

TRANSFORMATIONS: WOMANIST, FEMINIST,  
AND INDIGENOUS STUDIES

Edited by AnaLouise Keating

# Teaching with Tenderness

Toward an Embodied Practice

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## Introduction

A human mind is small when thinking of small things.  
It is large when embracing the maker of walking, thinking and  
flying.

—Joy Harjo, *A Map to the Next World*

We are not all that is possible. None of us has ever really  
experienced justice. None of us has known enough tenderness.

—June Jordan, “Outside Language”

We still do not know what a body can do.

—Elsbeth Probyn, “Teaching Bodies: Affects in the Classroom”

In one of the many talks June Jordan gave before her untimely passing in 2002, the poet and writer said that none of us has known enough tenderness.<sup>1</sup> This recognition hit me hard partly because as children, many of us did not get the degree of tenderness that we needed. Her insight also made me wonder what it would take to ensure that tenderness be a studied practice in our classrooms as well. I don't mean a kind of “anything goes, coo at all of the answers, take it easy on the number of assigned books and papers” kind of tenderness. By tenderness I mean an embodied way of being that allows us to listen deeply to each other, to consider perspectives that we might have thought way outside our own worldviews, to practice a patience and attentiveness that allow people to do their best work, to go beyond the given, the expected, the status quo. Tenderness makes room for emotion; offers a witness for experiences people have buried or left unspoken; welcomes silence, breath, and movement; and sees justice as key to our survival. I found myself asking, what might a pedagogy of tenderness require of us and make possible that we don't often see in the classroom, in activist circles, in our lives?

Googling “tenderness” doesn’t exactly lead to a number of websites on teaching. You’re more likely to end up in the online grocery aisle for meat tenderizers and grades of veal than on a site for teaching. So I began to reflect, when have I felt tenderness in the classroom? What does it take? What do students have to say on this subject?<sup>2</sup> I started to understand that the softness and receptivity that I yearn for in the classroom are qualities that are hard to document and ineffable when they arrive. Tenderness assumes a presence of the body in the classroom, which, as it turns out, can be scary to talk, write, and think about. What I discovered is that while there is a growing literature on theories of embodiment, there is very little about what bodies actually do in the classroom.<sup>3</sup> And there are all kinds of reasons this is true. I also came to discover that while there is substantial writing by teachers about what they teach, we have been disciplined not to include our bodies and emotions in our stories and analysis.

While this troubles me on many levels, I think what upset me most was realizing the bind that this absence puts “us” in. By “us” I mean those of us who teach about historical accounts of suffering and resistance—slavery, genocide, colonization, and social upheavals. We are in need of a pedagogy that takes into account students’ whole selves—their minds, bodies, emotions, spiritual lives—since accounting for all these levels is necessary for the topics we teach to be most deeply understood. While there is much writing on teaching about injustice—made possible to a large extent by the liberation movements of the past fifty years—we still need to know more about how to teach this material.<sup>4</sup> It is as if we expect students to hold their bodies the same way, have the same emotions, whether they are studying tax law or genocide in Rwanda, whether they are studying calligraphy or Renaissance literature. Our attention to process has not caught up with our focus on content. The power of attention to embodiment is its ability to link form with content, link our bodies to the lyrics of a freedom song.

My yearning for a pedagogy of tenderness has led me in multiple directions—to multiracial feminist pedagogy for its serious attention to how gender, race, sexuality, religion, disability, nationality, and other social identities manifest in the classroom; to contemplative scholarship for its work on mind-body-spirit connections; and to trauma scholarship for its care in understanding injury and resilience. Each exploration encouraged me to consider what we might learn if these pockets of scholarship were in conversation with each other. And how, in our highly technological and often segregated culture, practicing tenderness in the classroom has become essential for teaching, for our lives.

## From Half to Full Moon

### MULTIRACIAL FEMINIST PEDAGOGY

Part of what has made a pedagogy of tenderness hard to name is that the resources for such an approach have been scattered across disciplines, space, and time. Not like it used to be, but still. When I started graduate school in the 1980s, interdisciplinarity was still cordoned off to outlier fields—women’s studies, African American studies, and ethnic studies. Specialization in one’s discipline was still the name of the game. Depth was more valued than breadth. The sheer intellectual power of these fields has played a huge part in changing that perspective. Edward Said, Cornel West, Gloria Anzaldúa, bell hooks, June Jordan, Robin Kelley, and many other publicly minded scholars helped lift artificial barriers between disciplines right off their moorings.<sup>5</sup> Now the disciplines are talking to each other in ways they didn’t before. There are also visionaries outside of the academy whose expansive minds have bridged all kinds of unnecessary gaps in knowledge and understanding. The Dalai Lama’s work to bring together practitioners of meditation with neuroscientists is an exciting example of this bridge work.<sup>6</sup>

