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A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Weird/Black/Play: Turning Racial Authenticity and Professorial Performance on its Head in the Black Studies Classroom

by Wendy M. Thompson

AN AFROFUTURIST PERIOD ROOM
BEFORE YESTERDAY WE COULD FLY

BEFORE YESTERDAY WE COULD FLY: AN AFROFUTURIST PERIOD ROOM, METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, 2022. WIKIMEDIA

What happens when things get weird in the classroom?

What tools or strategies can black professors use when faced with the added task of responding to student expectations of an authentic racial performance?

How is teaching while black different in the black studies classroom?

Is there room to play when topics and lectures are meant to be serious?

As a black mixed race professor who is short, appears youngish, wears glasses, is female, prefers dressing casual in professional settings, and can be categorized as nerdy, I am constantly thinking about what it means to show up authentically to class and for my students, and how to strategically navigate the layered expectations students have of me as their professor. One current strategy I have come to rely on is weird/black/play, a concept and framework that embodies transformative pedagogy and allows me to be my most authentic self in the classroom. Weird/black/play centers the use of (black)[1] humor, performance play, and "geeking out" which sets up the classroom dynamic in such a way that black faculty and their students are empowered to interact differently with course texts and get vulnerable through play while learning collectively and acknowledging the creative labor of black faculty who are constantly confronted with the blurred lines between racial performance and teaching.

Attempting to combat the myriad of challenges within academia, black faculty already work to buffer themselves from harm and exploitation: making themselves valuable to the institution to avoid disposability, standing firm with boundaries to resist aggressive encroachment of their time, and engaging in meticulous documentation to combat accusations and provide receipts. But where some of the strategies black faculty use to fortify themselves from student provocation and defiance in the classroom meet the different needs and desires of students in the black studies classroom, how do we black instructors balance students' desire to humanize and make instructors legible with our need to guard the intimate parts of our identities that tend to count against black (women) faculty? How do we teach and perform on our own terms without becoming the entertainment?

Reflecting on this and the shifts that have occurred in my own pedagogy, from teaching solely from the text and attempting to position myself as an outsider to engaging in self-reflection and teaching from the position as an insider , I think about how performance, knowability, authenticity, and the role of the black instructor come together (oftentimes messily) in the black studies classroom. Specifically, I consider how each part of myself that I willingly, reluctantly, suddenly, and accidentally share with my students forces me to grapple with tender personal things: what my presence and my body represent socially, culturally, and politically in the classroom; what it means to be authentic as a black mixed race person; what a professional black woman looks and acts like; and the difficulties of commanding authority as a physically small and young appearing professor.

This is where weird/black/play as effective and transformative pedagogy comes in. Here I'm thinking about pedagogy that incorporates, amplifies, and analyzes the less emphasized aspects of black life—the awkward, obsessive, strange, erratic, quirky, and imaginative—while still making plain the structuring apparatuses of settler colonialism, heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism under which, Iyko Day argues, black people continue to be "subject to a logic of exclusion where the only means of disposal is death" (Day 29). Weird/black/play matters now more than ever as cries for justice and the insistence on recognizing the value of black life thunder across the country despite being met with white conservative backlash. How we understand structures that boundary and obliterate black life should also include looking at and seeing black aliveness and black life in motion, in resistance, in pleasure, in the everyday. And it is by creating a classroom space, by choosing texts and exercises, by teaching students to see and get excited about the range of black expression of aliveness—through play, humor, geeking out, and the weird—that black faculty might also find pleasure and teach through their authentic self in institutions where they are already tasked with doing and being so much.

This essay, produced from deep reflection on how my teaching has evolved over time, discusses the pedagogical framework and strategy I currently use (and have found success with) in my classroom as an assistant professor who teaches African American studies. It is based on a concept I call the black weird from which black/weird/play emerges, and I offer it both as a resource and a reprieve while holding close the words of bell hooks, who writes that while "[m]ost of us are not inclined to see discussion of pedagogy as central to our academic work and intellectual growth," it is indeed "the mutual interplay of thinking, writing[,] and sharing ideas" that informs the potential and extent of our bodies of intellectual and creative work (hooks 204-205).

