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Bodies as objects of pedagogic power relations

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This paper is based on a study titled ‘Enacting Feminisms in Academia’, which engaged five feminist lecturers teaching English at five different multilingual universities in Southern Africa. The study explored: (1) the complexity of sociolinguistic and feminist identity construction in multilingual seascapes, and by extension (2) how feminist educators’ interpretation and enactment of their personal world-view informs their language teaching in terms of what they teach, how they teach, and why they teach what they do. The participants who hail from a diverse range of ideological landscapes were identified either by themselves or others as feminist teachers. Through a suite of data sources which comprised autobiographical essays, interviews and lecture observations, this paper explores how the female teacher’s educative and pedagogic expertise and interactions are framed in relation to her race, gender, and age. Accepting the fluidity and complexity of identity positionalities, the paper explores the identity constructions of the feminist teachers in their communities of practice.

Keywords: critical race theory; critical pedagogies; identities; race and ethnicities; pedagogy

Introduction

South Africa’s struggle against racial discrimination has received international exposure. Focus on gender disenfranchisement was, however, eclipsed by the struggle for racial redress. In the current climate of redress, post-Apartheid South Africa has pledged a commitment to the promotion of a unitary, non-sexist, non-racist education system. Several national policies promote equity and access to those previously excluded by virtue of race and gender from participating in key public domains. Despite women’s exclusion from other areas of public social engagement in South Africa, teaching has remained a women-dominated profession. The legacy of Apartheid, however, invariably still influenced how the participants in my study framed their pedagogic identities and experiences in relation to their racial identities. Goldberg (2000, 157) observes that South Africans:

define themselves, in the first instance, as members of a population group . . . that population group/race/nationality are first order interpretations, categorisations or characteristics in terms of which one is perceived . . . and these assumptions are so deeply entrenched in South African state ideology as to be unquestioned.

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The participants in the study confirm Goldberg’s observation in that they devote substantial attention to the dynamics of race, racialisation and racism in their narratives and how this identity marker impacts on a range of identity variables including gender, age, class, language, ethnicity, etc. In exploring how feminist teachers’ bodies become objects of pedagogic power relations, the paper is organised as follows:

- theoretical overview: bodies as objects of power relations;
- methodological issues;
- pedagogic relations defined by age, race and gender.

**Theoretical overview: bodies as objects of power relations**

Bucholtz (1999, 4), notes that despite considerable theoretical differences most contemporary feminist scholars agree that identity is less static than previously thought. In offering one perspective aligned to this line of thinking, Anzaldúa writes:

> ‘Making faces’ is my metaphor for constructing one’s identity ... In our self-reflectivity and in our active participation with the issues that confront us, whether it be through writing, front-line activism, or individual self-development, we are also uncovering the inter-faces, the very spaces and places where our multiple-surfaced, colored, racially gendered bodies intersect and interconnect. (1990, xvi)

Describing the kind of problem that identity is, Butler offers the following formulation:

> Just as bodily surfaces are enacted as natural, so these surfaces can become the site of a dissonant and denaturalised performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself ... As the effects of a subtle and politically enforced performativity, gender is an ‘act’, as it were, that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of ‘the natural’ that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status. (1990, 146–7)

Both Anzaldúa and Butler view identity as a construct, however, they differ in the role they assign to the body. For Anzaldúa, gender and other aspects of identity are inextricably interconnected, so that bodies are not simply racial and gendered but racially gendered. Butler, on the other hand, views the body as the stage on which gender is performed, where elements of the self, rather than being uncovered, as Anzaldúa proposes, are projected and made to seem natural at some times, and unnatural at others (Bucholtz 1999, 5).

Some scholars (for example, Houston 1997; Lorde 1984), implicitly align themselves with Anzaldúa and the multiplicity of selves available to social subjects, as well as the multiplicity of identities within what is often seen as a monolithic social category. Other scholars align themselves with Butler (for example, Epstein 1993). They focus on the hegemonic cultural and socio-linguistic forces, which influence identity production. Still others (Eagleton 1998) combine the two paradigms by underscoring the interaction between fluid identities and rigid social structures. They conceive of identity as a practice – an actively constructed performance rather than a pre-existing role (Bucholtz 1999, 7).

