Practicing Social Justice Feminism in the Classroom

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INTRODUCTION

A student reflection about authentic conversation begins this essay to introduce the urgency for practicing social justice feminism in the classroom. Part I then traces the strands of feminist legal theory that culminate in the emergence of social justice feminism, a theory forged by action. Part II of this essay provides examples for using this theory in the classroom.

Student One (an African American woman) wrote the following reflection in the eleventh week of a law school semester:

When I looked at the presenter/respondent schedule and saw that I had inadvertently signed up to respond to the readings on affirmative action, my stomach sank. I literally felt ill. Of all the “controversial” topics this class was to touch upon this semester, this topic was the one that intimidated me the most. In order to properly discuss affirmative action, one must deal with the issues of merit, privilege, prejudice, socio-economic disparities, and racism. And affirmative action is a dirty word in conversations, even among the most progressive folks I know. I have had conversations with dear friends of mine about affirmative action and most have not ended well.

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I read Grutter. And read it again. I read the transcripts for the oral argument for Fisher. And I knew I still wouldn’t be prepared. For some reason I felt an enormous amount of pressure to say the right thing in my response. I felt like, at the risk of sounding melodramatic, the ambassador of the Black perspective. When I walked into class, I was on edge. I tried to listen to [another student] as she was loudly presenting, but my heart was pounding so loudly in my ears I couldn’t pay attention. What would I say? How would I come across? And how would I respond to others’ comments?

When it was my turn to speak I had to force myself to form words. I’ve never been afraid of public speaking, but I could hear myself fumbling through my response. My skin was hot and my voice was shaking. I finished saying whatever it was I said and that was it.

And then the most amazing thing happened. We had a discussion about affirmative action. A real discussion. I’ve talked about it in classes before, but the conversation has always rapidly disintegrated into thinly veiled prejudice wrapped in unfounded rhetoric. But we were able to have a real discussion that, while uncomfortable at times, was honest and respectful.

I truly learned so much from my classmates that day. Everyone had wonderful comments and reflections. I left feeling so encouraged and, for once, not alone. I have so often felt isolated here that it was extremely refreshing to be able to be honest. Our class became a truly safe space to have such an important conversation.

Of course we didn’t solve the issue of how best affirmative action should be implemented, if at all.
We didn’t solve all the problems of privilege and prejudice. But we had an honest conversation. The kind that we, as a society, are terrified of having. So this got me thinking: how do we do this on a larger scale? How do we create a safe space for people to talk and be honest?

I think it is very important to find a way to have these important and uncomfortable conversations on a larger scale because maybe people will discover, like I did, that we really aren’t so different. We have similar thoughts, feelings, and concerns, and, with very few exceptions, we do want equality.

In their germinal article *Social Justice Feminism*, Kristin Kalsem and Verna Williams explore the history of the women’s movement and its seeming malaise in the current era. Describing progressive work by activists and academics, Kalsem and Williams urge that now is the time for the women’s movement to embrace social justice feminism. Social justice feminism “organizes from the ‘bottom up,’ and builds leadership from those among the least empowered and most marginalized.” Social justice feminism “strives to uncover and dismantle those structures [that support patriarchy], such as white privilege, heterosexism, able-ism, and classism.” Social justice feminism derives from practice. According to Kalsem and Williams, three methods assist the practice of law from a social justice feminist perspective: (1) looking to history; (2) examining inter-relationships between oppressions; and (3) focusing on bottom-up strategies when

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2 Id. at 137-38.
3 Id. at 157.
4 For an excellent article on the false dichotomy between theory and practice see bell hooks, *Theory as Liberatory Practice*, 4 YALE J.L. & FEMINISM 1 (1991) (explaining that theory provides a language and vocabulary to explain lived reality; theory provides a place of healing).
seeking remedies. How might these insights about practicing law apply to teaching law?

I teach courses in “Law and Social Justice” and “Gender and the Law.” In both classes I explore feminist legal theory and anti-discrimination law to assist students in developing tools to understand and combat injustice. I explain that a unified theory of anti-discrimination can and should be the essence of feminism. Because social justice feminism is evolving as a feminist theory and emerges from practice, I thought it would be useful to examine the practice of social justice feminism in the classroom setting. The law school classroom, by definition, is not the primary locus for society’s least empowered or most marginalized. With a professor who sets reading assignments and gives grades, the classroom remains a place of hierarchy as well. Yet, social justice feminism can blossom even in this potentially arid ground. As the student reflection that begins this essay illustrates, the law school classroom needs social justice feminism, too. At the very least, a classroom inspired by social justice feminism can serve as a training space for public conversations about the difficult questions that threaten democracy.

