

RADICAL TEACHER

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

It's All About Eggs: Teaching Lifelong Learners

by Jyl Lynn Felman



THREE CHICKEN EGGS OF CONTRASTING COLORS, TIMOTHY TITUS, 2011

After thirty-five years of teaching college, I graduated to the “lifelong learning” classroom. It wasn’t a slow march down the aisle with the band playing “Pomp and Circumstance.” It was more like a huge leap spanning decades. I went from seminar rooms filled with twenty-year-olds to the over-seventy crowd, from young, unformed minds to hungry, opinionated adult ones. There were no requirements. Everything was an elective, including me. And I was teaching for free. I chose two vastly different Massachusetts cities for my pedagogical peregrinations. Each reflected parts of myself, Jewish and Queer, that I wanted reflected back. Hour after hour for days, I prepared as though I was teaching my first graduate seminar. I was sixty when I started. I’ve been teaching seniors for three years.

The first site is the Mosaic (name has been changed) Lifelong Learning Institute for LGBTQ seniors and friends. We meet in a donated, all-purpose space at a Unitarian Universalist church. Students pay twenty dollars for ten-week courses that meet weekly for an hour and a half in the morning or afternoon plus a lunch break with a speaker. No one is turned away for lack of funds. Courses range from Tai Chi to Social Justice Activism to Queer Literature. The students are working-to-comfortably-middle class. Some work part-time. Many live on limited income, have low-quality health care, and may rely on public transportation. Attendance is uneven due to illness and family caretaking responsibilities. Mosaic students are predominately white, cisgendered lesbians. They are partnered or single. They seek intellectual stimulation and want to break out of social isolation in a safe environment. As a lesbian myself, I have enormous freedom to be out and proud in this classroom. Even though I was out for years as a university professor, now I can be a big, bold, red-lipstick-wearing, high Jewish femme in black leggings and leather boots! And not be afraid of losing my job.

An Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) is the other program I chose and is formally connected to an elite private university. OLLI receives an annual grant from the Osher Endowment Fund and has to meet specific requirements set up by the national foundation. We meet in a remodeled building near the main college campus. The space was designed for the exclusive use of OLLI with four classrooms clustered around a meeting hall used for lectures and lunch. The majority of students are cisgendered heterosexual, Jewish, white women from middle-to-upper class. They are also proud grandparents of highly accomplished, affluent families. Some are widows or widowers.

The OLLI structure is set up like college with courses four days a week, offered in three session blocks daily with lunch lectures and Friday study-group meetings. Courses are academically-oriented covering philosophy, literature, classical music, art history, the Russian Revolution, the Civil War, politics and more. Students miss class for health issues, overseas leisure travel, and numerous visiting grandchildren. The biggest difference between Mosaic and OLLI is class and privilege. OLLI’s full program costs \$675 for two semesters including January programming. I had two friends on fixed-income who wanted to take my course (at OLLI) but couldn’t afford it. I asked the director if

there was a reduced rate. Although not advertised, partial scholarships are available.

OLLI has three full-time paid staff members while Mosaic is all volunteers. In OLLI, you first must become a member to take classes, which are taught by Study Group Leaders (SGLs) who are also participants. To apply I had to have a face-to-face interview with the executive director and write a proposal. At Mosaic, anybody who wants to offer a course can, once the curriculum committee accepts it. Having had to resubmit syllabi to both programs, I know the evaluation processes are seriously rigorous. The review was so in-depth that I was sure I was back in the academy! The trick was to learn how to write a lifelong learning syllabus, which needs to be short on intimidating theory and not over-loaded with requirements and deadlines.

Teaching seniors is my full-time political work and the place where I grow intellectually. I used to (in my twenties, thirties, and forties) go to abortion rights rallies and marched (often) “on Washington”. I gave speeches on radical lesbian feminism, racism and classism in the “Women’s Community.” I wrote essays and diatribes against patriarchy. In the past, my activism was outside in the streets, on panels at conferences, and on the page. Now, as a senior myself, I’ve “come in from the cold.” I am inserting my subversive voice into the weekly classroom.

In the past, my activism was outside in the streets, on panels at conferences, and on the page. Now, as a senior myself, I’ve “come in from the cold.” I am inserting my subversive voice into the weekly classroom.

