
January 2001

Dislodging Patriarchal and Academic Boundaries: Dialoguing on Trauma Through Text

Monica Taylor
Montclair State University, taylorm@montclair.edu

Emily Klein
kleine@montclair.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/taboo>

Recommended Citation

Taylor, M., & Klein, E. (2020). Dislodging Patriarchal and Academic Boundaries: Dialoguing on Trauma Through Text. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, 19 (1). Retrieved from <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/taboo/vol19/iss1/5>

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Scholarship@UNLV with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Article in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Article has been accepted for inclusion in Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship@UNLV. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@unlv.edu.

Dislodging Patriarchal and Academic Boundaries

Dialoguing on Trauma Through Text

Monica Taylor & Emily J. Klein

Abstract

In this article, we, two feminist teacher educators who are professional colleagues and friends, use our personal correspondence outside of the academy to help explain how we bridge and navigate our authentic whole selves as teacher educators. These dialogic narratives break from traditional academic texts and their focus on logic and objectivity as they are written from intimate voices and include deep emotions, detailed descriptions of personal anecdotes, and imagery and references to art, music, literature and our general interactions of reading the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Through examples from our personal daily correspondence (text, messenger, Facebook, and email) during the Kavanaugh hearings, we explore the following questions: How can we push the boundaries of academic writing to write for our authentic selves? What are the spaces where we can do this? How do we bring in our real-world experiences of sexism, misogyny, and rage into our academic writing as teacher educators?

Monica Taylor is a professor of Educational Foundations and Emily J. Klein is a professor of Teaching and Learning, both in the College of Education and Human Services at Montclair State University, Montclair, New Jersey. E-mails: taylor@mонтclair.edu & kleine@mонтclair.edu

© 2020 by Caddo Gap Press.

Introduction

Maybe stories are just data with a soul. (Brown, TED Talk, 2011)

Facebook Messenger (10/19/2018)

Emily: *I just got this narrative from L (a student teacher) about a pregnant student. It's so powerful—and we emailed about supporting girls and how we need to do this more than ever. It's eerie the timing.*

Monica: *Truly.*

Emily: *I'll share it with you. I want to write about how we support teachers opening feminist spaces.*

Monica: *Yes and for preservice teachers too. We need to create hope.*

Emily: *I like that too.*

Monica: *And to do the work we have to look back . . . And our own histories.*

Emily: *Yes it's what brought us to the work!*

Monica: *Yup. And I want something about trauma too. Like supporting kids through trauma.*

Emily: *Yes!! Because we need to acknowledge how our own trauma is reignited as we deal with students.*

Monica: *Yes.*

Emily: *And there's some stuff I just read about how teachers take on trauma.*

Monica: *Yes. My own trauma helped me to be super good in crisis too as an urban teacher.*

Emily: *Me too!!!*

Monica: *. . . So many crazy fights I broke up. And also calling child services.*

In this article, we, two feminist teacher educators who are professional colleagues and friends, use our personal correspondence outside of the academy to help explain how we bridge and navigate our authentic whole selves as teacher educators. What began in the early days of the Kavanaugh hearings as two friends with shared language and work trying to make sense of both what we saw happening and our strong, embodied reactions to it, slowly evolved as we began to see spaces for how these conversations might influence our practice, specifically in the formation of what we call “empathetic pedagogy.”

These dialogic narratives break from traditional academic texts and their focus on logic and objectivity, as they are written from intimate voices and include deep emotions, detailed descriptions of personal anecdotes, imagery, and references to art, music, literature and our general reading the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Through examples from our personal daily correspondence (text, messenger, Facebook, and email) during the Kavanaugh hearings, we explore the following questions: How can we push the boundaries of academic writing to write for our authentic selves? What are the spaces where we can do this? How do we bring in real-world experiences of sexism, misogyny, and rage to our academic writing and work as teacher educators? We conclude with some insights into the implications of this collaborative writing for teacher educators committed to disrupting the patriarchy and as Ahmed (2017) writes, “living a feminist life.”

Blurring the Personal and Professional in a Feminist Friendship

Our friendship may have begun at the university fourteen years ago when we collaboratively designed a teacher leadership program, but it certainly has not remained there. In our work together, we established a friendship, grounded in a shared professional passion, but far beyond traditional work dynamics. Looking back, we now realize that the basis of our success as collaborators in teaching, scholarship, and service centers around three important tenets. First, we actively listen to one another and acknowledge the other’s experience, often by saying “I hear you.”

Facebook Post (7/7/19)

Emily: *You can see Sam [her son] took his final loss REALLY hard. But proud of him for being 39th in the nation for y10 and an all around really amazing year in fencing. Something really switched on for him and it’s so exciting to see him find such joy in this sport. Grateful to his coach who knows just how to support him.*

Monica: *Awww but how incredible is that—39th in the nation is amazing!*

Emily: *It is! And he fenced so well but his final bout was sooo close—10/9.*

Monica: *Ugh—so hard to witness our kids in pain but so important for them to learn how to tolerate loss.*

Monica: *But I get it!*

Emily: *Super hard but important.*

We do not judge or critique one another. We simply confirm that the other person is not alone in how she is feeling. Gay (2014) describes this principle: “If a friend sends a crazy email needing reassurance about love, life, family, or work, respond accordingly and in a timely manner even if it is just to say, ‘GIRL, I hear you’” (p. 50). Academia is marked by notably few instances of “I hear you”—noted as it is for the ways people are isolated from each other through hierarchical and competitive structures. The nature of tenure and promotion, a focus on individual accomplishment and publications (in many fields), leave little space for sharing what is vulnerable and insecure. There is no room for emotions—or even con-

nections—as the institutional structures and norms push us to stay focused and produce, produce, and produce.