This essay examines the evolution of feminist legal theory from its original push for formal equality to the emergence of social justice feminism. This theoretical path includes dominance feminism, relational or cultural feminism, pragmatic feminism, socialist feminism, postmodern feminism, critical race feminism, and lesbian/queer feminism. The essay highlights the salient points of each theory and connects them to an emerging social justice feminism. The essay next considers a methodology for social justice feminism, as practiced in the law school setting, and describes introductory reading and exercises for the classroom. This discussion includes student voices of their discoveries relating to privilege and subordination as they learn the value of the privilege analysis that lies at the heart of social justice feminism.

5 Kalsem & Williams, supra note 1, at 175.
6 I explore these themes when I teach core courses, such as torts, as well. See Thomas C. Galligan et al., Tort Law: Cases, Perspectives, and Problems 4th (2007) (text using perspectives to broaden the theoretical underpinning of the course).
I. THE EVOLUTION OF FEMINIST LEGAL THEORY

Feminist theories share several features. Fundamentally, feminist theory criticizes the misogynistic view of women that characterizes much of society.\footnote{Much of the review of feminist legal theories in this section comes from Stephanie Wildman, Critical Feminist Theory, in ENCYCLOPEDIA OF LAW AND SOCIETY: AMERICAN AND GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES 348, 348-50 (David S. Clark ed., 2007). For more insight on feminist legal theory, see MARTHA CHAMALLAS, INTRODUCTION TO FEMINIST LEGAL THEORY (3d ed. 2013).} Feminist theories make gender a central focus of inquiry, asking “the woman question.”\footnote{See, e.g., Katharine T. Bartlett, Feminist Legal Methods, 103 HARV. L. REV. 829, 836 (1990) (explaining three feminist legal methods in detail: (i) asking the woman question, (ii) feminist practical reasoning, and (iii) consciousness-raising). See also Deborah L. Rhode, Feminist Critical Theories, 42 STAN. L. REV. 617 (1990) (explaining three core assumptions of feminist critical theories: (i) that gender is a central category for analysis, (ii) that equality between women and men is a crucial social objective, and (iii) that such equality for all women cannot be achieved without fundamental social transformation).} The “woman question” identifies and challenges the omission of women and their needs from the analysis of any societal issue. These theories examine power relationships, making the political visible. The notion that “the personal is political” challenges the public/private dichotomy that characterizes liberal thought. Feminist theory postulates the still radical notion that women are people.

A key methodology, common to all forms of feminist theory, is consciousness raising, where women (or men) share their personal stories, weaving a pattern that illuminates a broader picture of societal treatment based on gender. Feminist theories recognize that identity is relational, constructed through interactions and responses with both individuals and groups.

\footnote{See, e.g., Katharine T. Bartlett, Feminist Legal Methods, 103 HARV. L. REV. 829, 836 (1990) (explaining three feminist legal methods in detail: (i) asking the woman question, (ii) feminist practical reasoning, and (iii) consciousness-raising). See also Deborah L. Rhode, Feminist Critical Theories, 42 STAN. L. REV. 617 (1990) (explaining three core assumptions of feminist critical theories: (i) that gender is a central category for analysis, (ii) that equality between women and men is a crucial social objective, and (iii) that such equality for all women cannot be achieved without fundamental social transformation).}
Consciousness raising embodies in practice the idea that “the personal is political.”

Feminist legal theories historically include: liberal feminism or formal equality theory, dominance theory, relational or cultural feminism, pragmatic feminism, socialist feminism, postmodern feminism, critical race feminism, and lesbian feminism. Each of these theories contains ideas that are helpful to an evolving social justice feminism.

Feminist theorists who have been proponents of formal equality have argued that differential treatment of women and men supported women’s subordination. Often justified as reflecting the natural order or “protection” for women, this differential treatment protected women out of opportunities for full participation in society. Therefore, formal equality advocates objected to any form of differential treatment based on sex. In the legal realm they were successful in persuading courts and legislatures to eliminate a series of sex-based rules based on gender stereotypes that had been enacted for administrative convenience. Critics of formal equality have argued that women who acted most like men were the primary beneficiaries of this strategy. Formal equality advocates

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defend the advances made for all women that have been gained by overturning these sex-based classifications.