Teaching seniors is different from undergraduates because the fragility of life is close by. Debilitating or chronic illness and the possibility of one’s own death or of a loved one is an acknowledged reality. Many young, middle-class students in their twenties often feel invincible and that they will live forever. Their sense of vulnerability is more about getting into the right college or graduate school, and having a four-point average. To some, getting a “B+” as opposed to an “A” is like getting an “F.” I’m different too, from when I first started teaching college thirty-five years ago. In my own way, I am more adamant and less flexible with seniors than I was with undergraduates. Like my present-day students, I have more confidence and am an established, published professional with a reputation. I am not climbing the tenure ladder and there is much less at stake.

For me the art of teaching well is political. Activist pedagogy that relies on critical inquiry and self-reflection is always at the core of what I do in the classroom. The constant negotiation of power and relationships, coupled with the exchange of knowledge among successful peers, is intensified with lifelong learners. There is a greater sense of being on an intellectual journey together. I am no

longer “just the professor,” but a whole person with a long, full life behind her. I also choose my courses carefully, and for the first time in my teaching career, on any subject that interests me. This is an academic freedom that I never had before, and I relish the chance to design new, boundary-crossing courses. I pick literature that neither program would normally offer, and that stretches the students beyond their life experiences. For Mosaic, my first course was on the life and work of Audre Lorde, the African American radical, lesbian feminist poet, prose writer and woman warrior. Next, I taught a mind-blowing (for me and the students) course on butch/femme identity, and just finished ten weeks exploring Pat Parker, an African American, butch lesbian, cutting-edge poet and performance artist who died of breast cancer at the age of forty-five in 1989.

My first course at OLLI was “Love, Politics, and Betrayal” on the work of gay, Jewish playwright Tony Kushner, who wrote *Angels in America*. The more conventional OLLI students had to confront gay men fucking in Central Park, the horrific reality of AIDS in the 1980s, and a closeted, Mormon character who eventually leaves his pill-popping wife. Plus, Ethel Rosenberg coming back to say Kaddish for the despicable Roy Cohn. Because no one wanted to be seen as homophobic in such a liberal democratic as-opposed-to republican environment, any unease with homosexuality remained unspoken. Only one student admitted having a lesbian daughter; no one discussed LGBTQ friends or relatives. I got the sense that the AIDS crisis was far removed from OLLI participants’ lives. The class welcomed the few personal details of my lesbian identity that I shared, appreciating that I was comfortable enough to talk about “being out” for over forty-five years. Confronting a main character who was a polymorphous angel who had heterosexual sex with a sick gay man while flying across the stage was much more challenging. Most of the class knew about, but had not seen, the play. One regular theatre-going student had never heard of *Angels in America*, even though it was a 1993 Pulitzer Prize winner (and a made-for-TV American Playhouse movie with Meryl Streep and Al Pacino). The class learned to truly appreciate Kushner’s genius when it came to craft and storytelling, although getting used to his nonlinear, spectacular epic style was daunting. The most resistance came when I dared to compare Tony Kushner with William Shakespeare. They asked, “How could a contemporary writer, with only one epic work completed twenty-five years ago, be put in the same category as Shakespeare who wrote thirty-seven plays and 154 sonnets; and whose work has endured for over four hundred years?” In the discussion, I had to locate *Angels* politically as a complex work of social commentary with brilliant literary feats, spell-binding dramatic moments and argue for the sheer magnitude of the seven-hour work itself, before the students accepted the comparison. We spent the first five weeks on *Angels...* and the last five on Kushner’s other plays, *Caroline Or Change*, *Homebody/Kabul*, and *Tiny Kushner*, a series of short plays.

Next, I taught *From Dreams to Nightmares: Five African-American Women Playwrights*, including Lorraine

Hansberry, Ntozake Shange, Suzan-Lori Parks, Lynn Nottage, and Katori Hall. For OLLI, the material went way beyond what the students were used to reading, challenging their understanding of race, class, gender, and sexuality. They had never analyzed the world through a “multiple lens” approach. At Mosaic, the students were primarily challenged reading across race and gender performance “roles,” because the subject matter related directly to their lives.