The second principle in our feminist friendship is that we place our personal friendship above our academic achievements and pressures and that means that tending to the relationship is an important part of our everyday lives. We find time to go to the movies, to talk about non-academic work and our out of work lives. We go dancing, see theater together, and share book ideas and lots of meals, we celebrate our children's milestones and inquire about their lives. We remain curious about who the other is outside of work, even as our shared work and passion for what we do is something that continues to pull us together.

Third, we believe in the feminist ethic of care (Ahmed, 2014; Lorde, 1988) and see self-care not as “self-indulgence” but “self-preservation” as “an act of political warfare” (Lorde, 1988, p. 130). For us self-care involves tending to our well-being, our mental, physical, and emotional health. We actively seek to reduce anxiety and stress and live a more balanced and manageable life. We understand that in order to be emotionally and intellectually supportive of our students, we need to come from a grounded and centered position. Self-care manifests in the ways we care for ourselves, each other, our colleagues, and our students. It becomes a kind of resistance within a structure that does actively support doing what nurtures us, so that we might also fight back against those structures. Actively caring for ourselves and others disrupts the structures in the academy which perpetuate individualism and division and focus on constant production (Mounts, Bond, Mansfield, Loyd, Hyndman, Walton-Roberts, Basu, Whitson, Hawkins, Hamilton, & Curran, 2015).

Through our feminist friendship, we have developed an epistemology which helps us to navigate our personal lives and our professional lives at the university. Our feminist epistemology of friendship involves constructing knowledge collaboratively; we both generate ideas individually that are later woven together and we build new concepts jointly. Drawing from women's ways of knowing and feminist pedagogy, we make meaning through caring, connection, cooperation, and collaboration (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Maher & Tetreault, 1994). We recognize that to do this we have to be open to a variety of ways of knowing that at times can be “contradictory, partial, and irreducible” (Ellsworth, 1994, p. 320). In taking up a feminist paradigm of friendship, and valuing our personal relationship interwoven with our professional relationship, we are able to work to destabilize the patriarchal framework of the academy which continually positions us as gendered subjects in hierarchical power structures (Gore, 1993; Ropers-Huilman, 2001). Like Lather (2006) and St. Pierre (2000), we hope to disrupt and destabilize norms, shake things up, and potentially invent new possibilities for our lives as feminist academics.

Our feminist friendship acts as the context for our dialogue. We reject the notion that academic writing is the primary mode for academics to think about and develop ideas. We have found that the informal back and forth, weaving of personal, professional, and artistic ideas and images have been some of the most

powerful sources of inspiration for what we do. Technology and social media have provided a new space for us to feed off the ideas of the other, and our narratives weave between personal and professional subjects seamlessly.

In the following examples, we explore how our personal writing helped connect us to our work in ways that were insightful and emergent. It has supported our growth as teacher educators and the theoretical naming of work we call “empathetic pedagogy,” by which we mean empathy as a way of knowing, learning, and teaching. Each section includes the unfolding events from the Kavanaugh hearing as they were largely reported in the mainstream media, followed by excerpts of our shared writing and sense making through Facebook messenger, text, and email. We end with an extended reflection on how this writing and responses from the other were significant in shaping our thinking and actions and, eventually, our work. Each of us used our empathetic writing to the other to explore how the hearings raised deep issues of trauma and shame, and how those might connect to our work as feminist teacher educators.

Kavanaugh, Dr. Blasey Ford, and the Hearings

On July 9, 2018, President Trump nominated Brett Kavanaugh for Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States to succeed retiring Justice Anthony Kennedy. At the time, he was a judge of the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit. From September 4-7, 2018, The Senate Judiciary Committee questioned Judge Kavanaugh and heard witness testimonies concerning his nomination to the Supreme Court. A few days later, as the committee was getting closer to a vote on sending the nomination to the full Senate for approval, Christine Blasey Ford came forward and courageously brought to light that Judge Kavanaugh had sexually assaulted her 36 years prior, while they were both in high school in 1982. On September 16th, Blasey Ford’s recounting of the sexual assault was made public in *The Washington Post*.

A professor at Palo Alto University, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford explained to *The Washington Post* that she decided to come forward because she felt her “civic responsibility” began “outweighing [her] anguish and terror about retaliation.” She shared that during a house party in the summer of 1982, when she was 15 and Kavanaugh was 17, Kavanaugh and one of his friends, Mark Judge, pushed her into a bedroom, pinned her down, groped her, and tried to take off her clothes while drunk. She said that when she attempted to scream, Kavanaugh put his hand over her mouth. She remembered that she thought he might kill her and stated, “he was trying to attack me and remove my clothing.” Kavanaugh’s friend then jumped on top of them and knocked them to the ground, enabling Ford to escape. Ford had not told anyone about the incident until 2012, when she was working with a couple’s therapist with her husband. Parts of the therapist’s notes confirm that Ford described being attacked by boys from an elite private school, although she did not

mention them by name. Kavanaugh's immediate response was: "I categorically and unequivocally deny this allegation. I did not do this back in high school or at any time." The Senate Judiciary Committee postponed its vote and invited both Kavanaugh and Blasey Ford to appear at the public hearing (https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/california-professor-writer-of-confidential-brett-kavanaugh-letter-speaks-out-about-her-allegation-of-sexual-assault/2018/09/16/46982194-b846-11e8-94eb-3bd52dfe917b_story.html?utm_term=.bfa992a09f67).