Certainly, feminist scholarship on teaching has helped us understand what nurtures and blocks learning in the classroom and the potential of teaching to foster social justice.<sup>7</sup> Feminist teaching has centered on seeing the classroom as a community of learners (rather than treating faculty as the ultimate and only experts). Learning can be based on cooperation and collaboration, rather than on a star system and competition. Learning doesn’t have to be serious all of the time. Laughter and ease in our bodies can help us be honest about the reading and own lives. Since many topics that are raised in feminist classrooms directly relate to people’s lived experiences in the world, students need to be able to talk about how they relate to the course content.

Feminist pedagogy also recognizes the classroom as a location of power—that inequalities in the larger society manifest themselves in classroom dynamics. Inequalities require us to be specific about the social forces that twist how we hold our bodies in the classroom; who gets to cry, and not; who sits in the front and who sits in the way back; whose hand is most likely to fly up at the beginning of a discussion and whose will likely stay down through the semester. We learn to notice who takes the elevator and who takes the stairs, who buys all of the books new at the beginning of the semester and who borrows one book at a time from the library, and which students have to keep visiting the registrar’s office when class lists include the wrong gender, semester after semester.<sup>8</sup> This movement teaches us to notice who writes

down what they say before speaking (to protect against losing English words when they are nervous or people are impatient); which students become close with custodial and cafeteria staff, knowing their names, their family members; and why it is important to include Ramadan and Yom Kippur on the syllabus along with Thanksgiving and Christmas.

As a white, able-bodied, English-speaking teacher who came up through the multiracial feminist movement of the 1970s and 1980s, I was taught that grappling with the complexities of privilege is crucial if I want a classroom where honesty can be practiced. Lorraine Bethel's "What Chou Mean We, White Girl; or, The Cullud Lesbian Feminist Declaration of Independence (Dedicated to the Proposition That All Women Are Not Equal, i.e., Identically Oppressed)" became a clarion call that a culture of belonging is not automatic. The poem by Black lesbian feminist Pat Parker "For the White Person Who Wants to Know How to Be My Friend" taught us to find an intellectual and emotional space that neither ignores nor belabors race. She opens the poem with "The first thing you do is to forget that i'm Black / Second, you must never forget that i'm Black." From this honest and brave poem, Parker spoke out about what bell hooks labeled "appropriation" and "eating the other" and what Native American Wendy Rose (Hopi) later called "white shamanism"—the white misuse of culture that Black/Native people create and sustain.<sup>9</sup> Parker expressed, "You should dig Aretha, / But don't play her every time I come over." And "if some Black person insults you . . . Please don't apologize to me . . . it makes me wonder if you are foolish."

Parker's poem and other writing of the 1970s and '80s became a template for many feminists attempting to turn white privilege on its head. From this intense and crucial period in multiracial feminism, I saw that I could not expect women of color to be my educators. After twenty years of white-centered education, I needed to do much of my own catch-up work. I needed to learn about the histories of African American, Latina, Asian, and Native American women as well as the struggles of South Asian, African, Mexican, Central American, Arab, Muslim, and Buddhist women. History, culture, imperialism, region, and sexuality meant that a monolithic concept of women of color made little sense. I needed to listen to the anger of women of color; it is informed by centuries of struggle. And I needed to look to my own history for signs of heresy and rebellion.

I remember in the late 1980s poet Kate Rushin encouraging me to explore the history of struggle of Mormon women, in keeping with Alice Walker's ethic—"in search of our mother's gardens."<sup>10</sup> I recall saying to her, "What about if there was no garden, only weeds" at that point in my life, not know-

ing if there was anything salvageable about such a regressive religion and culture. Kate just looked at me with her big eyes, cajoling me to dig deep, to move forward. From years of mentoring by Jacqui Alexander, I also learned that the "ivory tower" can cost you your life without sustained connection to a living community of dissent, that civil disobedience and hunger strikes deepen what it means to be human, and that hosting Angela Davis, Papusa Molina, Sistren, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, and other luminaries to speak on campus will include strenuous, life-affirming conversation and the making of joy long into the night. From Jacqui I learned that activism is a seat of love, rigorous scholarship sustenance for the body and soul.