Black Weird

What does it mean to be black and weird?[2]

Being the first black professor that some of my students have ever had has been both empowering and challenging. Every time I teach, I seek to create a classroom space that is big enough to contain the galaxy of our experiences, centering our voices, our visions, our maps, our resistance, our pain, our pleasure, our futures, our power. I view the learning that happens between us as reciprocal, nourishing, and affirming. I teach students to honor the texts we read for what they reveal and hide. Together, we build up a body of knowledge over a semester that moves with us well after the class ends. We can and do push against the elasticity of identity markers and calculate the cost of social death and the debt of racial wealth. But sometimes the classroom dynamics and actors are resistant to these efforts. Sometimes there is open hostility towards me or other students or the texts and what they represent. Sometimes there is destruction and waste or silence or paralysis. Sometimes there is glee or gossip. Other times, boredom. Occasionally, a breakthrough. In a classroom where blackness is centered in texts and discussions, anything can happen, including students straying from the text and redirecting the discussion toward me.

When this happens, students usually devote an incredible amount of energy and effort to craft and ask that touch in personal, private places. It is almost like a game: sussing out my racial and ethnic identity, marital status, or age (which, as I've gotten older in the profession, I have inadvertently disclosed when mentioning historic events I was old enough to witness and live through). Oftentimes this student effort revolves around a test, a challenge, or demonstration of some kind. Asking me to pronounce a word or name my favorite music group or wear my hair down in class (which is always worn up in a bun or single butterfly whorl) when there's unfamiliarity. Asking questions about the race of my spouse (when they find out I have children) or the ages of my children (when I share that I'm a mother) when things are more familiar.

With most professors, there is a "feel[ing for] the need to insert some sort of personal narrative into their pedagogical methodology…[in order] to invigorate student discussion, to prove course materials have a living correlation to experience, or sometimes to present themselves as three-dimensional actors with historical roots" (DeSoto 213). But for some of us who teach race-based courses, sharing our personal narrative can sometimes leave us vulnerable and further fuel student speculation about our authenticity and authority on the subject matter. Because of this, I often found this line of student questioning threatening and invasive, interpreting it as a distraction from the lesson plan and subject matter,allowing students to hold entire class periods hostage until they got the kind of response and information they were looking for. And while, as an instructor, I recognized that students needed a space to work through their assumptions, expectations, and desires, I was adamant about not becoming the text.

So I put up boundaries based on my own desire to be read as professional and to maintain control over the classroom, disclosing only the things that I wanted them to know: that I love zombie and post-apocalyptic films, that I listen primarily to melancholy film scores and ambient soundscapes, that I garden, that I believe in the abolition of prisons and the police and the dismantling of the settler colonial state, that I adore birds (egrets!) and being in nature. I have found that my refusal and selective sharing allows me to avoid potential scrutiny about the deeper and meaningful crevices of my personal life. But it has also led students to think I'm weird and I do nothing to change their minds.

What does it mean to be black and alive during a weird and violent time?

Today, many of the black students I encounter in my classes are the children and grandchildren of people who experienced "the immense gains achieved by the Civil Rights Movement and the cultural, political, and psychological fallout from these benefits" (Weheliye 213). Their parents and grandparents weathered mass scarcity, municipal abandonment, urban renewal, and economic restructuring in the sixties and seventies, some firsthand. My students, who are alive now, with some confronting housing insecurity, all expect to enter an uncertain economy with some debt that they will have to expunge with stagnant wages and minimal benefits at a jos that will require a BA degree at minimum. They are the Obama generation, born during a time of mass capital accumulation and ongoing black displacement, young people whose childhoods were played out against a backdrop of black life coming apart under increased policing and incarceration. Additionally, more and more of these students are the beneficiaries of childhoods spent in suburbia where they were the only or one of the few black students in their classes, and as a result have developed a cynical view or passé attitude about being black in the here and now.

In some ways I understand their perspective. Their views and attitudes are responses to the major changes that have occurred in cities where aggressive gentrification has led to the "incorporation and appropriation of…blackness-as-taste, blackness-as-style, blackness-as-struggle, and blackness-as-nostalgia …[while] conceal[ing] the violence of [black] dispossession" (Summers 3). In so many urban metro areas like the one I currently teach in, blackness has been reduced to a commodity or a sign, signaling the "wokeness" of white and other nonblack consumers and "highlight[ing] the illusion of inclusion within the culture of modern capital" (3). All the while, actual black people continue to be pushed out of communities that were once vibrantly, predominantly, and visibly black as part of the process of corporate reinvestment and capital reaccumulation in the inner city.

To live in a place where one is part of a shrinking black population surrounded by an ever-present black aesthetic that is "disarticulated from the complex, nuanced histories of [b]lack life, and is instead used as a site to celebrate difference" (3) is, for many of my black students, just plain weird.