Facebook Messenger (9/18)

Monica: *My gosh Em—this could have been my high school experience. I went to a co-ed private school in Texas that was a lot like Georgetown Prep. There were lots of parties like the one Blasey Ford described, drunken nights at someone's home with the parents away. The guys were all football players in the popular crowd and they certainly ruled the school. I often wonder how it is that I escaped this circumstance. It may have been because I had a serious boyfriend for most of the time who wasn't in that crowd—but just writing this now makes me upset. Why was my safety in the hands of a man?*

The truth is I feel like high school and college were all about entering the danger zone with men, in their rooms, in my room, in the park, walking on the street, getting into my car at night, and never knowing if I would actually have control. But men rarely feel this way—they have no idea what it feels like to always be on the lookout for danger. We feel unsafe all of the time.

Emily: *It's intense to think how little oversight there was overall and how many of my friends are nodding their heads right now. We all have a story and we all remember the anxiety so well of having to always be on your guard. Even now I feel it—that I have to make sure I'm always alert and aware. Does it ever go away?*

Monica: *But come to think of it, even being with my boyfriend, didn't always feel totally safe. There was always a lot of drinking involved. I remember one night we were at his friend's house and his parents were away—they were always away—and it was just the three of us. We had been drinking—but I remember wondering why I felt so drunk since I had only had one drink. I always wondered if something was put in my drink to make me pass out.*

I always felt like I was being manipulated by my boyfriend too. He wasn't physically abusive but he was controlling and demanding. I dated him for three years and it was only after we broke up and I had time to tell my mother in more detail about the relationship, that I realized he had many of the characteristics of my abusive biological father.

Emily: *Ugh Mon that's really scary. It's bringing up so much for me about issues of safety and vulnerability—thinking back to my own sexual abuse in high school, how totally unprotected I felt from the adults, but also how much I didn't feel I could even reach out to my peers. We had no language for talking about what happened to us.*

Monica: *Why do we always have to feel so incredibly vulnerable? I always tell*

my students how uncomfortable I feel after my summer doctoral class that gets out at night. I never feel safe parking below our building and walking to my car at night. It is dark back there and I feel nervous about being attacked. Why do we have to feel this way? Why can we never feel safe? Here I am a full professor, who has worked hard to be in this position, and yet I am physically unsafe on my own campus at night. Why is that permissible? And when I have said that to male colleagues, they offer to walk me to my car any time—but why do I have to rely on men for my own safety?

Emily: *Yes and, of course, it's the men who make us unsafe. I was one of the "lucky" ones—in that I got to see my abuser go to jail eventually—even if it wasn't for what he did to me. I think about the level of validation I have gotten from that and how very very few women get it.*

Monica: *You know I never talk about it but the more I think about this and the terror I have about being unsafe the more I realize that this fear is deeply lodged in my body and I have been carrying it around feeling like at any moment I could be unsafe or unprotected. I think this is because from the time I was little until about 6, I would watch my father rage at my mother. And there were so many injuries that she felt compelled to cover them up. There was her broken ankle from his kicking her that she told people was from tripping and falling. There was the perforated ear drum that she had because of a smack to the head. She was never able to put her head in the water when swimming because of that one. When my brother was only two years old, my father got tired of his crying and slammed him against the wall and broke his shoulder. We told people that he fell off the bed and even my brother thinks that is what happened to him. On their honeymoon, he was high on valium and driving and they had a horrible car accident. My mother's leg was broken and even more scary was that she had to have a tracheotomy because she couldn't breathe. And those were only the injuries I can remember. I was constantly in fear of who would show up each evening—had he been drinking, was he on downers, uppers, was he loving and kind and cuddly, asking me to lay with him on the floor and watch Alfred Hitchcock or would he be mean and jealous and scary? Just writing this to you makes me feel so sick to my stomach. My heart is racing and I catch myself holding my breath. I remember being that vulnerable little girl, hiding behind the couch or the armchair terrified that one day he would go too far. I became my mother's care-giver too—caring for her in the aftermath—it was almost as if a double layer of fear resides in me, for my mother and then for myself.*

Thankfully she mustered up the courage to leave him but the truth is that she often doubted her decision and what would become of her life. The trauma and fear stayed with her always even years later when she had re-married my stepfather. She continually worried about keeping him happy—that fear was always in her body and it is in my body too.