Alongside the crucial writing and activism about racism and race consciousness (nationally and internationally) of the late 1970s and early 1980s came pivotal writing about disability, class, sexuality, and religion—each helping us to see the classroom as a living space, capable of sparking a revolution or reproducing the very inequalities we claim to oppose.<sup>11</sup> From multiracial feminist writing and activism, we saw ways that teaching can shut people down, close their minds, and reinforce their preconceived ideas, or it can give students a real experience of talking as equals across divides they were taught to uphold. I started to get glimpses that in a feminist classroom, tenderness comes when people can sit together and really learn from those they have been taught to drop their gaze around, be intimidated by, and avoid. Tenderness comes from being willing to hold in one's mind more complexity, paradox, and community than was previously thought possible. Tenderness, a fleeting, illuminating reminder that we all belong to each other. A willingness to travel together, to reach into the mysterious, the unknown, where tenderness lives within us. A pedagogy of tenderness: those spontaneous, planned, and found rituals of inclusion that lean us toward justice, that rest on rigorous study, that treat the classroom as a sacred space, that coach each other into habits of deep listening, that treat "memory as an antidote to alienation," that multiply joy.<sup>12</sup>

A pedagogy of tenderness asks us to expand ways to talk about the complexity of identity, to open ourselves to new conceptual frameworks, as Kate Rushin had instructed in "The Bridge Poem": "Stretch or drown / Evolve or die." What the Combahee River Collective first named as the "simultaneity of oppression" in 1977, a concept reflected in political grassroots organizing in Boston to protest the uninvestigated murders of twelve Black women, took on the name "intersectionality" in the late 1980s.<sup>13</sup> Both concepts alerted us that people's multiple identities cannot be cut apart.<sup>14</sup> When Audre Lorde named herself a Black, lesbian, poet, mother, cancer survivor, and warrior,

she insisted that people not be asked what oppression is more injurious than other, that no one should be asked to leave out essential aspects of themselves (in organizing, in the classroom, in the bed). The shifting, hybrid quality of many identities asked us to reach beyond binaries—as poet Max Wolf Valerio, who identified as “Anita” in the first edition of *This Bridge Called My Back*, called themselves “he” in *Bridge’s* fourth edition; and my chosen daughter’s queer, Southern Ute, African American identity made ridiculous the little tiny boxes on census forms.<sup>15</sup>

Terms including Anzaldúa’s *planetary citizen*, AnaLouise Keating’s *post-oppositional politics*, and Layli Maparyan’s *womanist idea* reflected a movement wanting to see and feel ourselves in ways that are not set in stone.<sup>16</sup> These terms did not tether one’s politics solely to one’s race or gender or sexuality. Anzaldúa asserted that you could be a feminist and a man, a third (or fifth) gender that feels more expansive and expressive than “male” or “female,” a white woman with a women-of-color consciousness.<sup>17</sup> In the classroom, these shifts moved some of us to teach racial identity models as a way to understand trajectories of racial consciousness alongside more fluid models, including Anzaldúa’s *conocimiento*, seven cyclical, nonlinear stages of self- and collective transformation.<sup>18</sup>

Among the shifts that feminist pedagogy is incorporating has been transgender insistence on a range of pronouns—he-she-they-them-hir-ze—that unlock patriarchy-centered centuries of tight gender designations, modeling bigger ways of understanding ourselves. Where the body leads, language can follow. The anthology *Pinned Down by Pronouns* became an anthem for transgender organizing in the first decade of the twenty-first century, as had *This Bridge Called My Back* for multiracial feminism in the 1980s. Gender bending, hate crimes against LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex) people, renamed bathroom signs, media attention to Caitlyn Jenner and Janet Mock, people wearing slinky dresses and full beards became public iconography, hashtags, organizing principles, and representatives for the transgender movement. With this embodied stretching, intersectionality has begun to look more like a lively boulevard in Cairo or New York City than a right-angled juncture in a road.

This expansiveness has asked teachers to facilitate cacophonous, lively, and sometimes confusing discussions where people can witness each other’s intellectual and political questions. Keating’s nonoppositional politics invited us to nurture vital discussions about gender expression and identity that draw people together rather than pull them apart.<sup>19</sup> So, for example, religious students who observe clear distinctions between men and women and

transgender activists (with their multiple pronouns) know, in their bones, the threat of hate crimes against people they love. Pairing *We Are all Suspects Now* with *Transgender Warriors* with *The Colors of Jews* provides analysis for how oppressions are interrelated.<sup>20</sup> This stretching saves us from postage-stamp discussions stuck in ranking privileges to a bigger place. It asks us to visualize and manifest concerted struggle against Islamophobia, Christian supremacy, and transphobia, that this work is intimately linked.