What does it mean to be peripherally, conditionally, or part black?

That I am black but obviously "mixed with something else" positions me in relation to both blackness and nonblackness, an "and/or" embodiment that has made many students curious about my identity in the classroom. Among students whose racial assumptions drive classroom interactions and instructor expectations, my body is the most visible part of me and becomes the site where students (black students in particular) attempt to work out their ideas of what is and isn't authentic blackness.

Naomi Pabst suggests that to even "state that a mixed-race subject is black or the reverse is to reference the joint realities of both mixedness and blackness" (179). But in the long afterlife of slavery, black people largely came to symbolize danger, contamination, surplus, and waste and prompted personal and institutional decisions to contain or divest from black people, spaces, schools and facilities, neighborhoods, communities, and dreams. This resulted in our present society, one where proximity to whiteness continues to ensure heightened privileges and value, and where a proximity to blackness strips those all away. As a by-product, black mixed race identity has been loaded with the weight of cultural, political, and economic "distinctions made between mixed-race blacks and black blacks" (181) and many continue to find it difficult to situate black mixed race identity within a framework of blackness that otherwise makes room for differences along lines of "gender, sexuality, class, and (trans)nationality" (180).

E. Patrick Johnson reasons that "blackness is not always self-constituting. Indeed, blackness, like performance, often defies categorization" (*Appropriating Blackness,* 2). But in the black studies classroom where the instructor's body is highly political, imbued with layers of meaning, and treated as a separate text onto which black and nonblack students project their own desires, there can be suspicion and mistrust when the instructor's blacknessdefies categorization. Being read as mixed race ("black and") or racially ambiguous ("black but") in the classroom space can also create pause and the need for clarity. I've experienced this need for clarity as it erupted somewhere between the careful curation of course texts, prepared lectures, and my attempt to control my image while facilitating discussions. The constant nagging, the sudden question, the demand for proof happening while I stand in front of the classroom (on stage) at which point the entire class stops and waits for my response; all my students, silent and suddenly attentive, as I confront one of their black peers' sometimes direct, sometimes indirect charge to make myself racially legible.

So much of this ask, this ultimatum, is about kinship and belonging.

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Having taught black studies at different institutions across the Northeast and Midwest , where my body represented both blackness and difference, I became hyperaware whenever students positioned me outside of their vision of normative blackness. Initially, when my blackness was othered, seen as suspect or inauthentic or weird, or held up by black students as a mirror, I would immediately engage in performative rote blackness, going through the motions of verifying authenticity and legibility (dipping into a Southern patrilineal archive that included gestures, behaviors, and places I had heard before, an authenticity spread across my childhood by way of my father and his Louisiana-born parents) and enhancing our sense of connectedness by deploying the collective "we." But then it happened over and over and my responses became defensive, deflecting student inquiry with repeated instructions to go back to the syllabus or burying their curiosity in excessive course lectures and dense texts.

One thing that these performative racial exercises—either those demanded by students on the spot or preemptively enacted by me at the beginning of the semester—made clear was that what it meant, what it means, to be black and how one's blackness registers to other black people differs, sometimes wildly, across the United States, with most black students hungry and needing to unpack (their own) black racial identity, "a category of self-identity" that Brandi Thompson Summers underscores as being " [externally] imposed and resisted" with "salience across different time periods and geographies" (3).

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The three scenarios I present above simultaneously answer and do not answer the question of what it means to be black and weird in this moment, in this profession, in this body, and in the classroom. Additionally, in California where I teach and where black residents currently comprise just 6% of the state's population and have seen the worst of urban renewal projects, deindustrialization, and now gentrification which has displaced families and shuttered cultural institutions, I find myself teaching the children of those who left or were displaced from historically black urban neighborhoods. Their families, having left Los Angeles and Bay Area cities in the 1980s and 1990s for suburban townhome communities, did so to ensure that their children would have different (always better) futures. And their choices have resulted in complex lived experiences among my students—somewhere between privileged and othered in once all-white middle-class spaces—that serve as a common ground for talking about racist policies and urban planning in cities, environmental racism, black erasure, and the white supremacist roots of land ownership.

Once I share with students that I too come from a family that moved to the suburbs and that to come of age in middle-class suburbs while black is deeply weird (among other things), we are able to work together connecting local histories to family stories of migration, immigration, capital, middle-class status, and survival. For non-black students, hearing their professor talk about suburbia and their black classmates echo the strangeness, the isolation, the violence of tokenism, the resources, the opportunities, they begin to reshape how they have experienced and think about race and place in both the suburbs and our ever-changing cities and the structural processes that have led this change. n California, where almost all of my students are familiar with gentrification–the visible and accelerated loss of black populations and and the human cost of skyrocketing real estate and tech prosperity–I remind them there is nothing normal or new about these conditions.