Emily: *Oh honey it's just so intense and so much. I think about the level of trauma and how deeply ingrained it is. I think the violence and abuse—and watching this as a child is something that we don't talk enough about at all.*

Kavanaugh and Other Accusations

In the interim before the hearing, two other women, Deborah Ramirez and Julie Swetnick, accused Kavanaugh of separate past instances of sexual assault. Deborah Ramirez shared with Ronan Farrow and Jane Mayer of *The New Yorker*, that Kavanaugh waved his penis in front of her face while she was inebriated at a dormitory party during the 1983-1984 academic school year at Yale (<https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/senate-democrats-investigate-a-new-allegation-of-sexual-misconduct-from-the-supreme-court-nominee-brett-kavanaughs-college-years-deborah-ramirez>). Kavanaugh's response was:

This alleged event from 35 years ago did not happen. The people who knew me then know that this did not happen, and have said so. This is a smear, plain and simple. I look forward to testifying on Thursday about the truth, and defending my good name — and the reputation for character and integrity I have spent a lifetime building — against these last-minute allegations. (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/need-know-allegations-made-new-yorker-article-judge-brett-kavanaugh/>)

Prior to the hearing, Kavanaugh submitted his 1982 calendar as a way to dispute Ford's timeline (<https://www.axios.com/read-brett-kavanaugh-summer-1982-calendar-b9997863-0edb-4ddc-89f7-d17f328617b9.html>). Later that day, Julie Swetnick, through her attorney, released a sworn declaration that Kavanaugh targeted girls for sexual assault. She recounted that Kavanaugh and his friends would spike drinks with drugs to make girls more vulnerable to sexual assault. She also said Kavanaugh was present when she was gang raped at a party. She said: "They would line up outside rooms at many of these parties waiting for their 'turn' with a girl inside the room" (<https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/26/michael-avenatti-identifies-kavanaugh-accuser-as-julie-swetnick.html>). Kavanaugh denied the allegations.

Facebook Messenger (9/25/19)

Emily: *I remember going to the police station up near Barnard my sophomore year, after my friend called me to say she and another girl were trying to press charges against our dance coach. Did I have a story as well? Would I be willing to file a police report? We were still within the statute of limitations and they were finding more and more girls who had been abused. I walked myself over, alone, and gave a statement. I took a copy of it home and was told they would send it to the district attorney in Virginia where charges were being filed. I didn't find out until almost 25 years later that it never arrived.*

Monica: *Wait. . . I don't think I realized this Emily. That's completely insane. Did you give testimony later? That was such a horrible misstep. What happened next?*

Emily: *My friend just assumed I wasn't ready. Even though I was later able to give written testimony at his parole hearings, I was wrecked thinking about how much courage it had taken at 19 to go to the police. And what happened? I have*

no idea. I think all the time about the disbelief of women and their stories and how not believing changes our lives, and affects the justice system. Tiny little things like this add up to decades of injustice.

Monica: *How many women and especially young women muster up the courage to go the police only to have their testimony lost, to be treated disrespectfully, or worst of all to have their testimony received with disbelief? I feel like as women our stories, our truths are never accepted, no matter how violent or ugly. I think the hearings have really set me over the edge in terms of what I will or won't put up with and even so I feel shame when I tell stories about my own experiences.*

Interspersed with our direct comments about the hearing emerged thinking about women and women's anger and how we connected that to our work. We began to see our work as teacher educators in light of the anger and discrimination at work in the hearings, informed by the literature we were reading (in the case below Traister's 2018 book *Good and Mad* which Emily had started reading).

Monica: *Oh and my crown fell out again.*

Emily: *Omg Mon . . . That feels insanely symbolic somehow.*

Monica: *It's like always the final straw for me—the embodied reminder of the torture.*

Emily: *I know. . . So are you going to go back to your awful dentist guy? Ugh. It's so hard.*

Monica: *I have to. No one will work on this. It sucks. I am fucking bound to him. I cannot escape him and he continues to terrorize me.*

Emily: *I know. . . It sucks. I was just reading this part of Traister about the men we are bound to because we need them for something—and how complex that is. I was thinking about so many versions of this in my life!*

Monica: *Omg, I need to keep reading to get to that chapter.*

Emily: *She writes:*

We love them. We also often need them: to be our colleagues and family members and boyfriends and buddies, to help us raise our kids, to bring home paychecks on which we subsist. Because they have so much more professional and economic power, men are very often our bosses, our mentors. . . Because white men have had such disproportionate political power, it is often they on whom women—feminists, left activists—rely on a larger scale: as representatives, advocates, party leaders; to challenge them is to potentially imperil a whole political party, and with it crucial protections, advocacy, an ideological agenda itself. Of course it is precisely this reality—once again, this dependence—that has permitted powerful men to mistreat and discriminate against those with less power. It is also what has often kept women paralyzed—by fear, risk, love, loyalty—and reluctant to push back angrily against their own ill treatment, or in response to the ill treatment of other women. The

potential for damage to relationships on which women depend is real: consequences may be both emotional and material. Women's challenge to male authority of power abuse can send a family into a disarray, end a marriage, provoke a firing . . . It is so much more peaceful to not get mad, to not even think about the gross injustices that pepper our daily interactions with me. . ." (Traister, 2018, pp. 144-145)

Monica: *Word!*

Emily: *I just am thinking so much about how women make up teaching—they are so conservative—so bought into the power systems. So reliant on men in many ways. And so what does teacher ed look like that tries to push back on this for women?*

Monica: *Yep and how schools are structured with male admins.*

Emily: *Yes!*

Monica: *And teacher education programs perpetuate the patriarchal structure.*

Emily: *It really does and I feel like she has a useful lens for thinking about this.*

