

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Grieving Discontinued Classes

SONJA THOMAS

Dear Higher Education,

It is with a great deal of grief that I write to inform you that I am discontinuing my class, “Educated Feet: Black Feminist Thought and Tap Dance.” I developed this popular quadruple-listed course over the last thirteen years. This course was not just about the violences of colonization, enslavement, “Jump Jim Crow” of the minstrel show, Jim Crow segregation, and the new Jim Crow mass incarceration. This course was about helping students to think through decolonization, telling the stories of others, understanding that we stand on the shoulders of giants, and daring to imagine pathways to feminist anti-racist futures. As a non-Black woman of color with a PhD in Women’s and Gender Studies, I have learned and continue to learn that it cannot be the job of Black women alone to educate students about anti-racism and teach the works of Black women. It has been an honor to share Black feminist thought and the beauty of tap dance with students. Still, I have decided to discontinue this class because I’ve been concussed into oblivion by hitting my head against institutional brick walls. Further, I am discontinuing this class because of a larger reality that is hard to articulate: I will not let that which sustains me be the cause of so much anxiety, frustration, and sadness.

Institutions of higher education have been shaped by the racist patriarchy. Knowledges for and about Indigenous people, Black people, queer people, women, and people of color have been devalued and marginalized. Even with the creation of Women’s Gender and Sexuality Studies, African American Studies, Indigenous Studies, and Ethnic Studies, scholars in these disciplines have struggled to prove to people both inside and outside colleges and universities that their research and teaching is beneficial for students. In times of economic crisis or racist policies initiated by the state, these disciplines are the first to face budget cuts, department consolidations or closures, and to see faculty fired. This lack of commitment to Black feminist thought has increasingly been part of institutional commitments to “non-performative diversity.” Diversity is non-performative because it brings into being that which the institution will not do: diversity. As Sara Ahmed explains, “the ease or easiness in which diversity becomes description shows how diversity can be a way of not doing anything: if we take saying diversity *as if* it is doing diversity, then saying diversity can be a way of not doing diversity” (Ahmed 2012, 121).

Women of color feminists have long discussed how teaching anti-racist feminisms in institutions committed to non-performative diversity taxes women of color with particular types of labor—from carework for students of color, to doing a tremendous amount of uncompensated service their white counterparts are never asked to do, to being the voice of anti-racism in committees and meetings (because without that voice there, racism is free to go unchecked), to laboring behind the scenes to prove their academic relevancy in an academy that says it wants diversity in order to not do diversity. *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia* is rife with accounts of this taxing labor. This is a type of labor where the bodies of women of color become what Rachel Lee has called the “racial alibi,” where there is an investment in colored bodies tasked with teaching diversity courses rather than an institutional commitment to bodies of knowledges on anti-racism (Lee 2002). Amber Jamilla Musser has described the non-performative diversity academy as creating a

space for an acknowledgement of difference but only when it does not disrupt the system that is already set up by the racist patriarchy. As Musser explains, “within an economy that prizes acquisition and variety, the minority as specimen operates as a particular commodity; minorities signal a particular investment in the project of diversity, even as representation is not equivalent to an actual epistemological shift” (Musser 2015, 3).

Specimens/racial alibis working in the non-performative diversity academy are not equal in kind because the academy is particularly structured by anti-Black racism and settler colonialism. In the disciplines that supposedly already center women of color—such as Women Studies—we have seen transnational and postcolonial scholars, often South Asian scholars with caste privilege (my own identity), as the stand-ins for diversity specimens/racial alibis. With the hiring of transnational and postcolonial feminists, “Women’s and Gender Studies departments can now produce “diversity” in their ranks and curricular practices without having to address the early historical critique of the Women’s Studies paradigm offered by the centrality of U.S. black feminism to universal *women*” (Wiegman 2012, 86). At the same time, Black feminist thought becomes that which all feminists supposedly champion. Jennifer Nash has discussed how any critical discussion of “intersectionality” becomes seen as a violent practice placing scholars as either for or against Black feminism. This can place Black women in a position of trying to protect and guard the analytic of intersectionality. As a result, “Black feminists are enlisted in becoming precisely what the field imagines them to be—relentless, demanding, policing disciplinarians—as they expose and condemn the critics who are imagined to fail to adequately and fairly account for intersectionality, for black feminist theory, for black women’s intellectual production” (Nash 2019, 34). With institutional commitments to a diversity that the institution won’t do, with women of color as specimens/racial alibis, with Black feminism something that everyone supposedly champions while simultaneously positioning Black women as disciplinarians, and with failing to hire Black women or dealing with misogynoir in the academy and indeed, the US in general, educating students about Black feminist thought is not just labor intensive, it becomes damn near impossible.

Educated Feet

The history and legacy of plantation dance, the minstrel show, and the development of tap dance has been about white supremacist control. But it has also, simultaneously, been about resistance. When barred from drumming, enslaved peoples used their own bodies to create rhythms. When Black performers were required to perform in pairs because of the “two colored rule,” performers like Cora LaRedd broke that rule and became stars. She was so talented as a singer, dancer, and comedian/actress, she became the major draw to the Cotton Club in Harlem and formed her own band, the Red Peppers. While white performers had roles open to them in Hollywood that were not open to Black dancers, Black dancers, such as John Bubbles, made their dancing so intricate, rhythms so difficult, or steps so flashy, that no-one could steal them. They corporeally copyrighted their material (Kraut 2010). Every time tap dance artists perform steps they tell the stories of who came before. Black women continue to tell these stories as they sound their own lives. Ayodele Casel’s dance inspires. I dare you to watch her, hear her, and not be moved by the joy she exudes and by the stories she tells us.