My intersectionality method makes everything I teach inherently political. I introduced Kimberle Williams Crenshaw’s theory (of intersectionality) to both OLLI and MOSAIC participants by explaining how systems of oppression, hierarchies of privilege and dominance impact identity while being simultaneously interrelated. Since they had been involved in feminism and social justice, the LGBTQ seniors had everyday experience with the effects of intersectionality on their lives, while the mostly Jewish students (at OLLI) responded through their framework of anti-Semitism. Analyzing the benefits of privilege was much more complicated at OLLI (than MOSAIC) because the discussion would inevitably have to turn to the socio-economic status and benefits of the class members. Not an easy place for them to go. But applying Crenshaw’s theory to the analysis of literature was a challenge for everyone.

In teaching seniors, as compared to college students, I relearned immediately how important a good, effective facilitator is. Even though I had always been a talented discussion leader, I found unexpected challenges. Seniors like to talk about their lives and often go off on tangents. There can be a lot of competition to speak, and learning to listen to each other is often difficult: there is always someone who likes to hog the limelight. Sibling rivalry runs rampant. I had to rein people in and set ground rules from the beginning: no sidebar conversations or going off on personal stories, no eating in class, and “please” don’t repeat (or pontificate on) what’s already been said. I had to state firmly that class etiquette requires no one can interrupt someone else, which can happen a lot if there is not a strong, fearless facilitator. I get a really good workout with seniors because they are voracious, serious, excited learners. Some OLLI participants are retired professors or experienced educators with strong ideas of their own about good teaching. At first I performed a high-wire act, afraid of falling any minute into a heavy net of aging pedagogical anxiety. Everybody, myself included, calmed down after a few weeks.

I explain my radical pedagogy the first day and discuss that calling on people eliminates the same few from talking all the time, while giving the quieter students a chance to talk.

Also, I call on students, which is always controversial in the beginning. I explain my radical pedagogy the first day and discuss that calling on people eliminates the same

few from talking all the time, while giving the quieter students a chance to talk. Anyone is free to pass if they'd rather not speak. I have gotten tremendous appreciation for this "hands-on" approach. People who aren't used to participating find out they have worthwhile opinions. There is also a tendency, when there are only a few men in the classroom, for them to take over the discussion while the women retreat. This was a problem in my college courses too and has to be addressed diplomatically. Seniors are full of life and energy, but working with them is very different. They have more confidence than undergraduates and speak with a lot of authority, voice, and agency. They're complex, mature individuals who are used to being in charge and take direction with some resistance. Initially, I was intimidated by their articulate, informed voices and felt I had to "prove" myself. This was especially true at OLLI because of its class privilege and institutional affiliation.

At OLLI I stood up, gliding around the room basking in the splendor of the pedagogical performance moment. At Mosaic, I was more relaxed from the start sitting in a circle surrounded by the whole class. I was so relaxed and fully my lesbian, femme self, that I didn't think I was working hard enough. I was nervous I wasn't "professorial" because I wasn't gesticulating and stomping around. But of course that wasn't the case. Teaching at Mosaic raised the question (for me personally) of how the classroom is changed when the teacher can be seen in her whole person. Among my LGBTQ peers, I didn't worry about being "seen" as too lesbian or even as a radical feminist. The very existence of a Queer lifelong learning institute is politically significant because Queer elders are usually invisible. At more traditional OLLI I am restrained in my queerness and more guarded in my performance. I don't want to be "dismissed" at the onset as having any kind of counter-normative agenda, even though I do implicitly. My goal is always to disrupt the status quo. The classroom is and always was my site for "revolution." Challenging the "dominant paradigm" in any learning environment is the treacherous goal I always set for myself. It's where I have the most impact on people while being vulnerable at the same time. Teaching resistance and critical thinking is like turning the "normal" world on its head to create self-awareness and motivate action. After teaching *From Dreams to Nightmares*, OLLI students were excited about attending plays by Black authors; and (after Audre Lorde and Pat Parker) Mosaic seniors wanted to read more cross-culturally. That's a successful revolution, in my educational paradigm.

My goal is always to disrupt the status quo. The classroom is and always was my site for "revolution." Challenging the "dominant paradigm" in any learning environment is the treacherous goal I always set for myself.