Monica: *Even if women are in positions of power . . .*

Emily: *Also how our anger becomes revolutionary, and challenges the structures—it's important for students to see and know us as angry.*

Monica: *Like creativity and anything other than the machine is seen as disruptive.*

Emily: *It is disruptive—it doesn't reassert the traditional norms and power structures. Feelings, the body, all that stuff—not okay. It's why it's so impossible to move to constructivist teaching and learning.*

Monica: *Yes!*

Text (9/20/18)

As we continued to hear more and more details about Kavanaugh and Blasey Ford, Emily began to think about sharing her story through her social media networks. Although for years she has been honest about her abuse with friends and partners and speaking at *Take Back the Night* in college, it had been many years since she spoke publicly about what happened to her. She was aware her feed was filled with professional colleagues and former students, as well as parents of her son's friends, and even her husband's former boss. She worried about the fallout for others and turned to Monica to think through the implications and possibilities.

Emily: *Ok so I'm thinking about sharing publicly for the first time about my dance coach and the sexual abuse. On Facebook. I'm really scared.*

Monica: *I cannot even imagine how terrifying this could be for you but I also understand why you are considering doing it. Blasey Ford is a role model to us all. Her courage is encouraging others to do the same.*

Emily: *I just keep thinking that if she can do this in front of the entire world, certainly I can make a step forward as well. It feels important, but I'm not sure why. Maybe because I'm an academic in as safe a position professionally and personally as I can be in. If it's terrifying to me, imagine what it is for others? I feel like people will take me seriously, that people who know me will believe me and that might open spaces to believe other women.*

Monica: *Yes indeed. You have a platform, a position of authority, some sort of power from which you can speak and others or at least some people will listen.*

Emily: *I mean in our work we talk about social justice all the time. Isn't this part of my responsibility—giving voice, telling my story, when there are so many women who can't? Ugh. I dunno. I worry about the fallout—like parents of Sam's friends who know me.*

Monica: *But your bravery is also important for Sam—to see what it looks like for women to speak truth to power. We talk about that all the time but you sharing your own story is really walking the talk.*

After a lot of debrief and support from Monica, on September 21, 2018, Emily would finally share the following post on Facebook (September 21, 2008).

I understand it is very hard to understand the experience of a teen who has been sexually abused or assaulted. I can barely understand it myself—let me say that I too was 15. It was 3 years until I told someone, 5 years before I went to the police. Even then I only did because other women I loved came to me and asked me if I too had gone through what they went through—had nobody else come forward I don't think I ever would have sought legal recourse. Even then when I went to the police I would find out years later my statement never made it to the Virginia DA (although I have a copy of it). The DA would eventually decide not to prosecute because the testimony of at least five girls was not enough. Later this man would go to jail for years. I was "lucky" and it only took maybe 20 girls. . . We told adults. Nobody believed us. Or none of the right people. And let me say in the years I didn't speak of this it was a struggle to breathe, to get up every day, to keep from drowning in shame and terror. I was afraid to write about it in my journal. The fact that I have spoken of it so much is a testament to the power of the women and men who supported me- themselves children. You can't imagine the psychological and emotional damage of a statement like the President's today. Edited to say: Most people wouldn't know it but I actually don't share a lot of very real stuff on fb. But I think it's time. When the most powerful person in the nation says that it "can't be that bad" if people don't come forward then it is incumbent upon us all to push back against this insanely inaccurate and harmful narrative. #ibelievechristine #dearchristine #whyididntreport

Kavanaugh, Dr. Blasey Ford, and the Hearings

On September 27, Both Kavanaugh and Blasey Ford testified before the Committee. Blasey Ford was first to give testimony. Blasey Ford presented as calm,

professional, and composed. Asked what is the strongest memory she has of the incident, she said “Indelible, in the hippocampus is the laughter. The uproarious laughter between the two [Kavanaugh and Judge] . . . and they’re having fun at my expense.” Asked what she has not forgotten about the night of the incident, Blasey Ford responded, “The stairwell, the living room, the bedroom . . . the bed on the right side of the room. The bathroom in close proximity, the laughter — the nefarious laughter. And the multiple attempts to escape and the final ability to do so.” Ford also described the lasting impact of the attack, especially how he held his hand over her mouth: “Brett’s assault on me drastically altered my life” (<https://www.cbsnews.com/live-news/brett-kavanaugh-hearing-confirmation-today-christine-blasey-ford-sexual-assault-allegations-live/>).

Five hours later, Kavanaugh gave testimony. Angry, emotional, and red faced, he began: “My family and my name have been totally and permanently destroyed.” Kavanaugh said in his opening remarks. “This confirmation process has become a national disgrace . . . you have replaced advice and consent with search and destroy” (<https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2018/09/brett-kavanaugh-opening-statement-christine-blasey-ford.html>). When asked what number he considers as “too many beers,” Kavanaugh said the figure is whatever “the chart” defines as too many. He repeatedly stated he had never drunk to the point of “blacking out” while in high school.