In these moments, a pedagogy of tenderness makes room for intimacy and vulnerability alongside deep study of guiding texts. It allows people to question each other’s assumptions while still holding everyone in regard. It sometimes can be felt when truth telling, often in the form of personal story, leads to a quiet hush, eyes soft with respect for each other. A pedagogy of tenderness makes room for imagination, for dropping a script and spontaneously trying to teach in a new way, making time for *savasana*, when students come to the class exhausted followed by stretching and dancing together to raise the energy again.

#### CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES

With the need to facilitate discussions that keep people’s hearts and minds open to each other, feminist faculty have found ourselves searching for rituals of inclusion that can nurture safety and receptivity. Most of us had not been trained to see learning as embodied—that a quiet, receptive mind is connected to a still and relaxed body. The increasing interest in contemplative practices—including mindfulness, mediation, and yoga—in the past twenty years reflects an awareness of the classroom as a living, breathing space. People tend to be most willing to consider alternative ways of seeing issues when they can listen deeply, see each other as whole people, and share a commitment to creating justice.<sup>21</sup> The high-tech driven feeling that the world is spinning too fast to keep up with, the numbing distance that many faculty feel in the face of bureaucratic policy, and the epidemic of violence in U.S. society are just three of many reasons why more faculty are now turning to contemplation—in their own lives and in the classroom.<sup>22</sup>

While the 1974 founding of Naropa University in Colorado by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche is an early example of this renewed interest in contemplative education in the United States, by the 1990s links between the two could be seen in multiple venues—conferences, retreats, fellowships, and pedagogy journals. Highlights from this work include the historic Investigating the Mind conference at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2003 (where a distinguished group of Buddhist scholars and monks and

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well-known psychologists and cognitive scientists spoke about the dramatic changes that meditation makes in the brain), the emergence of more than 250 mindfulness centers linked to medical schools across the world, and the funding of training for faculty interested in mindfulness and meditation.<sup>23</sup>

This early work linking contemplation to higher education was nurtured by the 1997 founding of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society in Northampton, Massachusetts. This center offers retreats and workshops for people in law, business, government, and higher education who want to incorporate spiritual practice and social justice into their work. About these efforts, physicist and former center director Arthur Zajonc writes, “The university is well-practiced at educating the mind for critical reasoning, critical writing, and critical speaking, as well as for scientific and quantitative analysis. But is this sufficient? In a world beset with conflicts, internal as well as external, isn’t it of equal if not greater importance to balance the sharpening of our intellects with the systematic cultivation of our hearts?”<sup>24</sup> Although not formally affiliated with any college or university, the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society serves as a watering hole for faculty. In addition to hosting conferences and providing fellowship support for teachers incorporating contemplation into their pedagogy, the center has also made links between contemplation and racial justice—of seeing contemplation as integral to activism.

One of the most innovative and unique contributions from the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society has been its handbook *The Activist’s Ally: Contemplative Tools for Social Change*, written by a multiracial, multifaith group of activists and scholars, that offers specific practices from multiple traditions to encourage social justice activism. This handbook recognizes seven branches of what they call the “Tree of Contemplative Practices”—approaches that extend way beyond traditional monastic forms to include relational practices (such as dialogue, deep listening, storytelling, and council circles), ritual practices (Shabbat/Sabbath, sweat lodges, building an altar), and activist practices (vigils, bearing witness, work).<sup>25</sup> With this tree, contemplation extends beyond the realm of Eastern traditions, to include practices among African Americans, Native Americans, and Euro-Americans; the ecstatic world of Rumi’s poetry; African praising of ancestors; and hip-hop soul chanting. With this expansiveness, the handbook makes the half moon (where social justice work is cordoned off to one venue, while contemplative work takes place in another) whole, linking meditation with racial justice activism, treating multiracial community development as key to contemplative work.

*The Activist’s Ally’s* recognition of yoga as a contemplative practice that can support social justice anticipated the increasing practice of yoga in education.<sup>26</sup> For those of us already appreciative of mindfulness and meditation as key ways of inviting calm and focus into the classroom, yoga became another welcome tool, a moving meditation based on listening to the body as a source of memory, wisdom, and awareness.