I learned the hard way about assigning too much reading. In college, assigning an entire book per week was

commonly accepted. But seniors live very busy, active, rich lives and memory is often problematic. When I first taught the course on Audre Lorde at Mosaic, I "merely" adapted my original, academic fifteen-week syllabus to a ten-week course. This didn't work. These were not full-time students and, due to age and fatigue, their ability to remember what they read was reduced. "Less is more" became my motto for homework assignments. Also, we read selected sections out loud. This works because it brings the reading front and center in the students' minds. In teaching plays, it was particularly successful to have the students read the dialogue out loud, so they could "hear" the rhythm of the language and the unique voice of the playwright. Some students were reluctant to read out loud, and balked in the beginning. I explained that you have to "hear" a play and speak poetry to fully comprehend each text. By the end of the semester, both sets of students performed at top level, and developed an appreciation of the craft of playwriting, poetry and the spoken word.

I was not prepared for the wide range of hearing ability in the lifelong learning classroom. I project easily, but the students often have difficulty hearing each other. Some people wear hearing aids, others do not. This is a sensitive issue. I had to ask everyone to speak up on a regular basis. Often, I had to repeat what had been said. I did not break up the class into small groups or partners (like I used to do) because of the inability of students to hear well when speaking in lowered tones. I also did not assign written work in or out of class. It simply would not get done because everyone was too busy with "outside" activities. In class, few took notes as compared with undergraduates who are copious note takers. My primary method was to ask questions to generate opinions. Listening and talking were the most effective learning styles.

I had a specific goal of what I wanted to cover and worked hard to stay on track. In many ways, my teaching was less improvisational than in the past. Seniors thrive on structure that is both fluid and predictable, which is a delicate balance. There has to be a road map with lots of scenic stops along the way. Lecturing for long periods doesn't work. Synthesizing the material regularly during class helped everyone stay "present" and enhanced comprehension. The senior environment is rigorous because the participants want to be there. Attendance is not mandatory. There are no required courses. So, the classroom becomes an "active site" by nature (due to years of lived experience) less than by the intentional nurture of the teacher. Energy and high intellectual exchange permeate discussions. There are no laissez-faire participants. My brain is "stretched" and I'm invigorated after each class. And exhausted.

The main challenge for me at both sites was to figure out how to teach cross-culturally to white students unfamiliar with diversity --whether race, class, sexuality or gender-- in their daily lives. In teaching *A Raisin in The Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry, I pushed the class to see the story as more than its traditional, reductive interpretation of a Black family striving to move out of the ghetto into a white, middle-class neighborhood. Most participants

thought they knew the play, although they hadn't read the actual script. A few had seen a production years ago. In early discussions, most of the class missed the universality of the play itself and were not able to see themselves in the characters' human desires and longings. They were merely reading about a Black family without any emotional connection to the plot.

I wanted them to connect with the craving for intimacy between Walter Lee and his wife Ruth, and to empathize with Beneatha's search for identity and Mama's hunger for sunlight and a garden. I chose the following excerpts as an example of a frustrated, married couple who have trouble communicating. I wanted Walter Lee's and Ruth's struggle to resonate with their own desire to be understood by a partner.

Ruth: Walter, leave me alone! (She raises her head and stares at him vigorously then says, more quietly) Eat your eggs, they gonna be cold.

*Walter: (Straightening up from her and looking off) There you are. Man say to his woman: I got me a dream. His woman say: Eat your eggs. (Sadly, but gaining in power) Man say: I got to take hold of this here world, baby! And a woman will say: Eat your eggs and go to work. (Passionately now.) Man say: I got to change my life, I'm choking to death, baby! And his woman say—(In utter anguish as he brings his fists down on his thighs)—Your eggs is getting cold! (from *A Raisin in The Sun*, by Lorraine Hansberry, Act One, Scene One).*

I talked about eggs. How the playwright uses food to show miscommunication and disconnection between people who love each other. We read scene after scene without any white characters and talked about how often Black or LGBTQ theatre-goers don't see themselves reflected back on the stage. Instead, they have to imagine their own personal narratives into the script while simultaneously watching the performance. We discussed W. E. B. DuBois' "double consciousness" concept, of always looking at oneself through the oppressor's viewpoint, such that Black audiences have to hold on to their own autonomy/selfhood when viewing plays that don't reflect their reality. This was a new concept. Many admitted that they didn't go to (or read) Black theatre because they assumed it didn't relate to their lives or was only about suffering, slavery, and anti-white bashing. No one wanted to feel attacked by going out for a night of theatre.