In this way, the black weird is simultaneously a tool, a strategy, a position, a mood, a query, an articulation, an intellectual jump-off that allows us to differently examine racial, class, gender, and citizenship social givens and further expand and complicate these identities as ambiguous, fluid, non-normative, and problematic. By bringing the black weird as a pedagogical strategy into the classroom where it is not just a subject to be analyzed or a cliché or a stereotype or genre, I am better able to navigate the gap between my authentic self and the black/professorial/classroom performance in a space where black faculty frequently find themselves challenged by an audience of students, some eager, some resistant, who have come for some kind of show and could use a playful dosage of black weird.

Black/Weird/Play

In the classroom where my lessons and activities are designed around students taking risks, I encourage black/weird/play, an activity that emits from and expands the framework of the black weird, in which students step into unfamiliar and strange territory and learn through centering and engaging with the unexpected, odd, fantastic, and aberrant while working toward a collective learning "win." For this reason, we use a range of "texts" and topics—freak shows, horror film scenes, blood (and not) kinship ties, literal and figurative magic, the abolition of all structures, freedom in its wildest iterations, nature and the capacity of oceans, breastfeeding as nutrition and titillation, expressions of ratchetness as empowering and fearless—to open and give context and texture to our discussions on structures of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, capitalism, eugenics, scientific racism, xenophobia, black imagination, empire building, the racialization of bodies, and social class.

Together, we have waded knee-deep into the violence of settler colonialism, slavery, and their afterlives. Relying heavily on texts, we peel back the layers of land ownership, extraction, genocide, and enslavement. But sometimes these texts are so jargon-filled and conceptually removed from student grasp that it requires a different kind of engagement. This happened in my introduction to African American history course while reading David Martin's "The Birth of Jim Crow in Alabama, 1865-1896," an article that examined the uneven implementation of black codes in Alabama. The purpose was to give students some legal footing for understanding the criminalization of black mobility and convict leasing, but students had a difficult time and grew frustrated with unfamiliar concepts like vagrancy. There was also pronounced fatigue being that this was an afternoon class.

Midway between a dry discussion and a boring lecture, I told students that we would role play it. Pulling from the introduction, I asked for students to volunteer to play the parts of individuals presented in two cases of black men who were arrested for vagrancy, fined, then jailed before being lent out to white planters. Before telling student performers that they had ten minutes to look over the "script" and give us a scene, I set the tone, instructing student performers to stay true to the text, to respect each other, and to respect the real-life individuals who were victimized by the Jim Crow system. I then instructed other students (the audience) to get into small groups and go over the "scene" they were going to watch.

Students attempted to balance being in the spotlight of the classroom and engaging playfully with each other, while bringing the text to life. As they did this, I continued to stress the importance of connecting to the original point of the role play: to illustrate how fraudulent and putative anti-black laws, a racist legal system, and an exploitative economic system led to the deliberate conviction of black people over labor contract violations and the life consequences that followed. Completing this exercise, students were able to relate Jim Crow era black codes, convict leasing, and the precarity of black mobility during Reconstruction to crooked legal systems, opportunistic judges, and a broader racist system designed to entrap black people. With better understanding and renewed attention to the text, I was able to finish my lecture about race, labor, law, and property, and incorporate contemporary apparatuses and incidents that students had heard about like stop and frisk policies and the incarceration of Kalief Browder, signaling the longevity of legal violence, state surveillance, and the endurance of punishment apparatuses.

Being well aware of the many cases in which racialized roleplay and simulations in classrooms or at summer camps enable nonblack students or participants to participate in slavery reenactments while positioning black students in the role of an enslaved person to give dimension to their white peers' experience, I am always cognizant about the racial politics in the classroom. I do not automatically assume every group of students can benefit from role playing and I am very careful not to turn my black students or blackness itself into a spectacle. I always ask for consent and, with willing volunteers, choose what roles I will assign to students beforehand, limiting which students can play which characters in relation to the classroom racial dynamics. I also find that having a running classroom dialogue and incorporating visual readings provide additional sites ripe for play and working through initial or unanticipated moments of weirdness.