While research on these practices in higher education is in its infancy, those who have been incorporating yoga philosophy and practice are showing intimate connections between the mind and body in the learning process.<sup>27</sup> As yoga scholar Stephen Cope explains, the mind and the body are “made of the ‘same stuff.’ Mind and body simply lie along different points in the spectrum of subtlety. The body is a gross form of consciousness. The mind is a more subtle form of consciousness.”<sup>28</sup> Yoga philosophy (and increasingly neuroscience) considers the mind a highly intricate network of chemical and electrical connections that exist inside and outside of the body (not only in the brain).<sup>29</sup> This network is linked to energy centers in the body (brain, immune system, muscles, heart, and chakras). The mind is capable of observing itself, particularly in moments of stillness, and in resting in vastness.<sup>30</sup> The mind seeks contrasts and polarities, as does the body in motion. Practicing yoga asana can calm the mind and body through finding alignment amid polarities.

This alignment becomes helpful in teaching about injustice since discussions about difficult subjects require that we grapple with multiple perspectives. The classroom becomes a holding space for working with polarities, what critical race theorist Mari Matsuda calls “bipolar discourse,” a method of consistently being willing to bring in alternative perspectives to encourage deeper discussion and solutions.<sup>31</sup> Such deepening can feel threatening for students and teachers who come with fixed ideas. Yoga teaches us to work with resistance, to find relaxation in our bodies even when that might feel difficult. Attention is on finding comfort and ease in postures (even difficult ones) through breathing and concentration. This ability, when practiced somatically, is what we are also aiming for in the classroom—to know it is possible to survive discomfort, to move through it.

Yoga and other contemplative practices offer ways to enliven and encourage students, to go deeper than words, to practice silence that allows people to try on new ideas, to take risks with their bodies and minds. These practices can help people to move beyond delusion (denial) and aversion (pushing ideas and awareness away).<sup>32</sup> Delusion and aversion are the land where racism and sexism live. These injustices are grand delusions that we have been

taught to accept. Segregated churches, schools, neighborhoods, families, and graveyards are all built on the delusion of racism. The epidemic of violence against women is built on the delusion of sexism. Aversion to the truth means pushing away our lived experience and awareness of these oppressions. All of us know, at the level of the body and mind (since consciousness includes both), that these injustices are taking place all around us.<sup>33</sup> Yoga and meditation, in concert with justice-seeking curriculum, can intervene on states of delusion and aversion before they are translated into action, opening people to feel and speak in ways that might otherwise stay buried.

### TRAUMA STUDIES

Another emergence that is integral to a pedagogy of tenderness is the work done by trauma specialists who offer insight into how the human mind and body react to living through or witnessing trauma or both. While this field of study gained renewed interest in response to the unprecedented number of soldiers who returned alive but deeply wounded after the Vietnam War, the field has gained momentum as each subsequent war has brought more vets home who, unlike those in World War II and previous wars, survived physically but not without devastating psychic wounds. Feminist therapists further developed the work on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), showing that the epidemics of child abuse, sexual violence, and crimes against Muslims, Black people, and LGBTQI people are homegrown wars, leaving many of those targeted with traumatic symptoms as well.<sup>34</sup> This reality raises questions about the *post* part of *PTSD*, since many traumas are ongoing.

While the primary treatment for trauma has been within therapeutic contexts, insights from this area have enormous applicability in academic settings. Recent discoveries made in neuroscience have stimulated substantial work on the impact of trauma on thought, emotion, and memory sequencing in the brain.<sup>35</sup> Teachers who focus on themes of injustice and its causes are, in many ways, on the front lines in dealing with it. To be effective teachers, we often need to know the direct experiences of violence that students bring to the classroom.

Trauma theory can help teachers understand that when students have a trauma history (both named and not), this reality can leave them shut down, overwhelmed, and disengaged in their studies. “Trauma can act like an eraser,” leaving depression and loneliness in its wake.<sup>36</sup> This depression may manifest in students’ physical bodies (looking down, keeping eyes averted, being afraid to talk in class), in their level of motivation (wanting to be engaged but not knowing how to be), or not being able to feel the rush of really

learning. On the flip side, students who have been traumatized can also be those most willing and able to understand the depth of the course material, to take their experience and extrapolate it to understand other traumatized groups.

Students bring to the classroom the social traumas they have collectively survived. Part of our job involves recognizing that what stands in the way of practicing gentleness and compassion in the classroom mirrors what stands in its way outside of the classroom. As a culture, we have not begun to deal with the astronomical social upheavals in the past two decades that have taken place on top of each other—the 9/11 attacks, the Abu-Ghraib prison abuses, school massacres, police brutality, the rise of Islamophobia, attacks on immigrants, the Katrina and Haiti disasters, and the refugee crisis.<sup>37</sup> These are assaults on humanity that students walk into the classroom carrying, whether consciously or not. The impact of this violence translates into our ways of being with each other and how students learn.