Identities affect teaching discourses and practices in ways that we will perhaps never fully understand. Identity constructions and perceptions also influence the range of options and understandings which teachers and students choose from in
developing classroom discourses. The shifting terrain of both teacher and student identities and diverse epistemological reconfigurations emphasise the need for constant examination of the roles of teachers and students’ identities in the shaping of classroom discourses. This conception about identities is consistent with Ellsworth’s acknowledgement (1989, 280) of the dilemma in relating to individuals constructed in post-structuralist sensibilities. Ellsworth contends:

people cannot fully understand each other, but they can try to understand how identity is subjective and can be used as a source through which power operates. These identities are not static or timeless. Rather, identities, as well as power and knowledge constructions, are fluid and constantly being redefined.

Foucault’s (in Gore 2002) reconceptualisation of disciplinary power recognises its repercussions from the macro realm of structures and ideologies to the micro level of bodies, a material and physical site at which the enactment of power relations is manifest. Supporting the view that power circulates and manifests at the micro level of bodies, Corrigan (1991), Epstein and Johnson (1998), Taylor (2006) and Clegg (2008) indicate the effect of power on the body. Student and teacher subjectivities are clearly implicated in the enactment of power on bodies. A central tenet of critical feminist pedagogy has been its insistence on challenging the mind/body split. For hooks (1994, 193) this pertains not only to connecting knowledge to experience or theory to practice, but to the way knowledge is embodied by the teacher.

Gore (2002) proposes that conceptions of power technologies on bodies have direct implications for the construction of teacher and student subjectivities. Power relations are configured by variables such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, language, sexuality, etc., all of which are not enacted in identical ways in classrooms. Gore suggests viewing bodies as material and physical sites, and proposes seeing teachers and students as people who have differential capacities to enact definitions of power based on their place in the social hierarchies.

Methodological issues
Coffey and Delamont (2000, 65) note that for a profession comprising predominantly women we know surprisingly little about women educators’ daily lives and the meanings they attach to their teaching. The relative absence of research on the lives of women teachers, given their numeric majority within the profession, has become the subject of some discussion. This study was guided by the theoretical underpinnings that inform feminist research methodologies. Feminist research methodology is identifiable by its preference for critiquing the restrictive standards of traditional social science research, which have hitherto, dehumanised and depersonalised both the researcher and the researched, feminist research methodologies wish to acknowledge the subjective, emotional, and biographic factors that shape the researcher and the researched (Acker, Barry, and Esseveld 1991; Lather 2007).

In an attempt to excavate autobiographical and biographical data, I used purposive sampling for the identification and selection of the participants. The sample comprised the participants shown in Table 1.

The sample served the aims of the study because their engagement in English-language teaching was:
(1) informed by feminist theoretical and methodological insights, and
(2) they represent a group that has been discriminated against formally on the basis of their gender and/or race.

This study drew upon autobiographical essays, 14 hours of interviews, and 24 hours of lecture observations which provided data from which to explore the participants’ identity construction. The lecture observations and interviews served to explore what the participants professed in their essays manifested in their pedagogical practices. The first tier of the data-gathering process required the research participants to write their autobiographical essays with a view to gleaning insight into the contiguous variables that shape their sociolinguistic and feminist identity construction, and subsequently informs their English-language teaching from a feminist perspective. Cognisant of the ethical and methodological dilemmas associated with autobiographical writing, I nonetheless considered it an informative way to elicit the voices of the participants. Taylor (1991, in Roos 1994) and Stanley (1992) suggest that in an autobiography the author endeavours to present her life as directly, naturally, and realistically as possible. While generic definitions of autobiography describe it simply as the writing of one’s own story, the autobiography cannot be accepted in terms of the classical representational mirror theory, preoccupied with the romance of the real, portraying a unified and coherent social actor. Although postmodernism has alerted us that it is impossible to write an autobiography in the ordinary sense since all aspects of the process are problematic, however, people go on writing their life stories under the assumption that there is a life outside, that they are describing it, that their selves are contiguous, not contingent, and that there is a causal narrative connecting the different events.

Questions pertaining to the participants’ personal, political and intellectual development were presented to guide them in their essay writing. Of particular relevance to this paper were the following aspects which provided insight into the feminist and pedagogical ideologies of the participants in terms of their personal theories regarding feminist and multilingual teaching and learning; the defining characteristics that inform the feminist ideologies/language teaching philosophies that they subscribe to; and the impact feminism has had on their conceptualisation of multilingual teaching.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Institutional position</th>
<th>Courses being taught that are related to the research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prof. Carol</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>University of the Western Cape, Senior Lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr Jennifer</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>UNISA, Senior Lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms Phumzile</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>University of Free State, Lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr Thembi</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>University of Botswana, Senior Lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr Vijay</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>UDW, Senior Lecturer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The essays have been published at the following URL: www.geocities.com/perumaljuliet/feminist_educator_narratives.doc.