As far as setting the classroom tone, I often plant the seeds for a running dialogue at the beginning of the semester and keep it going until the end. I do this for two reasons: to lighten the mood by infusing a small semblance of humor, knowing that I will be loading students with the heaviness of state-sanctioned violence, containment, contamination, and death, and to create a learning environment formatted to many of my students' expectations. These are young people who grew up in the age of binge-watching, reality TV series, streaming platforms, and social media. In some ways by turning each class into an episode and incorporating the performative features of a TV series, I am able to keep students "hooked" to the class content while giving them the agency and pleasure of acting as television audience and interlocutors.

In some ways by turning each class into an episode and incorporating the performative features of a TV series, I am able to keep students "hooked" to the class content while giving them the agency and pleasure of acting as television audience and interlocutors.

Through our interrogation of contemporary tropes and historical images we played with notions of white violence and safety, of American citizenship, and of authentic black looks. Notably, this included a long-running punchline about the fragility of white people every time a new 911 call by a white woman reporting black people went viral. Students would go on to make the connection between these contemporary "Karens" and the neighborhood watch captains of racially restricted all-white suburbs in the 1950s. These references got students to pay attention to the frequency with which white women deployed the police on black people while applying a media studies lens to discussions on why racial scripts and stereotypes make "good memes" and what leads them to go viral.

With images, we take the analysis of race, meaning, and public interpretation further. Arranging students into groups of four or five, I usually give students one or multiple images to work with. I then ask them to look at the images and tell me what they see. Sometimes the exercise is a bit more specific like when I gave students an assortment of images of apparel and accessories and asked them to create a description of the person who might wear or use the items pictured. These items were contemporary and relatable, easily associated with specific social groups, and sometimes worn or used by some of the students in the class: the water flask, the Starbucks drink, Nike slides, the man bun, hoop earrings. What began as a slow and quiet discussion eventually progressed to boisterous laughter as students created the profile and brought the person to life. When asked to share, students gave an incredible amount of detail about the person's life: what they ate, what shows they watched, where they lived, what classes they took, their names.

Together, we laughed at the results, at the precision of students' effort and creativity, and at the absurdity and exactness of stereotypes. But I also made sure to ground this exercise in a brief lecture about how clothing and accessories, how we stylize our bodies and the way our bodies are seen by others in public, are always racialized, always gendered, and always classed.

In another instance of having students read images, I introduced photographs of white passing or racially ambiguous individuals when discussing slavery, reconstruction, and who was categorized as black and therefore required to abide by Jim Crow laws and customs. One postcard image that I used to teach was a photograph taken by Myron H. Kimball in December of 1863 of a group of adults and children standing together in a scene titled "Emancipated Slaves Brought from Louisiana by Colonel George H. Banks." Each individual is named. Wilson Chinn. Mary Johnson. Robert Whitehead. Charles Taylor. Augusta Broujet. Isaac White. Rebecca Huger. Rosina Downs. Rebecca and Rosina who stand next to each other at the far-right foreground, arms linked, are the whitest presenting, with brown wavy hair, along with Charles Taylor to the far-left foreground, blonde with a hand tucked into his dark buttoned jacket. The three would appear together in a different postcard image taken by Charles Paxson,titled "Our Protection," all three draped in American flags, their citizenship and the nation their protectors, and the necessary racial identifier, text at the bottom that read: "Slave Children from New Orleans."

Showing these images to students, I tell them I want them to sharpen their visual literacy and to read the images. I set it up by telling them vaguely it's about slavery, abolition, and the importance of effective propaganda. I then ask them, "What do you see here?" I point to the three adults, visibly black and standing to the rear of the five children. In front, a lone black child is flanked by a row of white children. "Who are these people?" I ask them, urging them to tell me the story. "What is their relationship to each other?" I let the students go on guessing before reading the photographer's title. I pause and say nothing more, letting students react. There is always a mix of gasping, quizzical expressions, questions about how, and a refusal to accept. A million separate comments and side conversations suddenly electrify the room. The title again reads: "Emancipated slaves brought from Louisiana by Col. George H. Hanks."

"How are they black?" a black student asks, clearly referring to Charles, Rebecca, and Rosina.

I add context: that these cartes de visite were produced to raise money for schools to educate formerly enslaved children in New Orleans. Rosa, Rebecca, and Charles were the whitest presenting, and would appeal most to the sympathies of white Northerners who would take one look at the children and be horrified that children who looked like their own could be enslaved. It was a strategic especially during a time when morale was low and white Northerners had become tired of the issue of slavery. The white passing children were included along with visibly black adults and children in the images, as if to say, "If you don't care to support our effort to educate emancipated black folks, look at these children who were also emancipated, even if they don't look discernibly black."