While trauma theory helps us more fully work with students, it also gives us ways to see the classroom as a location for healing. One of the essential characteristics of trauma is what Dori Laub has named “a collapse of witnessing.”<sup>38</sup> By definition, a traumatic event (whether it be sexual abuse, witnessing a murder, or a collective trauma) involves the inability fully to witness the event as it occurs or the ability to witness the event fully only at the cost of witnessing oneself.<sup>39</sup> Following trauma you may blank out on what happened or see it only in fragments, like a film strip that was spliced, which may leave you with a haunting sense that something important is missing. Or you may have access to every detail, bringing vigilance to all that happens around you, but then have little awareness of your internal life. Sometimes trauma results in a combination of these protective reactions, all of which can leave you with a disoriented sense of self and belonging.

Recuperation requires the creation of a witness. This reality helps us see the potential healing made possible when assignments help create witnesses. Writing about trauma, then, is not only about developing certain analytical and organizational skills but also about creating a paper trail, a tangible record that an event did, in fact, occur, while attaching emotion to the event, transforming pain into beauty.<sup>40</sup>

Creating witnesses asks us to see that how trauma is experienced and processed is not universal, how trauma is embodied depends upon whose bodies we are talking about. The power of Martín Espada’s poem “Alabanza: In Praise of Local 100” pivots on its naming of immigrants from “Ecuador, México, Republica Dominicana / Haiti, Yemen, Ghana, Bangladesh” who



could “squint and almost see their world” before they lost their lives in the World Trade Center attacks. The profundity of Espada’s poem lies in its specificity, in honoring the alliteration of courage, the union workers who died and their family members who survived, still loving them. “First Writing Since,” by Suheir Hammad, a Palestinian American *New Yorker*, also speaks to the specificity of trauma as an embodied experience, as well as to the complexity and insanity of the attacks.<sup>41</sup>

These two poems offer us ways to teach that begins with specificity, that wraps around creativity, that celebrates the human spirit, that does not shy away from the depth of harm humans do to each other, that makes room for pain. When I asked students in a *Birth and Death: The Sociology of Joy and Suffering* class I taught at Duke University what happened in their classes on the day of the attack, they said, to a person, that classes went on as if nothing had occurred. My mouth dropped open when they said this. Our unplanned free writing for that day became what they remembered, where they were, what reverberates now. They wrote profound pieces, tears streaming, the witnessing of trauma beginning to be unlocked. About the power of writing, bell hooks explains, “It is usually impossible to explain to folks who are not writers that ideas, words, the whole essay itself may come from a place of mystery, emerging from the deep deep unconscious surfacing, so that even the writer is awed by what appears. Writing then is a revelation. It calls up and stirs up. It illuminates.”<sup>42</sup>

The creation of a community of deep listeners in a classroom is not only about teaching essential communication skills but also a means for students to bear witness to the stories of their lives. Such a witnessing begins at the level of the body—the actual physical process of being with each other, watching each other’s body language, seeing each other’s expressions, and hanging in there together through difficult, exciting, boring everyday discussions.

### Tenderness in Silhouette

What feminist teachers, trauma specialists, and contemplative practitioners share is understanding that teaching and learning start with the body—the happy body, the brown body, the young body, the worried body, the hurt body, the curious body, the growing body. In all of these traditions, the body is the starting place for intellectual, spiritual, and political growth. This common ground may be the most powerful reason that these fields have been at the margins of the academy—to speak about the embodied class flies in the

face of centuries-long academic privileging of the mind over the body, the notion that the intellect will, through disciplined study, reign.

For contemplative practitioners, meditation and yoga start with the breath, the body’s breath. For feminist theorists, women’s lives, work, and relationship to the world start with the body. In Native American philosophy, the earth is woman, is the body, from where we have all emerged. For trauma specialists, healing begins with understanding people’s relationships to their bodies, the memories in their bodies, their ability to safely reside in their bodies. For yoga practitioners, practice begins on the mat, in the body, in the breath of the body.