This paper presents the experiences of Phumzile, Vijay and Carol. These participants identify themselves as African, Indian and White, respectively, and they were located at different geographical South African universities that serve racially and linguistically diverse students. Drawing on their racial, age and geographical differences this paper explores how these identity markers configure their pedagogic relations.

I drew from the principles of content analysis, discourse analysis and grounded theory and compiled an analytical toolkit to analyse the data. I worked discursively through the data according to the following three levels:

1. I employed an *intra-comparative* process of analysis which entailed reading each participant’s data individually to look for similarities, differences, overlaps, recurrent themes, words and phrases, and then clustering them.
2. I employed an *inter-comparative* process of analysis, which entailed comparing and contrasting data across/among the data of all the research participants to identify thematic commonalities, and variances.
3. I employed a *theory–theory* and *theory–data interplay* analysis, which entailed analysing the data against the literature to see how it confirmed and/or challenged existing views, or provoked new insights on the debates related to the study.

In employing the theory–data interplay as an analytical technique, I created a dialectic referential circle among the participants’ views and the received literature. I drew on my pre-understanding of concepts, which I had assembled into a theoretical toolkit and then employed them as sensitising agents against which to analyse participants’ responses. The relational value of the study emerged on three levels:

1. the utility existing theory has in informing data analysis;
2. the power of data to challenge existing theory; and
3. how personal theories can either legitimise or delegitimise received theories, and thus, contribute to theory elaboration, theory recontextualisation, and theory reconceptualisation.

**Pedagogic relations defined by age, race and gender**

In exploring the politics of bodies as objects of pedagogical power relations, Phumzile reflects on aspects of her personal and professional identity that specifically pertain to her individuation as a Black educator working at the University of Free State (UFS), a predominantly White student and staff institution. She refers to age and gender as variables that are drawn upon to undermine her female teacher power. Phumzile wrote:

I soon discovered that in my literature classes race and gender were swear words. My first lecture provoked protests from a rightwing student organisation. Although I received support from staff, the then Dean sided with the protesting students.

...This has been one of a series of incidents, which were overtly racist, and sexist directed at me since I started teaching at the university. As a recent audit of Black staff... revealed, I am not alone in experiencing an assortment of tactics accompanied by (often stated) scepticism about our ability to function as credible professionals.
The dominant image of a knowledgeable person on any subject (read expert) is male, white, older. That I am Black, female, younger has three discernible simultaneous effects: For many of my (white) students, maybe less so now than when I arrived here in 1997 at 24 years of age, by their own admission I am a very rare example of a Black woman they have encountered in a position outside of (potential) servitude to them. (Essay)

The undermining tactics associated with gender discrimination is well documented as it relates to scepticism regarding the female teacher’s professional status. Traditionally, professorial authority and knowledge have been linked to patriarchal authority, founded on what Phumzile describes as: ‘The dominant image of a knowledgeable person on any subject (read expert) is male, white, older’. Within this tradition of patriarchal society, merely being female has justified being conferred inferior professional status. That Phumzile is female, Black, and younger has three discernible identity markings that destabilise the hegemony and trouble student and staff expectations of traditional conceptions of authority figures.

Ropers-Huilman (1997) contends that there is the belief that if students know teachers’ ages and professional backgrounds they would be willing to grant them a measure of authority based on those presumed experiences. The tendency to equate age with maturity, experience and professional expertise is a prevalent, though erroneous perception that Phumzile has to endure. Having to negotiate her gender and age in a university comprising predominantly White students, Phumzile admits to making strategic decisions as to how she enacts her pedagogic role. Having experienced racial and sexist disparagement, the need to assert her teacher authority is crucial in counterposing the ‘scepticism’ about her ‘ability to function as a credible professional’. She is aware that in this particular teaching space, to stage democratic technologies of teacher and student as joint learners (as espoused by variants of feminist pedagogies) risks it being construed as a tactical manoeuvre to mask her lack of knowledge in the field of study. Students and staff who believe that her being young, female and Black is an embodiment of innate ignorance and cognitive deficit are likely to see her efforts at drawing on their experiential epistemology as a way to mask her lack of sacred knowledge. Thus, choosing to foreground her teacher authority via an active demonstration of ‘official’ knowledge, Phumzile writes:

This has had several challenges for the ways in which I have chosen to participate in the lecturing space.