We were struck by how Kavanaugh’s rage, which seemed both terrifying and ridiculous to us, somehow failed to discredit his statements. Instead it seemed to garner him support. We were struck by the number of times we have been told professionally to be “calmer” and “less emotional” or “less hysterical.” We were continually reminded that showing emotion is a weakness. But, of course, for Kavanaugh it is a compelling force to encourage empathy. We were reminded by Brene Brown “Empathy fuels connection. Sympathy drives disconnection” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw>). We looked at Blasey Ford and felt empathy, but we were aware that many see her and experience disconnection—a “not me.” We wondered about how to engender empathy rather than sympathy, particularly in our work with future teachers.

Facebook Post (9/27/2018)

As the fallout from the testimony intensified with growing male support for Kavanaugh, Emily wrote a second Facebook post about her own experience:

When I was 19 and two women called me to say they were bringing charges against my dance coach and did I have anything to add, I immediately went home to tell my father about my abuse and that I was going to go to the police even though it was 4 years later. I will never forget what he said: “It’s a bump in the road and if you stop you will never start again. I don’t support you going to the police and I think you should forget it.” Nobody knows better than a man what men think about women coming forward. Listening to these men falling all over themselves telling

this smug man how sorry they are for him reminds me of the men who failed me.
Monica: *Your post stuck with me all night. Rereading it this morning I also think about the fear that caused your father to react that way. Not excusing him in any but was just thinking about all of the men yesterday and beyond allowing fear to stop them from protecting their loved ones or confronting an abuser. Women seem much more capable of being vulnerable in the face of fear and using their anger to protect and to fight for what is right.*

Emily: *Yes I think that's right 100%. It's interesting how much more compassion I have now as a parent too than I did then—the strong need for your kid's life to be “great”—how that can overwhelm what they tell you even. I think my dad REALLY needed my life to be great (which it is and it was—just complex). And I think if I had told him at the time he would have gone down and killed him. Part of this reaction was that to him by then it seemed “too late.”*

Monica: *Totally—like you fail somehow at parenting if their lives are not perfect. And the visceral reaction of just closing the door to an idea—and how as young as 19 you knew to take matters in your own hands- the resilience and strength is really incredible. The temporality is also so complex.*

Emily: *It's SO complex. I think for him also and his own trauma in life—when things were bad you just doubled down on making your life good. That was his revenge and it had worked for him. And you know now I can admit that in some ways maybe he was right. In some ways, I did put it behind me and move on and kept going and I didn't get “stuck.” So it's so complex to me now.*

Monica: *Absolutely—he was using his own survival/coping mechanisms—some of which you took up—but you need additional—I totally can relate in terms of my mom's reactions to my father's abuse- sweeping it under the rug was easier for her—but I always wondered at what cost to her body?*

Emily: *I think that's right. I think the cost to my body has been profound.*

On September 28, the nomination was forwarded to the full Senate on an 11–10 vote. Then, on October 6, following an additional FBI investigation into the allegations, the Senate voted 50–48 to confirm Kavanaugh's nomination to the Supreme Court.

Commentary

As we wrote over those several weeks, we wondered how our dialogic interactions could speak back to the patriarchy and legitimize emotions as a way of knowing. How could our own personal experiences as women inform our work as teacher educators? What could academic writing look like if it broke away from the traditions of the dominance of the mind and included emotions and subjectivity? How could bringing our whole selves into our writing help us to leverage our personal experiences as part of our curriculum and scholarship as teacher educators?

Triggering Trauma

For both of us, the early revelations by Dr. Blasey Ford triggered deep and painful memories that seemed highly aligned to the stories from the media. Our writing began to serve as a way both to journal and document, but also to provide empathy for the other, and be curious about the other's experiences as well as our own. It was a safe space for dialogue as we felt constantly barraged on social media by insensitive commentary about violence and abuse, often from people we knew and cared about. This experience of sharing, curiosity, and empathy for and from the other, seemed primary to us as we thought about how we might also engage in ways to bring our experiences to our work as teacher educators. What would it mean to bring our whole selves into the classroom? Would it be appropriate for us to share our own experiences of violence and abuse with our students? For years we had been discussing how our student teachers might face their students' trauma in the classroom, but we had read very little about what it might look like for us as trauma survivors to help support preservice teachers in navigating student trauma. Suddenly we found ourselves confronted with this as we worked with our student teachers this past fall, thinking about how our own trauma influenced our interactions with our students and how they, as student teachers, might have the same struggles. What triggered them? How did their reactions sometimes arise instinctually based on unexamined trauma? How could our own traumatic experiences provide an entree for thinking about how to support students? How do they limit us if they remain unexamined?

For example, when Emily went to observe two talented male physical education teachers and noticed that they called only on the boys in the class, her reaction was strong and angry—almost visceral. Worried that she might be overly sensitive to their actions, she texted with Monica to think through how to raise the issues. Hearing an empathetic response and making connections to how Kavanaugh was raising issues about how women are treated in society, she was able to find an appropriate angle when she debriefed with them. The narratives around the hearings pushed us to think about how the patriarchy continually dictates how women—and especially young women—are encountered in public spaces like schools. Examining our personal responses and dialoguing privately increased our confidence in calling out these societal practices with our students.

