring relationship between faculty of color and students of color, is the ultimate act of resistance as “awakening to love can happen only as we let go of our obsession with power and domination” and the way we have internalized them (hooks, 2001, p. 87). Love is very necessary.
In a culture and climate that negates our very existences, in this space, all we have is love. Our practices, our ways, our cultures are read as excessive, as loud, as Other and unnecessary, while “Whiteness is deemed rational and acceptable” (Patton, 2004b, p. 195). We need love that is resistive and political. We need love that “can transform ethical, social, and political relations. Indeed, in order to transform ethical, social, and political relations, we must reconceive of love” (Oliver, 2001, p. 218). This love, this act of caring, the bond that is created in mentoring is often misconstrued and misrepresented by a dominant culture who have set the rules for play without reflecting on the ways in which those rules are culturally loaded. Of this situation, hooks (1989) argues, “Efforts individual professors make to humanize the teacher/student relationship may be perceived by colleagues as threatening the maintenance of hierarchal status” (p. 69). Do we enforce domination by perpetuating this hierarchy or do we work to construct alternative behavior that “strengthen our compassion and deepens our care for one another?” (hooks, p. 69) Our love is read much like our other behaviors, as deviant or inappropriate, but the very basis of our survival is our ability to love, extend that love in a “loving glance,” and to be a witness to the very real trauma we face in our everyday (Oliver, 2001). This loving glance is similar to the world traveling and loving perception that María Lugones (1994) says women of color, as outsiders of the U.S. mainstream, practice out of necessity.

hooks (1994b) addresses the ways love and emotion are marginalized in the academy and silenced by the mind/body split and the myth of objectivity:

Teachers who love students and are loved by them are still “suspect” in the academy. Some of the suspicion is that the presence of feelings, of passion, may not allow for objective consideration of each student’s merit. But this very notion is based on the false assumption that education is neutral, that there is some “even” emotional ground we stand on that enables us to treat everyone equally, dispassionately. (p. 198)

This suspicion of love and affiliation becomes even more complex when we discuss issues of race:

My Black teachers and I defined ourselves to and for each other within the larger context of the predominately White university. Our public social interactions are viewed by multiple spectators within the classroom and the larger academic environment. Hence, what appears to be a practiced avoidance of racial affiliation ensues. Yet, in the privacy of an office space the shared racial and presumed cultural affinity might come to inform the educational relationship. (Alexánder, 1999, p. 314)

I want to challenge these assumptions that make us avoid performances of affiliation by thinking of mentoring as the homeplace driven by an ethics of love. I do so by bringing it back to the level of emotion and love. Like hooks (1989) and Moraga and Anzaldúa (1983), I want to return to the body and affect— theories of the flesh that have guided our ways for centuries as people of color. I refuse to silence emotion, passion, or the possibility of affective community building through the resistive power of love. Muñoz (2000) writes that the affect of Latina/os is often off or
seen as inappropriate, as it does not match the official national affect associated with White middle-class subjectivities. However, this affect provides us with a point of renewal and connection, a space to access and relish our shared Otherness. This affect is a space of resistance. It is a critical act and practice. This affective excess of Otherness is the very thing that we rehabilitate as a source of empowerment as we turn what they have used against us into a political tool.

Again you must realize that my writing of this letter is bittersweet. I relish all the possibilities you have opened for me as I rejoice in the knowledge that everything we have established will equip you with the tools you need to succeed. Looking back at my experiences throughout college, I have come to realize that much of my success was due to the faculty members who guided me through each step of the way. I was blessed to have worked with women of color as my faculty advisors throughout my educational process. I have also had other faculty of color and gay and lesbian faculty members who took me under their wings hoping to equip me with all they had learned about survival in the academy. I took all of this for granted until I became a faculty member myself and was able to inhabit their spaces. As I reflected on what Alexander (1999) refers to as my institutional biography, I saw how the presence of each of these mentors was meaningful because “it was a reflection of the familiar” (p. 311). Suddenly I understood that my experience of mentoring was definitely not the norm. Each of them taught me the importance of mentoring for historically marginalized communities. The spaces we form in mentoring relationships are our homeplaces, and this is where we pass down all we know about survival, resistance, and making do. These sites are where we reach our highest levels of complexity and intellectual development (Bonner & Evans, 2004, pp. 11-12). Mentoring, as a critical site, is where we actually blend our theory and practice. It is an embodied practice of theory. It is a political theoretical act that is an entity itself outside of our scholarship, service, and teaching. It is a strategy of survival.

I give you all I received from each of them, and I am confident that as you prepare for this next step in your life and education you will be able to navigate in ways much better than I have. Keep these stories with you. Keep them close to your heart and dwell in the knowledge that you have been loved. You have been both student and teacher and you have given me an incredible gift. Oliver (2001) writes that, “Falling in love, the otherness of the other, is the greatest joy; and vulnerability in the face of the other is a sweet surrender, a gift rather than a sacrifice” (p. 224). Given all I know now, I believe that falling in love with the Otherness not only of others but of ourselves is a sweet surrender.

With love and respect . . .

Postscript → May 17, 2005

I sit in my office feeling the enormity of all that has passed over us in the last few days with your graduation and your subsequent departure. You have left me with so much more than I had before we met—mostly a sense of purpose and renewed determination. As I look to my right I see a physical manifestation of our multilayered relationship. Perhaps you gave me this because of all my talk about space and the
ways in which your presence changed it. Is this your way of leaving a piece of yourself behind forever in this space as a way to continue to guide me in the future? The plaque you gave me just days before as a gift of thanks and love reads:

Dr. Bernadette Marie Calafell in grateful appreciation for being a dedicated mentor, loving friend, and true confidant. Without you I could not have done it. Love, Anthony May 14, 2005

You, this gift, and all we shared will stay with me forever and mean more than any institutional acknowledgment I might receive. Our circle is complete, and I thank you again for all you have taught me.

Notes

1. There were two sections of this course. One was extremely difficult, challenging me at every step in terms of my authority and course content. The other, the course Anthony was enrolled in, was much more racially and ethnically diverse, reflexive, and open to the discussion of the ideas advanced in the course content.

2. *Mojado* translates as *wetback*, a derogatory term for Mexicans in the Southwest, signifying just having crossed the border illegally.

3. This loneliness is also addressed by Tompkins (1996) in *A Life in School: What the Teacher Learned*: “I don’t know whether my sense that the university was a lonely place stemmed from this ancient habit of feeling or if my perception was more widely shared. But my sense was that at least some people felt as I did” (p. 182).

4. Flores (1996) discusses the ways Chicana feminists construct discursive bridges to other communities as a way to begin coalition building.

5. Farmer (2005) conducts a thorough review of mentoring literature as it relates to interpersonal communication. For some of this literature, see her citation of Bartell (2005), Boreen and Niday (2003), Clutterbuck and Lane (2004), Gallien and Peterson (2005), Johnson and Ridley (2004), and Mullen (2005).

6. I personally do not like to reinscribe the hegemonic Black/White racial binary within mixed race Latina/o cultures; however, as Latina/os we are rarely “read” as mixed race, and oftentimes we ourselves reproduce this binary.

7. Although not specifically addressing cultural difference, Rawlins (2005) addresses the tensions surrounding teachers who view teaching as friendship. He writes, “Teachers who subscribe to the model of friendship premised on this classical notion of eros are especially vulnerable to self-inhibition or to criticism or suspicion by third parties and the public at large. Many teachers who consciously or unconsciously buy into this image of friendship run scared and are typically afraid to care for their students” (p. 6).

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