From formal equality, social justice feminism can learn to look at gender-based categories with skepticism. Differential treatment can, and has, led to gender exclusionary practices. But not all differential treatment need be vilified under a social justice feminist analysis. Consider California Federal Savings v. Guerra, a case in which Lillian Garland took a leave from work to have a baby. When she returned from her unpaid pregnancy leave, Cal Fed told her she had lost her job. Garland filed a claim under the state antidiscrimination statute. Cal Fed countered by suing in federal court, claiming that the Title VII mandate for equal treatment preempted a state law that protected a pregnant woman by permitting her to take an unpaid leave. The ensuing litigation divided the feminist legal community. The U.S. Supreme Court upheld the state law, finding no preemption.

Dominance theory views society as a place in which women are “used and abused” by men. This power imbalance between men and women portrays men as the dominant actors. Dominance theory recognizes that men remain the measure to which women are compared. Thus whether women are the same as men or different from men, men remain the yardstick. Catharine MacKinnon’s work, from the identification of workplace


11 CATHARINE A. MACKINNON, Difference and Dominance: On Sex Discrimination, in FEMINISM UNMODIFIED: DISCOURSES ON LIFE AND LAW 32, 41-42 (1987). “This social status in which we can be used and abused and trivialized and humiliated and bought and sold and passed around and patted on the head and put in place and told to smile so that we look as though we are enjoying it all is not what some of us have in mind as sex equality.” Id. For further work by MacKinnon see CATHARINE A. MACKINNON, ONLY WORDS (1993) (considering the harm of pornography) and CATHARINE A. MACKINNON, SEXUAL HARASSMENT OF WORKING WOMEN (1979) (early theorizing on the harm of sexual harassment).

harassment to the description of forced sex and the subordination promoted by pornography, best exemplifies this theory.

Dominance theory introduces a perspective about power into social justice feminism by illuminating privilege. Its hallmark lies in the questions it asks: “Who has power?” and “Who has privilege?” MacKinnon explains that answering those questions makes apparent that western society serves as an affirmative action plan for White men:

Men’s physiology defines most sports, their health needs largely define insurance coverage, their socially designed biographies defined workplace expectations and successful career patterns, their perspectives and concerns define quality in scholarship, their experiences and obsessions define merit, their military service defines citizenship, their presence defines family, their inability to get along with each other—their wars and rulerships—defines history, their image defines god, and their genitals define sex.13

Social justice feminism will benefit by considering the privilege dynamic that privileges maleness. The presence of the privilege dynamic serves as a reminder that calls for formal equality do not start from a level playing field. Social justice feminism must analyze the status quo with deeper insights than knee jerk calls for equality allow.

Relational or cultural feminists believe that women are different from men in important ways that should be celebrated.14 This theory criticizes other feminist theories that emphasize power or women gaining power if that power means losing the important qualities of connection and the ability to be relational. Sometimes

13 Id. at 224.

termed "different voice" feminism, this strand of critical feminism relies heavily on Carol Gilligan’s research suggesting that women and men make moral choices through different reasoning processes.\textsuperscript{15}

Social justice feminism can consider substance in calls for equality, asking what qualities does society wish to promote? Men, too, can connect and be relational. Studies show teamwork often plays as a more productive work strategy.

Pragmatic feminism merges pragmatism with feminism.\textsuperscript{16} It seeks workable solutions to concrete problems, elevating the practical answer over the sanctity of an abstract theory. Pragmatic feminists, like Margaret Jane Radin, identify the double bind, dilemmas leading to losing choices for subordinated subjects. Pragmatic feminists confront the dilemma by asking which choice will least impede empowerment.

Pragmatic method provides valuable guidelines for social justice feminism. Strategic choices often seem to mirror the double bind. Social justice feminism can respond pragmatically by taking small steps and observing what works.

Socialist feminism emphasizes the integral connection between gender and class as being at the core of the oppression of women.\textsuperscript{17} Agreeing with Marxist analysis that historic change will result from class struggle, socialist feminists highlight the mutual dependence of capitalist class structure and male supremacy. This feminist class analysis examines distinctions among women in the political economy and women’s shared experience as women. The work of socialist feminists such as Heidi Hartmann focus on women’s economic issues, including comparable worth, family

\textsuperscript{15} Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development (1982).


and medical leave, child care, welfare reform, and health care.\textsuperscript{18} This theory aids social justice feminism in examining economic inequality.