Pervasiveness of Abuse and Complicity

We were struck by the degree to which everyone we know seems to have such a story. Later Solnit (2019) would write, "But in so many cases rapists have help in the moment and forever after, and the help is often so powerful, broad, and deep—well, that's why we call it rape culture, and that's why changing it means changing the whole culture. Sometimes it's the family, community, church, campus looking the other way; sometimes it's the criminal justice system." (<https://lithub.com>)

com/in-patriarchy-no-one-can-hear-you-scream-rebecca-solnit-on-jeffrey-epstein-and-the-silencing-machine/?fbclid=IwAR2b6N2KqQ9aSPyHfH5JDzMd8sTf-nmJs2JAUZWJQjJx3CZVZd3Buyq8Y0WQ). We are deeply aware both of: (a) How these systems perpetuated our own abuse and abuse of women we know; and (b) That we are part of a system both at a university and in schools that, is one of those cultures, that is powerful and broad and deep in its protection of rape and abuse. What is our responsibility as feminist teacher educators in disrupting these systems?

As we continued our dialogue, often through multiple media (messenger, text, email), we began to consider how our own work and positions in teacher education at the university contribute to a society that privileges certain ways of being and knowing that are highly hierarchical, disembodied, and rational. We reflected on how we have been complicit in perpetuating oppressive systems that purposely disconnect the body from the mind. We thought about the many instances when we have suppressed our anger, sadness, fear, and frustration in meetings, examining university and credentialing policies, and in interactions with our colleagues, students, and even school and community partners. We realized that our success in the academy is in part because we have taken up the constant demand for immediate production, rather than a slower more thoughtful kind of scholarship and pedagogy. We have actively sought to develop different, slower research and writing habits that disrupt these traditional ways of being in the academy. We also wondered about the physical and emotional toil that this continual clampdown has taken on our bodies and our minds.

Moving from the Private to the Public

For both of us, after years of private grappling with a history of violence and abuse, we felt we wanted to move beyond the private to a more public space of sharing and reflection, no matter how scary it felt. Although we had mulled over our narratives over and over again, some of the details have never been shared publicly. Having the support of one another helped us to find courage to speak out, giving voice to our experiences, a kind of initial step in social justice, activism work. This process of going public alongside one another also began to influence the ways in which we engage with our students as well as what we are willing to share with them. Our dialogic empathy to one another encouraged us to think through the best ways to share some of our stories with our students.

Finding ways to go “public” about our own experiences of abuse and trauma required ongoing dialogue and support that we were able to offer each other. The private writing was where we both thought through the consequences we might encounter personally, professionally, and emotionally in sharing our stories. The public sharing became a key piece for our emerging thinking about how these experiences influenced our work. We were struck by how empowering it was to both provide and receive empathy, how that empathy helped us to go deeper in understanding of others and ourselves. If we could understand the experience of another’s trauma, could we not, in fact, better understand ourselves?

Empathy as a Way of Knowing

I understand—I've been there.
That's happened to me too.
It's OK, you're normal.
I understand what that's like. (Brown, 2007)

As we mulled over instances of childhood shame, we began to talk about how shame has permeated our professional lives; we have reflected on the many ways we experience shame and shame ourselves in academic work. We realize that we are particularly vulnerable to shame because as Brown (2012) writes, “Shame derives its power from being unspeakable. That’s why it loves perfectionists—it’s so easy to keep us quiet” (p. 58). Most recently Emily caught herself apologizing to a colleague for “only” submitting a single proposal for a national conference (despite over 17 years of multiple conference presentations there and now being a full professor). We have both experienced self-shaming for taking personal time, setting boundaries, and saying no. But as Brown (2012) reminds us, “empathy is the antidote to shame” (p. 74). Our friendship, developed as a means to counter traditional academic isolation, has allowed us to navigate our own shame through empathy. She (2012) writes, “If we cultivate enough awareness about shame to name it and speak to it, we’ve basically cut it off at its knees. . . . If we speak shame, it begins to wither” (p. 58). For example, we both work hard to validate the other’s needs and boundaries - pushing the other to shut off email during a vacation, not do ANY WORK AT ALL, knowing that the granting of permission for a trusted outsider/insider can often help with the experience of shame. Our experiences of professional and personal empathy (where each are not necessarily separate from the other), helped us to reflect, learn, and then act.

Embodied Empathetic Pedagogy

These insights have encouraged us to collaboratively design empathetic teaching practices, over the last few years, and especially in response to the Trump administration, that focus on the body and in particular our emotions as a way of knowing in the classroom. We have begun to incorporate embodied activities in our preservice teacher education courses to help our students to access their emotions and use them as a vehicle to understand their students and build authentic relationships with them, and create a learning environment that is both inclusive and safe, as well as a place for risk-taking. For example, during fall 2016, Monica noted that several of her male student teachers were struggling with the emotional challenges of teaching. They described their surprise at being so overwhelmed with their feelings of sadness, anger, and frustration and their worry about how to manage their emotions. Recognizing that they needed some way to explore these feelings, Monica modified a “Theatre of the Oppressed” activity which asked them to work in pairs having one person as pilot who described in detail how they felt

in their bodies during an emotional incident in the classroom and the other person as actor who created a mirrored image of what they heard. Seeing a mirror of their feelings provided a way to gain some new insights and also think through how those feelings could be used. Several of the student teachers shared examples of feeling angry and Monica talked about the purposes of anger, of mainly to defend something that is important to you, and so they talked about how to use anger in a productive way rather than explode or blow up. In general, inviting students to focus on their feelings seem to offer them a new way of knowing. In their culminating reflections, one student said that he felt like he had “gotten more in touch with feelings” while another student said that “it’s important not to repress your feelings.” They also commented about how the activity made them think of their own students’ emotional experiences. Finally, one student reflected:

I could not remember names, grade levels, or classroom teachers of many students. I was, however, able to recall my feelings towards them. Although I could not remember the exact interaction I had with a student in class, each interaction left an impression on me. When I saw a student in the hallway, in class, or on lunch duty, I felt in my body if that student was shy, friendly, antagonistic, good humored, etc.