It took weeks for the students to feel comfortable speaking aloud in Black vernacular. Some were nervous about themselves as white people speaking Ebonics. I explained that they were learning a new language, much like studying Irish playwrights (Enda Walsh, Martin McDonough, or Edna O'Brien) who write in Irish dialect. In teaching theatre, the language of the play must be spoken (or performed) out loud to be understood completely. Self-conscious and embarrassed, they kept trying. By the time we got to *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf*, by ntozake shange, they were "singing" the blues and "signifying" from deep inside. They were "feeling" the play's power beyond what they

originally thought was its "limitations" and lack of relevancy in their own lives. They were not mimicking Black people or offensively performing minstrel, but were theatre students studying significant American playwrights. The distinction was clear to everyone.

When studying shange's life I discussed her middle class up-bringing and that houseguests of her parents included Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, Chuck Berry, and W. E. B. DuBois. She graduated *cum laude* in American Studies from Barnard and got an M.A. from the University of Southern California. I explained that the sheer beauty and unique rhythm of *for colored girls...* is in the voices of the women characters, written in the style of a long choreopoem in Black urban street language. One student interrupted my introduction with a pointed, but genuine question. *How could shange, from such a privileged background, be able to write in Black vernacular?* I was unprepared for the question and taken aback by the query. Because shange's parents were highly educated (her father an Air Force surgeon and her mother an educator and psychiatric social worker) the student assumed shange didn't have access to Black experiences other than the lifestyle of the Black bourgeoisie. I explained that men (Tennessee Williams *et al.*) write from women's viewpoints and in female voices all the time, and that a good writer can imagine characters' lives different from their own. More significantly, I added that due to the history of segregation, Black people's neighborhoods were often mixed-class and/or that poor neighborhoods bordered more wealthy neighborhoods. And owing to restrictive covenants, over-priced mortgages and a racist banking industry, there was often movement between classes in any one Black family or street. The students were not aware of the extent of cross-pollination in the Black community. In thinking about the assumptions white students have about the lives of people of color, I realized that I was also teaching African American cultural history in addition to the plays themselves.

After that first class, I contextualized the plays, adding in Civil Rights history and socioeconomic information from 1959 to 2009. I located the readers in worlds they have little or no access to, and familiarized them with concepts such as structural racism, internalized self-loathing and the hierarchy of oppression. I had to work hard to keep the literature at the forefront rather than American race relations or racism. We discussed what it was like to see the Black experience from the inside, rather than always filtered through a "white" imagination. This was a new idea. We moved beyond the stereotypical characters of maids, butlers, and buffoons historically portrayed in the movies and on TV (*Gone with The Wind*, *et. al.*) The richness of each text continued to surprise the class. Not one play was alike in structure or content. By the end, the talent of the playwrights flew off the page and filled the students with utter amazement at what they had been missing out on before.

One issue that came up repeatedly was the portrayal of Black men by the Black women playwrights. Other than Walter Lee in *A Raisin in The Sun*, who goes through a total character transformation, most male characters (in *for colored girls...* *Intimate Apparel*, *Top/Dog Underdog*,

Saturday Night, Sunday Morning, and The Mountaintop) cheat on their wives/girlfriends, are emotionally and physically abusive, and/or don't have real jobs. Mystified and unsettled, much of the class wondered "why?" *Wasn't this male-bashing? Where were the happy Black marriages and good Black men?* they asked. Their reluctance to accept these portrayals as other than male-hating belied their understanding of the history of violence against Black men that was turned inward and taken out on the women of their own communities. Another issue came up concerning the legitimacy of the women playwrights to write the characters that were the most compelling to them as writers without making the characters palatable for a white audience. People did not want to acknowledge that Martin Luther King, Jr. (in *The Mountaintop* by Katori Hall) was less than a saint or the reality of abuse in some black women's lives (*for colored girls...*).

In contrast, in teaching the herstory of butch/femme identity in the lesbian community, I was teaching "living subjects" their own stories (including mine). MOSAIC students came out in the Women's Movement of the 1970's and 80's, or much later in life after years of heterosexual marriage (and children), in their 50's, 60's and 70's! Their present-day rejection of butch/femme as a positive identity related to a misunderstanding of the erotic underpinnings of lesbian relationships. They rejected the concept of "roles" outright. The class became very personal for everyone. When appropriate, I used my femme self and butch partner of nineteen years as an example. (Something I never did in OLLI.) We read selections from both *Persistence: All Ways Butch and Femme*, edited by Ivan D. Coyote and Zenna Sharman, and *The Persistent Desire: A Femme/Butch Reader*, edited by Joan Nestle. We discussed the "sex wars" in the 1970's and 80's, although most of the class had never heard of the 1982 infamous Barnard Conference on Sexuality where the legitimacy of pornography was challenged. Historically the lesbian feminist movement rejected butch/femme identity as a total parody of heterosexual, male/female gender roles. I talked a lot about how much this response was based on internalizing "The Master's" hetero-normative narrative and not about the actual erotic tension between two women attracted to each other. We discussed how "difference" versus "sameness" can be a turn-on and the reality that butch-identified lesbians were physically attacked (and are still) just walking down the street alone.