Postmodern feminism engages the postmodern critique of objective reasoning and describes the inconsistencies in terms posed in opposition to each other, like male/female, equality/difference, and public/private.\textsuperscript{19} Postmodern feminists like Jane Flax and Carol Smart emphasize deconstructive discourse.\textsuperscript{20} Reason, knowledge, and self are neither neutral nor universal. Postmodern feminism insists on examining the gendered formations underlying these concepts.

Critical race feminism objects to the implicit assumption in much feminism that women are essentially the same and that they share whiteness in that sameness. Focusing critical inquiry on women of color ensures that those most marginalized in society will not be forgotten. Alice Walker’s call to use the term “womanism” underlines this critique that feminism has been associated with whiteness.\textsuperscript{21} From a global perspective, critical

\textsuperscript{18} Hartman, supra note 17.
\textsuperscript{19} Mary Joe Frug, A Postmodern Feminist Legal Manifesto (An Unfinished Draft), 105 HARV. L. REV. 1045 (1992); Tracy E. Higgins, “By Reason of Their Sex”: Feminist Theory, Postmodernism, and Justice, 80 CORNELL L. REV. 1536 (1995); Jessica Krouse, Using Postmodern Feminist Legal Theory to Interrupt the Reinscription of Sex Stereotypes Through the Institution of Marriage, 16 HASTINGS WOMEN’S L.J. 159, 166 (2005) (“Postmodern feminists are concerned specifically with deconstruction of the male/female binary, because it privileges male sex roles, marginalizes female sex roles, and has the additional deleterious effect of limiting individuals to one of two potential roles, a choice predetermined by anatomical sex.”)


\textsuperscript{21} ALICE WALKER, IN SEARCH OF OUR MOTHERS’ GARDENS: WOMANIST PROSE xi-xii (2004) (1983); see Kalsem & Williams, supra note 1, at 158-59 (“[O]ne of [critical race feminism’s] contributions to the feminist canon is its theoretical analysis of multiple oppressions, particularly with respect to women of color .... [C]ritical race feminist scholars, viewing subordination through a cross-cutting lens have produced important works that make visible forms of subordination that liberal feminism’s emphasis on formal equality miss.”).
race feminism both examines the marginalization of women of color and theorizes solutions to that invisibility.

Lesbian feminism critiques compulsory heterosexuality as a key underpinning of women’s subordination. In her landmark article *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, Adrienne Rich challenged women to consider the lesbian possibility. Making the link between heterosexism and women’s subordination, lesbian feminists ask women to consider what sexual orientation they would choose absent the overwhelming societal forces that dictate heterosexuality. They also urge feminist theorists who consider the impact of societal policies and practices on women to remember to include lesbians whenever they use the word “women.” These theories provide vocabulary and signposts for social justice feminism as it asks definitional questions and remembers to include women of color and lesbians in the definition of women.

Thus, threads from all of these theories carry elements that serve the emerging social justice feminism. For me, the key elements of social justice feminism, as it claims to be a unified theory of feminism, are simple:

1) “Feminism is the radical notion that women are people;”

2) Feminism includes all women and all men who have a stake in ending gender subordination and inequality; and,

3) Anti-subordination in all forms should be its stance, and social justice feminism should recognize the linkages between all forms of oppression.

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24 Slogan on a popular 1970s political button.

With these basic principles in mind, this essay turns to consider the operation of social justice feminism as a teaching methodology.

II. SOCIAL JUSTICE FEMINISM IN THE CLASSROOM

Turning to social justice feminism in the classroom, this essay builds on work I have done with Margalynne Armstrong developing the practice of color insight. Color insight is the antidote to colorblindness and an important tool for practicing social justice feminism. The process of developing color insight requires four steps: (1) considering the context for any discussion about race or other identity categories; (2) examining systems of privilege; (3) unmasking perspectivelessness and white normativeness; and (4) combating stereotyping and looking for the “me” in each individual. These elements of color insight support the Kalsem-Williams methods for practicing social justice feminism. Color insight recognizes the importance of racial justice within social justice feminism. Conversation about race recedes from feminist conversation unless speakers make a concern for racial justice explicit. Color insight also serves as a model for developing insight based on other culturally significant

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27 See Kalsem & Williams, supra note 1.
identity categories in accord with social justice feminism’s precept of inclusion. This essay concentrates on the roles of context, both personal and historic, and systems of privilege in practicing social justice feminism in the classroom.