...The non-hierarchical classroom model is contradictory and counterproductive. It is difficult to maintain responsible and efficient co-ordination when an organisation is truly non-hierarchical. It is also misleading to think that classrooms can ever be truly non-hierarchical for learners are not educators within the classroom context. While their multiple literacies are not called into doubt, it is clear that... they chose to register for a course they identify as outside their ambit of experience. (Essay)

Phumzile draws attention to the hierarchical nature of the university, which in attempting to fulfil its roles and responsibilities, and pursue efficient co-ordination and organisation, can prove undemocratic. Thus, firstly, hierarchical relations play themselves out at the macro level of the UFS. Second, in negotiating the challenges of lecturing at UFS, Phumzile finds it useful to also retain educator authority at the micro level of the classroom. She does so as part of her educative and pedagogic mandate because she maintains that: ‘In a lecture situation it is true that I know more about literary critical analysis than my students do’. She argues that students register for courses of study because they identify these as areas in which they need to expand their
knowledge. As a way of exposing students to wider knowledge, as a qualified educator who has undergone extensive training, she is comparatively more knowledgeable in the chosen field of study. Thus, her craft and disciplinary knowledge imbue her with more insights into the discipline, by virtue of her specialised educative and pedagogic expertise.

Furthermore, given that the feminist critique of teacher authoritarianism emanated from disenchantment with class and gender supremacy wielded by predominantly elite White men, the call for sharing academic authority is inappropriate for Phumzile as a Black female. She is aware that in a climate of overt and atmospheric racial and gender undermining, her real claim to pedagogic authority is vested in her academic expertise. Thus, while recognising the strategic value of equity, Phumzile rejects the fantasy of non-hierarchical egalitarianism, and does not yield her teacher authority indiscriminately. The present and conspicuous reality of being a young, Black woman who constitutes a racial minority in a largely White student classroom has tempered her blanket adoption of the feminist and anti-racist model of establishing non-hierarchical pedagogic relations with her students (see Cross et al. 2009; Dorsey 2002, 207; Soudien et al. 2008).

Phumzile is aware that when her body is associated with identity-diminishing stereotypes, her ‘true’ claim to authority is tied to the body of expertise/specialised knowledge that she has acquired through extensive training. This implies that her appointment as lecturer is not arbitrary, but is based on her academic credentials that have qualified her for appointment.

Phumzile is also intent on challenging images of Black women and their traditional association with servitude. Another reason she forwards for not relinquishing teacher authority is linked to dismantling the White-leader–Black servant hierarchical binary that prevails in social configurations of power relations. Phumzile wrote:

Clearly, my new terrain demanded radically different forms of insurgency.

... When I, as a Black woman lecturer, walk into a classroom composed of mainly white students who are not much younger than I am, what meanings stem from my use of servant–leadership paradigms? ... Servant–leadership then does not challenge their thinking in any way if their expectation is that as a Black woman servitude is my role. Forms of service can be read as submission especially when they are seen as natural. It is therefore to be expected that learners who respond to me as though I ought to mother them would do so even more were I to participate in this paradigm. I would be challenging none of their preconceived ideas, conscious or otherwise. I would indeed be reinforcing racist and patriarchal ideas about the appropriate behaviour and station of a Black woman in South Africa. (Essay)

Phumzile is perceptive that her identity as a Black woman frames her students’ perception of her professorial authority. Thus, she attempts to subvert the pervasive images associated with the construct of Black womanhood/mothering and its conflation with servitude. Enacting a servant–leader ethic, as espoused to within variants of feminist and anti-racist discourses, is inappropriate, counterproductive and contradictory because it does not challenge students’ preconceived ideas regarding racist and patriarchal ideas about the appropriate behaviour and station of a Black woman in South Africa. Hill Collins (1990) also deconstructs the hegemony of the process of objectifying Black women. Echoing sentiments similar to Phumzile, Hill Collins writes:
Created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women’s long-standing restriction to domestic service, the mammy image represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all Black women’s behaviour... Even though she may be well loved and may wield considerable authority in her white ‘family’, the mammy still knows her place as obedient servant. She accepts her subordinate. (1990)

As a way to short circuit this reductive and dominant image of Black women, and to enact the institutional authority that is expected of her, Phumzile performs her feminist educator authority in a way that is cognisant of dominant contextual ideologies. Opting to employ aspects of teacher hierarchy, Phumzile subverts traditional patriarchal expectations, and feminist sensibilities, as they relate to Black racial submission and power sharing. Through this enactment of power she strives to portray a positive role model for both Black and White female students thus demonstrating that power does not necessarily have to be manipulated for negative effects.