I then ask: What does it mean to look black? What does it afford you to not look black?

Some black students now remark that there are people in their families who look like Augusta: milky skin, hair dark and pulled back. *You can see the black in her, right there, in the nose, the eyes.* Others, still analyzing, scanning the images intently, still insist: "They don't even look black." In that instant, in their simultaneous refusal and acknowledgement, blackness in its ambiguous form, its versions, its wideness, comes into view. The responses are the same when I show a studio portrait of P. B. S. Pinchback, his hair straight, smoothed and parted, mustache and beard slightly gray and textured over his black bow necktie, the first black person to be appointed governor in the state of Louisiana.

"He looks white," students exclaim.

I counter, "What does it mean for him to look white but be elected as the first black state representative?"

"What does black look like? And how can we tell?"

"How do we know who's black?"

These questions set us up for rich discussions about race, phenotype, scientific racism, interracial relationships, mixed race people, racial passing, black cultural markers, the one-drop rule, and the extensiveness and detailed nature of Jim Crow.

Using ambiguous images allows us to play with the "truth" of what we see. While all images require us to trust our instincts, the racial ambiguity of sitters in these images forces us to see deeper and to sometimes be okay with our visual "misreadings." This is where black/weird/play comes into the picture, making space for racial confusion, slippage, and glitches. It encourages students to go off-script and leap into the impossible or yet unimagined, as the act of play and playing are connected to imagination, fantasy, performance, and creativity. And I push them to continue with this method of learning, encouraging them to add elements of curiosity and play to the otherwise formal assignments and exercises I give them.

When foregrounding weird as a fluid space in which we can re/examine and re/interrogate black racial identity, cultural productions, histories, and experiences, one should expect some degree of student resistance rooted in existing social pressures to solely exhibit and engage with normative thoughts, behaviors, and approaches. But by encouraging students to explore and "play," an activity that many of us were encouraged to leave behind in childhood, I am able to ease some of these tensions and directly connect learning with pleasure. Incorporating a play-oriented strategy, in which we roleplay and sing and draw what we understand or don't understand and use other two- and three- dimensional resources and our bodies to animate the texture and evidence of black stories, songs, photographs, rituals, practices, and political thought and action, allows the me to step in and get messy with students rather than remaining in the moderating sidelines. I use play to agitate and disrupt, subverting the traditional expectations and norms of the classroom space, while reminding students that there are still some (flexible) ground rules and respecting that not all students are always ready or willing to play.

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Thinking about the place of play in the classroom, a study by Torko, McMorris, and Lin found that perspectives on the use of humor as a teaching tool have shifted over time, evolving from "virtually useless and a major source of distraction that reduced classroom morale and efficiency" to a contemporary acceptance of humor as an effective, if not necessary, teaching tool that "has a substantial place in classroom lectures and testing" (14). Together they argue that in our present academic climate, the "[i]ncorporation of humor is encouraged across all academic levels" (14), noting that among students, humor has "the power to make teachers more likeable, facilitate understanding of course material, lower tension, boost student morale, and increase student attentiveness" (18).

Keeping in mind the tensions that black faculty face when they are told to be relatable and humorous only to have their professionalism questioned when they seemingly embody the deeply problematic racialized trope of the entertainer, I turn to McGee and Kazembe who echo the value of humor in the classroom, stating "smart and critical humor that unpacks issues of race, racism, and bias…has provided a novel forum for meaningful discourse among black academic professionals" (101). Considering that humor and play are also subversive, I use it to guide students to engage in critical work amidst the fun: playing with texts, concepts, and ideas at the same time that we play with each other. Playing, in this respect, should be thought of not as nonintellectual or a passive activity but one that is political, integral to the pedagogical mission, and requires significant personal investment on the part of students. It is also a practice that is grounded in the long tradition of black play or performance, used by everyday black folks who consciously assessed their opponents and strategized about the rules in order to make calculated moves to subvert agents and structures of white supremacy, patriarchy, and the life stealing system of capitalism.