A. Personal Context

Practicing social justice feminism in the classroom requires both a context for conversation and a sense of safe atmosphere to try out and share new ideas. Context includes history, in both the personal and more conventional sense. To begin to create an atmosphere of personal context, one can use an exercise on the first day of class that asks each student to introduce herself or himself and to speak on a relevant topic. In law and social justice, I ask students to describe their own aspirations in coming to law school and the aspect of social justice that interests them. The assigned reading for the first class covers these topics.

In gender and law, I ask students to tell about their maternal grandmothers. The reading for that class includes history of the early women’s movement. Here is how I introduce the exercise to the students:

I would first like to tell you a little about myself and review the course outline and course requirements with you. Then we will do an introductory exercise, remembering our grandmothers. So be thinking about your grandmothers.

[later in the hour]

The first chapter in our casebook tries to give a historic overview of the foundations of women’s inferior legal status and the struggles against that status. In order to situate all of ourselves in this history of women’s struggle for equality and to begin the process of getting to know each other, I

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28 See also COLORBLINDNESS IS THE NEW RACISM, supra note 26, at 68-71 (providing another example of using this exercise).
would like us all to reflect on where we have come from.

I learned this exercise from Professor Mari Matsuda and Charles Lawrence (faculty with joint appointments at Georgetown University and the University of Hawai`i). I would like to go around the room and have each of you introduce yourself, so say your first name and last name, and tell us a few sentences about your maternal grandmother. If you know nothing about her, I guess that tells us something about women’s history as well. If you really cannot speak about your maternal grandmother, pick another relative from that generation or earlier. You can pick your paternal grandmother.

I hope from doing this exercise we can begin the process of appreciating our differences as well as our common interest in learning about gender and the law. This subject can generate strong disagreements, but we can all learn from respectfully listening to and commenting on our disagreements as well as our commonalities.

I speak first and I bring a visual aid. My maternal grandmother, Lena Sokol died in 1995 at the age of 96. I bring a photo of her taken in 1949; I am the baby in the photo. And I tell the class:

My grandmother was part of that generation of Jewish women who fled from the Ukraine to escape pogroms. Her mother died when she was young and her father and brothers left her and immigrated to America. She was raised by an aunt [whom she called the mima] and her aunt’s family. I guess there was some money there, because she tells of arriving at the mima’s house and being afraid to walk on the wood floor, fearing that she would fall in. She was used to dirt floors. She, too, left Russia
in her late teens or early twenties after World War I and after her marriage to my grandfather. Her first child, who was a son, died during this journey. Her second child, my mother, was born in Romania. My grandmother came to New York and worked in a mattress factory. She always had bad knees from pushing the pedals. She had two more daughters, and all of them became teachers.

By the time I knew her in Los Angeles, she didn’t work outside the home, but she cooked for all her daughters and sent food to their houses. I think she believed that the only important thing I ever did was to get married and have children. So we saw the world differently in terms of life choices and priorities, but I do miss her.

Through this exercise, learning in the classroom begins to come from the students and not just from me. The grandmother stories that each student tells, along with my own, create a tapestry that touches on women’s lives and our own lives in relation to them. Through this process, snapshots emerge portraying economic class, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, disability, and many other attributes that cross-cut gender. A picture of differences across the commonalities becomes apparent as issues of work, mothering and child care, marriage, education, domestic violence, autonomy, sexual roles, health, and immigration and migration become vivid in the classroom. These identity categories and issues crosscut gender in women’s lived experience. These issues are, of course, the content of the course that we will discuss all semester.

Student reaction to the exercise has been positive. Student Two (an Asian and White woman) wrote:

I’ve enjoyed the structure of the class because it fosters participation and the exchange of ideas. In the past few weeks, I think I have learned more by listening to everyone’s thoughts and opinions on the reading than I have from doing the reading alone. I
particularly enjoyed our first class, where we shared stories about our grandmothers. I was surprised by how many students don’t have a relationship with their grandmother and it made me realize two things: first, I am lucky to have such a close relationship with my grandmother and second, opinions on women’s roles and positions in society have noticeably progressed since our grandmother’s generation.