The issues of race, gender, and physical presence as expressed in Phumzile’s extracts are also echoed in a series of extracts from Vijay’s interviews. Like Phumzile, Vijay is aware that her race, gender and age do not immediately signal her as an embodiment of authority, unless she performs her power in a tangible and familiar way. Vijay comments on how conceptions of her identity are shaped both by herself and her students, and how these impact pedagogical relations:

I find that the signifier Indian upon an individual in this country [South Africa] is narrowing and diminishing and in many ways do not carry the strengths that I think are part of identity. It is minority. It is less than. It’s insular, separate. I wouldn’t want that to inform my teacher identity. I would find that disconcerting. (Interview)

In South Africa, a country wracked by parochial, racial and ethnic fragmentation, Vijay is aware of the identity-diminishing stereotypes that circulate even within the classroom. As a South African Indian, who constitutes a minority within a predominantly Black South Africa, Vijay admits to not wanting her ‘Indian’ identity to inform the way students relate to her. While Phumzile, who belongs to a Black majority, asserts her Black identity by challenging stereotypes that associate Black women with servitude, Vijay chooses to refuse her ‘Indian’ categorisation, and to instead identify with the Black majority. She thus privileges her national, rather than her third-generation-diasporic-root-identity. However, her identification with the South African Black majority does not redeem her from having to navigate the negative stereotypes that generally plague Black identity. In trying to understand the racial stereotypes that Vijay experiences we can return to what Phumzile elucidated in her essay. Phumzile identified undermining tactics that express, for example, scepticism about Black academics’ ability to function as credible professionals, and expectations for Black women to perform roles of servitude, etc. In playful, yet nonetheless, telling statements, Vijay expresses sentiments similar to that of Phumzile. Vijay explains: ‘I like them to think: she is an Indian-but. Like, she is a women-but. She is a Black person but she is still on time. She is efficient. She does her work. She is reliable. She is honest’. In contravention of the staid expectations for her as a Black/Indian female to perform her public roles at substandard level, Vijay wants to enact her persona in accordance with her own standards of excellence, even though this may be deemed an extraordinary feat in the estimation of those who equate her ‘dark skin’ with an overt sign of inefficiency, ineptitude, and professional mediocrity. In doing so, Vijay demonstrates
that she has been able to transcend discriminatory social hurdles to actualise her potential.

In choosing to subvert and downplay her ‘Indian’ identity Vijay, teaching a university class comprising predominantly Indian and African students, comments on the way in which she embraces and/or veers away from her racial identity. The fluidity of her racial identity seems to be manipulated more for epistemological than interactional and interpersonal purposes. Vijay says:

I’m very definitely aware of myself as Indian, but not Indian. Being an Indian doesn’t mean that I can’t talk about this. In fact, I might be able to show you how you can find one way of talking about it.

The identity thing was something very weird for the students. They had to write about it, think about it. They could see that I was coming from somewhere quite different. They were actually nervous when I used the word *charro* in class. I made them go and look at words like *coolie* and *kaffir* and it really helped the class grow in a few days. (Interview)

Implicit in Vijay’s comments is that she is able to fluctuate between racial categories, and in so doing de-essentialises identity normativity, thereby exemplifying the non-unitariness of identity. While she generally refuses her Indian identity, there are instances when she strategically foregrounds it for pedagogical purposes, like using it for concept deconstruction. She is, for example, able to name and talk about racial pejoratives (like *charro* and *coolie* in reference to South African Indians), in a way that perhaps a non-‘Indian’ educator might be reluctant to discuss, for fear of being construed as racist. Vijay feels comfortable critiquing, discussing and addressing issues that may be regarded ‘Indian-specific’. However, because she identifies herself, in the first instance as Black and then as an Indian, as is suggested in the statement, ‘I’m very definitely aware of myself as Indian, but not Indian’, this ontological-in-betweeness, or ‘racial cross-dressing’ engenders a sense of alienation among some of her Indian students, who feel that she pays more attention to the African students.