At the same time, as much as I try to integrate play and humor into the classroom, I also recognize that there are limitations to play. Aside from play having the capability of being dangerous, both in the sense of what one can gain if one "wins" against their oppressor/opponent (and what the oppressor/opponent loses) and what can be learned and applied that empowers and transforms a student, too much playing can sometimes get out of hand. For those of us who have been a little too extra or made jokes at the wrong time around other black folks, we know what it means to be told "you play too much," a cultural expression that seeks to curb the humor of a jokester who disregards the boundaries of others, offering a sharp criticism of their lack of seriousness. Given that students have different boundaries and levels of tolerance for what they consider play-worthy, there is always the chance of "playing too much" in the classroom, which is why I anchor our inquiries and play in the texts, returning back to them frequently in class to ground our learning.

One added personal benefit of encouraging black/weird/play in the classroom is having the space to create a professional identity outside of the dominant racial and gendered stereotypes and controlling expectations projected onto black faculty such as the "mammy"[3] or comedian.[4] Oftentimes, this identity bleeds into the domain of the black nerd ("blerd") or black geek. While the nerd emerged as a "product of postwar modernism…as a way of distinguishing, and discrediting, a particular expression of nonhegemonic masculinity" (Quail 461), the geek evolved in "relation to its twin [the] 'nerd,'" with the difference between the two being that "the nerd relates compulsively to the technological and/or scientific, while the geek obsesses over information/knowledge; both are intelligent and socially discomfited to varying degrees" (Weheliye 219).

With nerds traditionally associated with middle-class suburban "[w]hite, socially awkward, tech-savvy maleness" (Herrera, 308), Alexander Weheliye points out that black nerds and geeks "appropriate and recast a specific type of white identity that is both racially marked ('normal' whiteness generally functions by not calling attention to itself) and tied to educational and economic upward mobility" (221), a gesture that places them on the periphery of hegemonic black cultural expression and performance and squarely in the center of black weird. In this way, they share a similar ancestry as ChicaNerds, young Chicanas who Cristina Herrera defines as usually young, nonwhite, and possessing the "'nerdy' traits of bookishness, math intelligence, poetic talents, and love of learning" (307). Rather than treating it as stigmatized or shameful, this remixing of nerd identity in both cases affords black and Latinx youth "an empowered subjectivity in stark contrast to…stereotypes of the fumbling, rejected ([w]hite male) nerd in popular culture" (308).

Fueled by the rise "of consumer computing technology in the late 1990s and into the 2000s, the blerd evolved alongside" idealized concepts like "'[g]eek chic' and 'technosexual'" (Quail 465), becoming an increasingly normalized and trendy identity. As an instructor, being perceived as a black and nerdy by students allows me to feel more comfortable in my own body and skin which students regularly read as a short, black, mixed race, middle-aged, tomboyish, female professor who is both deeply knowledgeable and passionate about black culture and history down to the way it smells and feels. Being read as such works as both a shield and a ploy, allowing me to assert facts about black life in an undisputed authoritative voice while gathering black and nonblack students, the latter of whom are already anxious about being in a black studies class, and taking them with me as we "go there" in the texts and discussions.

By channeling black nerd energy and engaging in black weird play I am able to model what it means to "geek out" in the classroom. While "geeking out" generally refers to "an intense commitment or engagement with media or technology" (Ito et al. 65), it does not exclusively pertain to these things as "one can geek out on topics that are not culturally marked as 'geeky'" (66). As "a genre of participation—a way of understanding, interacting, and orienting" (66) and as an expression of black/weird/play, geeking out has allowed me to model to students how to deep dive into black history and culture, pushing back against a prevailing belief that to enjoy the exploration or analysis of certain types of data or information—black data and information—is excessive, uncool, or abnormal. It also embodies what bell hooks has emphasized as a primary paradigm that influenced her pedagogy: "that the classroom should be an exciting place, never boring" (hooks 7).

As a side door to curiosity and excitement, black/weird/play challenges the terms of boredom in its capacity to "intervene, alter, even disrupt the atmosphere" (7), leaving room for new discovery, authentic knowing, and a pleasure for learning that stays with students long after we end our class.

Context and Conclusion

Every day, as black faculty in academia show up to provide various forms of visible and invisible labor as racialized, gendered, and minoritized colleagues, we are expected to present ourselves professionally, as good and trusted "safe" black folks, and expert teachers to our students. The expectations are clear: to be responsive to student, peer, and administrative demands, to be visible, and to be productive while only being valued for the ability to perform and follow particular roles and scripts. This contradiction follows us into the classroom where we are expected to be experts in our fields, teaching both the cannon, new departures, and the margins, while making sure students feel comfortable by avoiding issues that are "too political" or "too personal." We are expected to do our best at our jobs while being evaluated by those who already doubt our competence.