We knew that both honoring our bodies, using our feelings as a way to make meaning, had been profound for us in finding voice and action; why, then, would we not find deliberate ways to use that kind of knowing to support our students’ growth and reflection?

Conclusion

To illustrate how our past and present personal lives impact our teaching, this piece describes our visceral, embodied reactions precipitated by the historic testimony by Dr. Blasey Ford during the Kavanaugh hearings. Our dialogic space enabled us to surface years of experiences of sexual trauma, physical abuse, and microaggressions. Over the course of the hearings and the media debate, we explored our own experiences of trauma, writing to one another throughout the day and over the course of weeks, using a variety of mediums, sometimes in fragments, thinking out loud about all the ways we have become ourselves in relation to these traumas. Although we had both spoken of these incidents before in our private lives, it was within this safe, dialogic, informal context that we both began to feel empowered to be more publicly outspoken about our emotional selves in personal and professional contexts. Interwoven with our memories of rage, shame, sadness, and frustration, we examined how these experiences were shaped by our relationships with our family, and specifically our parents. We shared our experiences of being daughters, of having lost our mothers and fathers, of our anger but growing understanding of how their own limitations influenced their ability to help us through trauma.

Although initially this dialogue emerged organically as a survival mechanism to withstand the political climate, we soon began to realize that empathetically

writing to one another consistently in these immediate and informal ways provided us with a means to craft what Zembylas (2007) calls “trauma stories” which have the potential to “create a social and political space in which victims can reconstruct memory and may heal or perpetuate their pain” (p. 209). Sharing our stories to one another in these immediate and informal contexts, no matter how different the stories were, helped us to construct an empathetic space where we experienced “emotional resonance” (Zembylas, 2007, p. 216) and no longer felt alone. It was in these exchanges that we began to nurture the strength to consider how telling our own traumatic experiences could help our preservice teachers to examine their own narratives of trauma, abuse, and microaggressions.

Our personal curiosity, empathy, exploration and grappling with trauma, and public sharing about our experiences were also interwoven with reflections about how this might influence our work as teacher educators. None of this happened linearly, but emerged throughout our dialogue and struggle to give voice to our experiences. Our personal correspondence is a space for us to reveal our authentic selves, be vulnerable, and where we can theorize about the work we are doing in a feminist way—emerging from the lived experience. Throughout the past year we have grown in our conviction that our best work is that which speaks to the deeply held beliefs and passions that inspire us, and we have recently begun work to create an institute that will help further our work in teaching, the arts, and social justice. What began as dialogue, emerging from friendship, has become a means to break the boundaries of traditional academic work, the roots of new ways of being in our careers and selves. We are “living a feminist life” (Ahmed, 2017).

References

- Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a feminist life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Belenky, M. F., Clinchy, B. M., Goldberger, N. R., & Tarule, J. (1986). *Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Brown, B. (2013, December 11). *Brene Brown on empathy*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw>
- Brown, B. (2012). *Daring greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent and lead*. New York, NY: Avery.
- Brown, B. (2011, January 3). *The power of vulnerability*. Tedtalks. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCvmsMzIF7o>
- Brown, B. (2007). *I thought it was just me: Women reclaiming power and courage in a culture of shame*. New York, NY: Gotham Books.
- Ellsworth, E. (1994). Why doesn't this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy. In L. Stone (Ed.), *The education feminism reader* (pp. 300–327). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Freire, P. & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Gay, R. (2014). *Bad feminist: Essays*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Gore, J. M. (1993). *The struggle for pedagogies: Critical and feminist discourses as regimes*

- of truth*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Lather, P. (2006, October). *(Post)Feminist methodology: Getting lost OR a scientificity we can bear to learn from*. Paper presented at the Research Methods Festival, Oxford, UK.
- Lorde, A. (1988). *A burst of light: Essays*. London, UK: Sheba Feminist Publishers.
- Maher, F. A., & Tetreault, M. K. (1994). *The feminist classroom*. Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield.
- Mountz, A., Bonds, A., Mansfield, B., Loyd, J., Hyndman, J., Walton-Roberts, M., et al. (2015). For slow scholarship: A feminist politics of resistance through collective action in the neoliberal university. *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geography*, 14(4), 1235–1259.
- Ropers-Huilman, B. (2001). Feminist poststructuralism in higher education: Opportunities for transforming teaching and learning. *Organization: Speaking Out*, 8(2), 388–395.
- St. Pierre, E. (2000). Poststructural feminism in education: An overview. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 13(5), 477–515.
- Traister, R. (2018). *Good and mad: The revolutionary power of women's anger*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Zembylas, M. (2007). The politics of trauma: Empathy, reconciliation, and peace education. *Journal of Peace Education* 4(2), 207–224.