Vijay was unaware that some Indian students felt that she paid more attention to the African students, until I overheard a group of Indian students discuss this during one of my lecture observations, and raised it with Vijay. It appears that Vijay’s refusal to promote racial narcissism, racial favouritism, or ethnocentricity, unintentionally engenders a feeling of social distancing from her Indian students. Vijay decided that she would enquire of the Indian students whether they felt that she was ‘neglecting their interests in order to play up to the African students’. Perhaps, there might have been an expectation among the Indian students for their ‘Indian’ lecturer to be a safe, and familiar ‘space’ – someone with whom they could feel close rather than alienated. Phumzile too, is conscious that her status as lecturer at a predominantly White institution often constructs her as a social refuge for Black students who have been given academic access to predominantly White universities, but who remain socially and contextually dislocated and dispossessed (see Horton 1985). Phumzile is cautious not to differentiate on the basis of race, in the way she relates to her students by being a confident role model to both Black and White female students, alike.

Both Vijay and Phumzile express the view that their classroom authority is rendered suspect because of pervasive societal presumptions, assumptions, and expectations of them as women (and young, Black women at that). Both have no qualms about assuming and asserting educator authority. There appears to be a concurrence in Phumzile’s and Vijay’s understanding of the politics of feminist teacher authority. Phumzile says: ‘It is
also misleading to think that classrooms can ever be truly non-hierarchical... that hierarchy is not always bad; aspects of the hierarchy remain useful’. Echoing similar sentiments, Vijay admits: ‘I like having authority in the class, but authoritarian, I would have problems with that’.

For Phumzile, in addition to being assertive, confident and enacting her teacher authority in a way that overtly demonstrates her pedagogic and educative expertise, Vijay too comments on the usefulness of tangibly enacting authority in the class.

Vijay reiterates how identity body markers related to race (‘not only am I a darkie’); gender (‘I’m a woman’); and age (‘and I’m young’) surface as variables that frame the authority embodied in the teacher. Significant in Vijay’s extract is the notion that ways of performing authority are not static, but evolutionary. This is evident in her reflection: ‘At the beginning I go in tough, and then I gradually ease up’. Furthermore, Vijay demonstrates power in tangible, and audible ways, when she says: ‘I just blasted that class... I am really tough, formidable, I’m pushing, I’m loud, I’m clear, responding to everything’. Both her attitudinal and behavioural postures confirm Jones’ observation that:

Physiognomy, voice, and physical stature have been among the personal marks believed to signify one’s being an authority. We speak, for instance, of a commanding presence, of authoritative voices. (1993, 237)

Vijay is conscious that she is deliberately ‘performing’ the personae of someone in authority, in that while ‘coming on strong’, and wanting to transmit the message about who really is in charge, she is simultaneously firm, but friendly. Thus, her power performance is interspersed with jokes, and heartiness. She is aware of how her pedagogic power enactment as ‘loud, formidable’, and ‘tough’ is inconsistent with her ‘authentic’ self, which she describes as ‘shy’. Essentially, she stages an authoritative pedagogic teacher performance in response to students who do not immediately equate her young, Black female body with authority.

Both Phumzile’s and Vijay’s understandings of the fluidity of power and identity resonate with reconceptualised understandings of feminist teacher authority as espoused by Ellsworth (1992), Gunter (1995), and Gore (2002). Their struggles to create a basis for authority when, because of their age, gender and/or race, students are hesitant to grant it, confirms the need to reconsider the notion that institutional power sufficiently compensates for the lack of power/authority that is ascribed to the female body (more especially, it would seem, a young, Black female body).

Like Phumzile’s and Vijay’s negotiation of their racial teacher identities, Carol as a White, middle-aged female educator is also aware of the politics of her skin, and its impact on her teacher identity. Carol teaches at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), which comprises a predominantly Black student and staff population. Her racial self-awareness is a departure from findings in Frankenberg’s (2000) study, in which Frankenberg noted that when White women look at racism they generally view it as an issue that people of colour face and have to negotiate, but not as an issue that generally implicates them. Frankenberg contends, viewing racism in this way:

has serious consequences for how White women look at racism, and for how antiracist work might be framed. Within this view, White women can see antiracist work as an act of compassion for an ‘other’, an optional, extra project, but not one intimately and organically linked to our own lives. Racism can in short, be conceived as something
external to us rather than as a system that shapes our daily experiences and sense of self. Clearly, White feminist women... lacked an awareness of how their positions in society were constructed in relation to those of women and men of colour. (2000: 451)