This constant negotiation has meant balancing the desire to be authentic to ourselves and the need to be nonthreateningly black in the presence of nonblack folks across campus. But there is an additional cost we assume when we are teaching while black in "courses focused on race [in which we disproportionately] face consequences, such as racial battle fatigue, threat of safety, and questioning of authority" (Closson, Bowman, Merriweather 83). Aureliano DeSoto elaborates on this unique experience, noting that while instructors "tend to be regarded as apolitical instruments of knowledge," there is a disconnect that is expressed by "students [who] tend to have the opposite expectations of courses that address race and gender" that are also taught by instructors with multiple marginalized (minoritized) social identities (211).

This means that unlike white instructors, those of us who teach African American studies and also present as black, face an added expectation that we should act not only as conduits of knowledge but as conduits of black knowledge that has been cultivated from our firsthand experiences. In this setting, black instructors become the target of confrontation when failing to live up to students' demand for an authentic black performance. This also sets a high standard for black faculty who are teaching in classrooms that double as a stage and whose critics and audience are both black and nonblack students, each with their own overlapping and different expectations of the professor and the performance.

As black faculty find themselves positioned on stages that have become more restrictive at institutions that increasingly hold FTEs and good evaluations over their heads and make decisions to abandon or downsize programs and departments when faculty agitate, garner political attacks, or are seen as no longer profitable, there is a growing need for an infrastructure of strategies and tools that will support us as we teach while remaining emotionally whole. bell hooks reminds us that "[t]eaching is a performative act" (11). However, with current student expectations of black faculty placing a premium on good performance in the classroom, we must not forget that this racialized expectation is embedded in "the historical tendency to situate the black body as a source of entertainment, amusement, and spectacle" (McGee and Kazembe 99) in a society where "African Americans are often more revered for their entertainment value than their intellectual acumen" (98).

As personalizing courses, turning the classroom into an "experience," and making oneself even more accessible to students have all become normalized parts of undergraduate education, black faculty face a complicated task, a double bind, really: how do we teach well and remain authentic while doing so in an institutional context of student-consumer demand for good black performance and black professorial knowability and a world context where oversharing is common and the average person spends time curating ideal versions of their lives on social media?

For me, employing black/weird/play in the classroom has allowed me to do both, marking the classroom as an already weird space that students will have to navigate throughout the course of the semester, and situating black histories and experiences as intimately related to and born from the weird, having been shaped by the weird and violent contexts and structures of European colonialism, Atlantic slavery, racial capitalism, biological annihilation, and mass extinction. Transformative, critical, and just pedagogy requires us to use unconventional approaches, emergent strategies, and radical methods to engage our students and turn them into interlocutors, actors, and collaborators in institutions that were never intended to serve and protect us and where to be a black is to perpetually inhabit a precarious place.

Returning to bell hooks, who encourages us to recognize that "our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence" (8), I wonder in what other ways can we energize, nurture, and feed our students and each other in institutions that, in the words of Robin D. G. Kelley, "are incapable of loving [us]…of loving anyone, perhaps" (154).

As I encounter more and more students who come to my classroom overworked, unimpressed, defensive, and deprived, but curious and expressing a deep underlying desire to connect, to share personal experiences with each other, to give and receive validation in a society where we are overwhelmed by information yet live publicly staged anonymous lives on social media, I know I'm in the right place. We need black/weird/play now more than ever to make sense of our place in the world because where we are now, in this moment, at this time, when the unexpected, the odd, the fantastic, and the aberrant are not just common occurrences, but in some sense, already completely normal—we are already here.

Notes

1. Here I'm referring to a particular black comedic tradition developed during slavery that directly and indirectly subverts antiblack racism while empowering and giving pleasure to the joke teller and their interlocutors. This tradition relies on parody, animal tales, rhymes, the dozens, satire, proverbs, riffs, toasts, stand-up sketches, snaps, and jokes to sustain generations of black folks who through bitter loss, precarious movements, and brutal violence, have relied on humor to define their collective experience.

2. As I ask this question, I'm thinking about black folks who love alt rock music, anime and cosplay, queer gender nonconforming black folks, all the black folks who were told they weren't black because the way they talked or acted or the things they loved or did was considered "white" or weird.

3. See Manya Whitaker, "The Color of Teaching: Expectations of Mammy in the Classroom," *The Feminist Wire,* November 6, 2013.

4. See Ebony O. McGee & Lasana Kazembe, "Entertainers or education researchers? The challenges associated with presenting while black," *Race Ethnicity and Education,* vol. 19, is. 1, 2016.

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