For me, beginning to understand the centrality of the body in the classroom came from realizing somewhere along the line in my academic training that I had left my body. And I wanted it back. That journey has been nurtured by trying to find my own body through sports, dance, and then yoga.<sup>43</sup> My own process has helped me see that how students are in their bodies often tells us much more than what they say. Multiracial feminist theory has also helped explain that there is no monolithic body. This reality requires me to be both focused and relaxed in seeing how embodiment manifests itself in classroom dynamics and styles of learning. Yoga and other contemplative practices help us see how to be genuinely present and attentive with each other as we struggle through challenging material. These practices allow us to witness each other’s healing while cultivating abundance and joy. These are the reasons my musing about teaching circles around the body—the students’ bodies, my body, and the collective body that we, imperfectly but regularly, try to inhabit together.

My hope to connect the analytical and somatic dots among trauma theory, contemplative practices, and multiracial feminism has led me to ponder a number of questions: What rituals might we incorporate into teaching that invite the body into the classroom? What is it about the structure of academe that leads us to flee our bodies? How can we find them again? What risks will this take? What truths do we need to tell about our lives and our teaching that we have been hiding from ourselves, or barely whispering? How might inviting bodies into the classroom change how we seek justice in the world?

In the following chapter, “Thatched Roof, No Walls,” I trace multiple factors that have kept feminist teachers, trauma specialists, and contemplative practitioners from learning from each other. I imagine what it might take to heal disciplinary splits and why it might be worth doing so for academic communities.

In the next two chapters, “Inviting Bodies” and “Creating Rituals,” I reckon with what embodiment looks like in the classroom. I chronicle how I was first invited fully into a classroom as a graduate student by the marvelous mentoring of a deep-listening professor and the books I fell in love with and, then, how I stumbled my way through creating syllabi and pedagogy that invited students into the classroom. I ask what it takes to build multiracial communities in a culture where people across race (and language, class, disability) are slated not to see each other and how I needed to stretch to help make the learning possible. I explore how I turned students away from their questioning spirits and what healing I needed to do to change that. I chronicle why sadness, betrayal, mistrust, and guilt become part of the fabric of classroom dynamics and how creating rituals of inclusion can help people keep their hearts open to each other and the material.

In “Why We Flee,” I chronicle multiple reasons we leave our bodies in academic settings. I trace how racism and a backlash against feminist gains to stop sexual harassment have policed our attempts to stay embodied when we teach, compromising our abilities to thrive as orators, as compassionate listeners, as people excited about our research. I give examples of the cues I missed when students could not fully engage with the course material and how understanding trauma can help us become more alert to students’ courage as they grapple with difficult material. I offer examples of how I have relied upon the creative writing by Yusef Komunyakaa, Rafael Campo, Sapphire, Edwidge Danticat, and other writers to teach about resilience in the face of war, homophobia, colonialism, and other violations. I also examine what students have taught me about the risks involved in being present in the process. The chapter ends with discussion of the synergistic relationship between the qualities of the mind and the sheaths of the body, in particular how yoga might catapult us to a place of deep connection and joy.

In “To You, I Belong,” I reckon with historical memory as an embodied concept. Teaching asks us to identify and work with memories in our bodies. The memories that we store often defy coherent narratives, require us to patchwork sensation with emotion, an energetic presence with evidence shaken by time.<sup>44</sup> The presence and insistence of historical memory inevitably ask us to make room for fear, grief, betrayal, confusion, and ambivalence, and sometimes a combination of all of those emotions. Dealing with historical memory isn’t easy—our own or our students’ memories. Working closely with the student life office, counseling services, and other support centers becomes crucial. At the same time, outsourcing emotional work to spaces beyond the classroom runs the risk of separating content from process, the

mind from the body (a symptom of alienated labor in the Marxist sense of the word). This outsourcing can send a message that a teacher is not up to the task of witnessing student journeys. In the chapter, I share some examples of when students were willing to share an embodied presence in the classroom and what they teach through their courage.

In the concluding chapter, I grapple with what bringing tenderness into the world might look like. Student willingness to question medical authorities in order to protect their children, to learn about a family history of living under fascism in Europe, and to become a bridge across generation and ethnicity gives a few of many examples of often unsung, uncelebrated ways that the tenderness can dance into our lives. From truth-telling by students, I turn to tenderness quite unexpectedly showered in my direction when I stood on the shore in Lesvos, Greece, waiting for refugees coming from Syria, Afghanistan, Palestine, Pakistan, and other war-torn countries. As they risked their lives to save their lives on perilous rafts from Turkey to Greece, I witnessed the biggest refugee crisis since World War II that, I came to understand, was also the biggest intergenerational, multiethnic, multifaith peace march in modern history.<sup>45</sup> Daily I witnessed great acts of tenderness, sometimes in place of language, sometimes in the air, on a raft, in the water, walking up a mountain pass with children and elders. I am overwhelmed by the dignity I saw. I am overwhelmed by the merciless power of multiple states, the capacity of the human spirit to survive. During the months of walking, talking, and listening, paradox became a constant companion. The sea, a graveyard; the sea, a current to safety; the sea, merciless and beautiful. The strawberry trees lining roads where we walked were skinless and radiant in the summer sun.