In contrast to Frankenberg’s observations, regarding the White women in her sample who externalised the implications of their racial positionality, in her reflections, Carol is aware that being a White female educator teaching at a predominantly Black institution has significant implications. Carol says:

Bossy, which I am at times... A prudish White, middle-class woman trying to tell them how to live their lives and what to think. That’s what I wouldn’t like. I’m very conscious of it because all my students are Black. I sometimes think if I had grown up under Apartheid I would be very resentful. (Interview)

Unlike Phumzile and Vijay who don the trappings of overt teacher authority, Carol is cautious about demonstrating overt teacher authority by being bossy, prudish, and exercising social class and race supremacy. Carol confides that for someone who considered herself privileged and superior, she is humbled by what her students have to teach her about diversity. Teaching at UWC, a previously disadvantaged university that comprises predominantly non-English, Black and disprivileged students, has been enriching in that it has sensitised her to the nuances and complexities of diversity as they relate to the varieties of Englishes, sexualities, cultural and religious affiliations, etc. Furthermore, it has made her aware of her White privilege, and unlike Phumzile and Vijay who name the factors that render their professional status and credibility suspect, Carol does not detail the specifics of White privilege that make her want to downplay her classroom authority. However, the legacy of Apartheid that ensured White preferential treatment in terms of socio-economic, political, cultural and linguistic privileges offers some insight into what frames Carol’s teacher identity as a White South African. In addition, it is possible to draw on McIntosh (1997) who as a White women herself, employs the baggage metaphor for discussing White privilege as an important social construct that frames power relationships both within and outside educational settings. McIntosh enumerates three examples of White privilege:

- she can be fairly sure of having her voice heard in a group in which she is the only member of her race;
- she is never asked to speak for all the people of her race group; and
- if she has low credibility as a leader, she can be sure that her race is not the problem.

These, among other unnamed privileges, make Carol particularly aware that she might be construed by her Black students as: ‘A prudish White, middle-class woman trying to tell them how to live their lives’. In addition to her race supremacy, Carol is also aware that her middle-class status may presumably afford her more deference from her students.

Furthermore, while Vijay chooses to distance herself from an Indian identity, because it carries the baggage of being ‘diminishing... minority... insular, separate’, Carol relates the evolutionary trajectory of her identity construction, which she believes has been enriched through her first-hand experience and interaction with Black students. Her interaction with Black students has made her critical of the tendencies to associate Blacks with violence and destruction, which has fuelled fear among fellow White South Africans. Thus, Carol distances herself from the prevailing conception...
among certain White South Africans who hold stereotypical views about Blacks. She is aware that the rigidities and injustices of Apartheid could justifiably make her students resentful towards her if they perceive her as an embodiment of racial oppression.

Carol attempts to inculcate in her students values of democracy, equality and citizenship. These are regarded as important for democratic nation-building. However, a tension arises between that of her White teacher identity and the identities of her Black students. The politics of a White educator, teaching a predominantly Black student population, creates epistemic dissonance.

As a teacher, Carol regards it her moral obligation to alert students to the uninocence and non-neutrality of English in order to equip them to be responsible, well-informed citizens who participate meaningfully in a democratic society. Her objectives, however, do not go unquestioned. Although there is widespread belief that English is a useful tool to facilitate modernisation, Carol who subscribes to theories of critical language awareness, is sensitive that inequality and exploitation are generally not regarded as a consequence of the spread of English. Critics of modernisation theory (Tollefson 1991) argue that under-development in some societies is a result of development in others, that is, differences in development emanate from relationships of inequality and exploitation. For Carol, whose first language and mother tongue is English, her attempts to divest English of its colonial legacy and expose it as an uninocent, value-laden language of imperialism come into tension with the visions of economic and social liberation that some of her students believe access to English holds. The complexity and battle to transform such ideologies is evident in her declaration: ‘I have found myself struggling, in the days of late-apartheid, with ideas articulated by ardent “Black” students to the effect that English is the language of liberation’. The political correctness associated with the celebration of multilingualism has stirred a body of Black scholars who are suspicious of educators’ (like Carol’s) altered ideologies about interrogating the status of English, especially in a global environment where admittance to, and participation therein demand proficiency in English (see Carrim 2001; Cele 2000). Carol’s sensitivity to her Black students’ quest for ‘liberation’ does not readily correlate with her critique of the English language. Instead, based on the legacy of her kin and skin her pedagogic intentions to expose the exploitative and uninocent propensity of the English language are rendered suspect. Hence, she struggles with alerting her Black students to the Janus-faced nature of the English language, in its propensity to be simultaneously exploitative and liberatory. Often this gives rise to pedagogic performative anxiety as it relates to issues of epistemic privilege and paternalism. Thus, Carol is not alone in her epistemic struggle against oppression. Phumzile also writes: ‘I soon discovered that in my literature classes race and gender were swear words. My first lecture provoked protests from a rightwing student organisation’. As a Black educator, Phumzile has had to deal with public protest for teaching against racial and gender discrimination.