Tap dance is the story of America.

Even if you want to remove park exhibits on the history of slavery, we can still tell the story of oppression and resistance through educated feet.

In my now discontinued class, “Educated Feet,” we read Black feminist thought and Black performance studies together. Audre Lorde, Michelle Alexander, Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Nadine George-Graves, Jayna Brown, and Katrina Dyonne Thompson. Students researched Black dancers by

searching through African American newspapers learning details and histories not recorded by the white academy.

Thank you to the librarians who developed a library course site for “Educated Feet” and worked with me so that the institution subscribes to African American newspaper and magazine databases.

In “Educated Feet,” I teach students tap steps and historical dances, such as the Coles Stroll, the soft shoe, and the Shim Sham Shimmy, speaking the rhythms of resistance with our feet. We live in a world where Billie Holiday sang “Strange Fruit,” where Lester Young played saxophone with Billie Holiday, and where we sound tap dancers’ national anthem, the Shim Sham Shimmy, to a song named for Lester Young, Count Basie’s “Lester Leaps in.” We put on performances working with banjo and bones musicians.

Thank you to Kafari and Michael Kebede.

We do not shy away from the racism of the minstrel show and the legacy of that racism in the present. But we also celebrate the Black history of the banjo, the Black Banjo Revival movement, and how the sounds of the African diaspora have shaped American music and dance. We work with a local elementary school making the call and response social nature of tap dance allow us to speak these histories to the next generation.

Thank you to the Albert Hall School and the Albert Hall tap dance club, Waterville, Maine.

Despite this class routinely filling, despite being quadruple listed, despite working with the community, and despite enthusiasm from the tap dance world, I have always been told, through a variety of barriers, that this class does not really have a place. I struggled to make this square peg class fit in the round hole of academia. New spaces for the Arts have been built without any floor conducive for percussive dancing, my tap dance practice boards misplaced and stolen. I’ve been kicked out of a workable space to make room for a wife of a white professor teaching a non-credit class unaffiliated with any department even though I reserved the space a year in advance. Excellent spaces that existed were modified or are no longer accessible, and most recently I’ve been tasked with finding my own spaces if I want to continue the course. I’ve had difficulties booking a performance space even when no-one else has claimed the space for the time I requested. “Someone else might need it,” I’m told, implying that my humanity and the humanity of my students are secondary to the humanity of an imagined “someone else.”¹ While other events are advertised as an “Art” event, our tap dance performance is never listed. I’ve had an “arts” requirement removed from the class and credits removed from the class without an explanation of why. Despite some individuals in the institution offering support and trying to help, I’ve been told by others that tap dance makes floors “dirty” or that the sound is “disruptive” so we need to be scheduled last on programs or be “far away” from other Arts.

I never encounter these brick walls when I teach postcolonial or transnational courses. I think when I teach those classes, I’m the South Asian dominant caste specimen/racial alibi that non-performative diversity institutions can get behind. For me, the barriers I’ve experienced in teaching “Educated Feet” only make the anti-Black racism of institutions all the more apparent and allyship all the more difficult. I’ve had meetings with people about these push outs. I’ve produced documentation about these push outs. I’ve tried to work around

the push outs. I've shouted, I've cried, and I've allowed all of it to affect my health. The joy of teaching this class might soon be replaced by only sadness, frustration, and anxiety. I will not allow that to happen.

Discontinuing this class means I need to develop a new prep for a class shaped around the non-performative diversity that most likely will face less barriers but make me sick--what an odd sort of labor I created for myself. Discontinuing means that "Educated Feet" remains on the books and can possibly be taught by anyone in the future without my input--what an odd sort of gatekeeper I've become. Discontinuing a class engenders a different type of labor for women of color; it means that we carry the grief and sadness of what could be and what was never supported.

Discontinuing makes it seem like I've given up. I write to inform you that the grief I carry does not mean that I am giving up on teaching Black feminism or fighting against anti-Black racism in my own South Asian American community. I still, and will always, believe in seismic epistemological shifts. Black feminist thought and feminist anti-racist literature sustains me. Tap dance gives me joy. Being a conduit for this is an honor. I will find another place for "Educated Feet." But I regret to inform you that I no longer will be teaching it here.

Very truly yours,
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About the author

Sonja Thomas is a South Asian feminist whose research focusses on gender, race, caste, and Christianity in India and the South Asian diaspora. She is the author of *Privileged Minorities: Syrian Christianity, Gender, and Minority Rights in Postcolonial India* (University of Washington Press). Her second book, *Indians and Cowboys, on Catholic Priests from India in Rural America*, is forthcoming from the University of Washington Press. She has also written on the tradition of tap dance in the US and globally. She was a research consultant for Ayodele

Casel's award winning play, *Diary of a Tap Dancer*, and has taught tap dance classes both outside and within the academy since the age of fifteen. She is currently working on a series of biographies of Black women tap dancers for the Oxford African American Studies Center.

ⁱ I have learned immensely from Professor Chandra Bhimull about how institutions dehumanize Black women through accumulated instances and continued aggressions while simultaneously seeking to contain Black joy and radical imagination. It was through conversations with her that I was able to see how the use of the term "somebody else" is a way to dehumanize, and how this dehumanization happens. I learned this in Dr. Bhimull's class on Black feminist thought. The syllabus for this class included a majority Black women authors. I am indebted to Professor Bhimull for her guidance and her brilliant scholarship.