While colonialism, militarism, racism, and patriarchy remain structural impediments to tenderness, as teachers we find ourselves digging deep, knowing that, as Angela Davis has written, “without deep, abiding practices of self care, there can be no radical social transformation.” So this is where we start, rethinking our relationship to grading, office hours, faculty meetings, tests. We want to be able to send students off ready to do justice work. Such work may start with examining what Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet has called the “jewel at the left side of your chest.”<sup>46</sup> Our own jewels in this lifetime.

### For You, I Write

As I have imagined those who might be reading this book, I have pictured students who are doing all they can to stay whole even as pressures and educational injuries disregard them. I have pictured teachers in the social

sciences and humanities who, amid the din of bureaucracy and the ache of a bloody world, are trying to nurture liberatory classrooms. I have also written for those in the sciences, partly because my first exposure to practicing freedom in the classroom was as an undergraduate teaching assistant (TA) in an inorganic chemistry class. The professor willed us to work together, insisted that it was our responsibility that everyone understood, and got us moving around the classroom, treating collaborative blackboard work and seeing each other's eyes as key to learning.

I also hope that K-12 teachers will find companionship in the book. I was raised by a public high school teacher whose creativity and ingenuity enlivened thirty years of students but also often left my mother alone in the teachers' lunchroom, exhausted at the end of her days. At twenty-five years old and a single mother of two young girls, Sally Abood fought the school administration in order to teach *Montage for a Dream Deferred* (a multiracial anthology of poems, prose, and art) in an urban high school in Phoenix in the 1960s when the country was on racial fire. And she taught world poetry and art way before the new curriculum curve.

I also write for Shannon Farrington, a poet and former graduate student whose teaching of students with special needs in the Boston public schools bursts with subversive imagination. After Shannon read an earlier version of this book, she said, "K-12 teachers are craving tenderness, especially specific rituals to keep themselves and their students alive to learning." She added, "Everything you identify that professors are up against, we face, but worse. Teachers are not embodied in the classroom, so how can we expect students to be? The teachers who prioritize this are given bad evaluations and usually choose (are forced) to leave teaching altogether." I hope Shannon writes her own book on tenderness, one that will reach deeper than this one. May this book be a holding pattern until Shannon's arrives.

This book was also written for skeptics—those who shake their heads as you read, put the book down, and then maybe pick it up again. I want to learn from your skepticism. I write for yoga teachers who want to bring social justice to the center of their teaching, trauma specialists who work with students as they try to stay whole as they study. For anyone who, in the words of Otis Redding, will "try a little tenderness."

## 1

## Thatched Roof, No Walls

The rise of feminist pedagogy, trauma theory, and contemplative practices can all contribute to a more expansive and humane teaching. Yet conversations among people in these fields are just beginning. For the most part, it still feels like teachers carry our minds to one place (to work, the classroom, our desks), our bodies to another (to the gym, yoga studio, or couch), our spirits to another (to church, synagogue, mosque, mountains), our psychic healing to another (to the couch, the bed, to vacations), and our activism to another (to prisons, borders, the streets). Students sense and feel these splits. They are trying to learn amid these splits. And we are, somehow, trying to teach amid these splits.

This is why creating a pedagogy of tenderness requires its own new bridge work that is asking us to think bigger than we have before, to start from a place of imagination and go from there. For starters, I imagine the coming together of people who practice tenderness but have not necessarily been talking with each other. While we would need a big room for such a gathering, I certainly wouldn't want it to be a windowless, overly air-conditioned hotel conference room. Instead, since this is all in my imagination, let's opt for the gathering to be in a warm place where there is a domed, thatched roof but no walls, just open space looking out onto a sea, or mountains, or hills. Let's imagine that there is public transportation to this meeting site—maybe a properly funded Amtrak with a stop close to the thatched gathering. And let's imagine that anyone who wants to come can (which means child care, wheelchair ramps, plenty of different kinds of food, rugs for praying five times a day, and soft chairs for people who need to sit).