Conclusion

Against the backdrop of early feminist theorising that advocated redefining pedagogic power differentials which would render feminist classrooms egalitarian, the discussion showed that when circumstances, contexts, colleagues and students attempt to divest the female teacher of power, she may actively engage in power performances that subvert the Freirean (Freire 1968) ideal of being both teacher–student. On these occasions she realises that by disinvesting in the notion of the professor, she is
masking her educative and pedagogic power. This is particularly evident in the way Phumzile and Vijay (two young, Black females) enact their teacher personae in overtly powerful and authoritative ways, so that race-, age- and gender-diminishing stereotypes do not sabotage the educative and pedagogic mandate they have committed themselves to. The point is that their varying enactments of power are not always for strictly pedagogical reasons, because more often than not material sites, conditions and interpersonal relations, rather than strictly feminist, anti-racist ideological considerations may demand pedagogic performances that make aspects of the hierarchy useful for them. Conversely, circumstances, contexts, colleagues and students may direct teacher discretion towards downplaying female teacher authority. This is particularly evident in the way Carol performs her professional and pedagogic identities. Carol is conscious that as a middle-aged, White female, the legacy of her race, class, language and age sometimes act as technologies that can alienate her from her predominantly Black students.

An interesting trajectory to the race, gender and age question is the way in which Phumzile, Vijay and Carol perceive of their own racial, gender and age identities, and how this affects their teaching practices and relations with students. Carol too, had to perform her identity differently when she relocated from the historically White University of Cape Town (UCT) to a predominantly Black UWC. Carol compared her teaching experiences at different universities in South Africa, reflecting that at an English-language university (e.g. UCT) ideas are generally debated very passionately, whereas at the University of Stellenbosch, ideas were not easily debated. She attributed this to students’ socialisation at school, which emphasised reliance on what the authority endorsed. This continued within the more authoritarian University of Stellenbosch, where students were likely to become quite dismayed/threatened if they were asked to critically debate knowledge systems. Similar tendencies prevailed at UWC, where students are generally deferential to their lecturers. Thus, rather than exploit the deferential nature of her students at UWC, Carol is sensitive not to be bossy and prudish by dictating to students how to live their lives.

From their accounts we see that teachers often problematise the intersections and interactions between their identities with a view to creating educational environments conducive to educational goals. As a result their perceptions of their own identities, as well as their understandings of students’ perceptions, impact on the learning environment and pedagogic content. These identities are always fluctuating and contextually specific.

Essentially, these teachers either call attention to, or lessen the effects of their identity difference depending on reactions they anticipate and experience with their students and colleagues in the particular contexts they find themselves. There is a tendency when working with teachers’ narratives to focus on their teaching content, while contexts which influence their personal and pedagogic identities receive short shrift in studies. Thus, the discussion flagged the importance of recognising the context in which teachers ply their trade. Furthermore, the discussion confirmed Lyons’ (1981, in Harrison and Marbach 1994, 47) contention that linguists and educationists carry particular social, ideological, cultural and geographical backgrounds. Who teaches what to whom? Why? and How? are curricular decisions fraught with political allegiances that confirm the non-neutrality of language pedagogy.

The variations in the participants’ pedagogic identities resonate with Anzaldúá’s (1990, xxiii), observation that our voices and identities are sometimes framed out of a discourse of choice. Teachers choose with which voice to speak (the voice of the Black/White professor); the first person, third person; and in which language (Black
English, isiZulu, academese, vernacular, formal). When brought into teaching/learning situations, the varying accents teachers place on their identities reassert the non-essentiality and provisionality of their subject positions. It highlights the particular and contextually embodied expressions of teachers’ insertion into interpersonal relations, and challenges them to examine their own claims to centrality and marginality.

References