This exercise serves another pedagogic purpose. In addition to introducing the issues, it sets a tone for students speaking in the class and opening up to each other about topics that matter.

B. History

History provides another vehicle to introduce race into the social justice feminist discourse. I use an essay entitled *Hidden Histories, Racialized Gender, and the Legacy of Reconstruction: The Story of United States v. Cruikshank* by Angela Harris and Rebecca Hall at the outset of the gender and law course.29 In this essay, Harris and Hall introduce the idea of racialized gender, which suggests that Black women are not merely the sum of Black plus women. Racialized gender acknowledges “the interplay of race and gender subordination.”30 Black women’s lives at the intersection of race and gender transforms the meaning of their lived experience as women. Introducing race at the outset of a course becomes significant for the practice of social justice feminism in this culture that advocates color blindness. Student reaction to learning this history reveals the importance of keeping race at the starting point. Here are more student reflections:

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30 Id. at 22.
Student Three (a Latina):

Race and gender are two classifications that I rarely thought about as intersected. We are taught about the Civil Rights movement and Women’s Suffrage, however, we are never shown the connection between them. I had never considered until recently how the needs of different races matter. There was a section which gave examples on how women from different races seek improvement or have concerns about different issues. For example, Latina women may be afraid to call 911 because of immigration status while White women do not have the same concern. Although women in general have been oppressed, White women were still afforded a privilege that minorities have historically been deprived. For instance, White women were deemed “Belles” while Black women were seen as “Wenches.” White women may not have been able to work or go vote, but at the very least, they had dignity – and were granted some respect. It is this distinction that really left an impression on me. True feminism should be a petition for equal treatment and dignity for all women, regardless of race. However, the question is, is it possible? It is possible to address every issue that pertains to every race or ethnicity. At the very least, it should be recognized that there are varying needs and that gender equality is not generic.

I think about the Black women that testified in Congress about the Memphis Riots and think about whether I would have had the courage to do the same. These women knew that their testimony would enrage many White citizens and potentially would jeopardize their lives, yet they still found the strength. They saw the importance of their message and the equality they sought. Maybe they even
understood how this went beyond race and concerned sex.

Student Four (a White woman):

_The idea of racialized gender discussed in the Hall and Harris handout intertwined race and gender. These stories about African American women struggling with oppression during the time of the Reconstruction were compelling and presented discrimination against women in a new light for me. I was familiar with the stories of women being discriminated against as one class, regardless of gender, but I hadn’t thought of the differences between discriminatory experiences that women experienced based on their race. What happened to these African American women during the “light of day” would never openly happen to White women. It made me think that discrimination against women must occur within a range, with White women experiencing the least discrimination, at one end of the range, and other races experiencing increasingly more discrimination. This idea that I, as a White woman, had probably experienced very little of the discriminatory treatment compared to other women of different races made me feel as if gender discrimination was probably a bigger issue than I had previously realized._

Student Five (a mixed race woman):

_The idea that race and gender were inextricably intertwined hadn’t occurred to me; instead I had always thought of gender and race struggles as separate events. Though equally important, I hadn’t thought of gender and race struggles as being connected to each other._
As these student reflections illustrate, the class has become comfortable thinking out loud together (at least in writing) about oppression, identity categories, and social change.

C. Teaching Privilege

In 1996, looking for a unified theory of societal discrimination, I observed that discrimination was too narrow a frame to explain the interlocking systems of subordination.\textsuperscript{31} Subordination only exists when unexamined and often-unrecognized privilege plays a role in maintaining that subordination. As a further complication, each of us individuals is privileged and subordinated across multiple identity categories; I used the image of the koosh ball to portray the many strands of privilege and subordination. The movement of this dynamic ball highlights that the strands of privilege or subordination shift with the context. So a White woman, who might feel herself the subject of subordination based on gender might miss the ways in which her White or heterosexual privilege enables her to move through the world more easily, even as she suffers oppression.

Many tensions in the evolution of feminist theory arise from the lack of this multidimensional perspective—a perspective made explicit in social justice feminism.

Interlocking systems of privilege, across multiple identity categories such as gender, economic wealth, sexual orientation, and physical ability, serve to mask and reinforce all forms of systemic privilege. Fran Ansley describes this dynamic using the metaphor of a power line, a horizontal line on the blackboard.\textsuperscript{32} The power line divided those who were privileged for each identity category from those who were not; those above the line are privileged with respect to those below it. Thus most individuals have some privileges, while being excluded from privilege for other aspects of personhood.

\textsuperscript{31} STEPHANIE M. WILDMAN WITH CONTRIBUTION BY MARGALYNNE J. ARMSTRONG, ADRIENNE D. DAVIS, & TRINA GRILLO, PRIVILEGED REVEALED: HOW INVISIBLE PREFERENCE UNDERMINES AMERICA xi-xii (1996) [hereinafter PRIVILEGE REVEALED].

\textsuperscript{32} Conference Presentation from Frances Ansley, in PRIVILEGE REVEALED, supra note 31, at 29, 171.
Examining privilege must become a part of gender discrimination discourse through social justice feminism. Critical feminist theory recognizes that women of color and White women do not share white racial privilege; Lesbian/Queer feminism acknowledges that straight women and lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women do not share privilege based on sexual orientation. Socialist feminists also see the power line dividing women as to socio-economic class. Assigned readings on systems of privilege and class exercises\(^ {33}\) create a classroom atmosphere that fosters student consideration of the role of privilege in perpetuating subordination. Again student responses illustrate the power in engaging these issues in the classroom.

Student Six (a White Woman):

"Making Systems of Privilege Visible"\(^ {34}\) [another assigned reading] makes a strong point by stating that, "the language we use inhibits our ability to perceive the systems of privilege that constitute the status quo." Essentially, talking or not talking about certain things highlights what we as society deem as important. Our failure to discuss certain topics allows their importance to remain diminished.

I began to think about all the ways in which gender, race and sexual orientation discrimination are allowed to grow and develop based on our failure to openly discuss these topics or to even acknowledge they exist. It is easy to ignore one's privileged status when you are not negatively affected by it. Perhaps my status as White blinds any of the positives or negatives associated with my gender.

\(^{33}\) See COLORBLINDNESS IS THE NEW RACISM, supra note 26, at 71-72, for an example of an in-class exercise using the power line.

\(^{34}\) PRIVILEGE REVEALED, supra note 31, at 7.
Student Seven (a White woman):

*I always knew that privilege existed and that I was privileged in several ways, but I never thought about it as tool to understand subordination or discrimination.*

Student Eight (a White Man):

*Coming into this class, I really didn’t consider myself to be ‘privileged’ because of the fact that I was a white, heterosexual, male. I considered myself to be privileged because of my upbringing, socio-economic status, and education level. However, after reading “Privileged Revealed” and partaking in our class discussions, I really started to consider whether I was privileged because I was a White heterosexual male. The more I thought about it, the more it made sense. Throughout United States history, and even today, White heterosexual males have probably faced the least amount of discrimination, oppression, and any of the “ism’s” you can think of.*

Student Nine (a White Woman):

*Most members of society think that we have moved past discrimination based on gender. I, for one, believed that we had, perhaps because I am a White, middle-class woman, who has never truly felt the discriminating effects of my gender. My social class, race, and gender may have made me a silent perpetuator of discrimination.*

Student Ten (a White Latina):

*My initial reaction to the readings is that I had not ever considered privilege, dominance, and subordination as affecting an individual on different*
levels. I had always only thought about an individual being either privileged or disadvantaged in absolute terms. Now, I can see how at times an individual is privileged or disadvantaged according to different situations and characteristics. More personally, I have thought about this framework as applied to my own characteristics. Being a half Hispanic female, I evaluated the different ways these characteristics operate. At times, I recognize that I am privileged in some situations to be perceived as White, while at other times, I am judged for being Hispanic.

These student reflections emphasize the need for all of us to use social justice feminism to create safe places for the discussions that students are hungry to have. If you already do this work, keep going, even though it is never easy. And if you are worried about raising these topics because it is not easy, I hope I have encouraged you to begin.\textsuperscript{35} In a sense we change together in the classroom in order to enable transformation in the world.

\textsuperscript{35} For another example of social justice feminist practice in the classroom, although the article does not use that phrase, see Michelle Oberman, \textit{Getting Past Legal Analysis... Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Teaching Rape}, 42 Creighton L. Rev. 799 (2012).