In contrast, femmes were seen in the past (and in the class) as "passing" for straight, benefitting from heterosexual privilege, and taken far less seriously than butch women. In the 1970's and 80's the gender binary was out and androgyny was in. By lesbian "law", big lumber jackets, plaid flannel shirts, navy-blue chinos and heavy work boots replaced the rigid gender imposition of tight-fitting A-line skirts, soft, pastel cashmere turtlenecks, and shimmering silk blouses. (This was especially oppressive to fulfilling my creative, sartorial self-expression, I opined half seriously and half in jest). Students remembered how freeing it was to give up wearing a bra, stop shaving, and having to feminize their appearance. No one wanted to go back to the constricting

roles of femininity and family that they grew up with in the 1950s!

I broke many silences about lesbian sexuality, dildos, and desire. I learned to talk about how, herstorically, "penetration" (see the work of Andrea Dworkin, Catherine MacKinnon, and Sheila Jeffries), or imitating the missionary position, was seen as politically incorrect and oppressive to women. Resistance (and outrage) to the use of the terms "butch/femme" was strong and continued throughout the semester. Most of the class was against labels of any kind. Fury at femmes for "selling out" their more masculine-identified sisters by wearing lipstick, high heels and revealing clothing kept coming up. It was difficult (for the students) to deal with, understand, and accept the contradictory realities of being feminist and overtly feminine. I felt on edge much of the time, like I had to prove myself as a "real" radical, lesbian feminist in spite of wearing lavender eye-shadow, burnt red lipstick and long, dangling earrings. Because the content of the course referenced the life experiences of the participants, they felt personally conflicted, much like my undergraduate female students when I taught Introduction to Women Studies.

In teaching the work of African American lesbian writers Audre Lorde and Pat Parker the biggest issue was white privilege. Unlike OLLI, Mosaic participants talked openly about growing up white and having little contact with Black people.

Although it was exhilarating to teach the course of my dreams, "Butch/Femme Identity" challenged me pedagogically. Believing the "personal is always political," I had to balance how much the students could talk about their lives, against how much theory to discuss. Mosaic class members felt extremely vulnerable with the material. Unlike the students at OLLI, they weren't intellectual outsiders studying another culture. They were the insiders themselves. This brought immediacy to the classroom that wasn't present at OLLI. One student who favored androgyny cried when talking about how she wasn't allowed to play baseball because of the gender rigidity she grew up with in the 50's. Another more Butch woman brought in a dress she was considering wearing for the first time in years. (What clothes to wear was an ongoing discussion topic.) Several students who came out in their late sixties (outside of the Woman's Movement and Feminism) refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of butch/femme identity in the lesbian community at all. The issue of social class came up, as we talked about the relationship of working-class identity and "masculine" women (*a la Stone Butch Blues* by Leslie Fineberg). Only one woman out of fifteen identified as a "butchy" femme with the emphasis on "butch." And one student was so upset by the material she dropped out. In the end, this wasn't just gender theory. It was real-life praxis.

In teaching the work of African American lesbian writers Audre Lorde and Pat Parker the biggest issue was white privilege. Unlike OLLI, Mosaic participants talked openly about growing up white and having little contact with Black people. Social segregation, the history of racism, and economic disparity were acknowledged outright and never minimized. There was a keen sense of anger about ongoing police violence. Mosaic students were not afraid to personalize the material and hold themselves accountable. This was a huge difference from OLLI. Students genuinely admired and respected the outspoken political work of each author. Both Lorde and Parker were accomplished, brave, radical artists who took tremendous risks in their lives. They were revolutionaries. They called out homophobia in the Black community and had long-term white lovers in an age when interracial relationships were dangerous and suspect. Their bravery inspired the class. One session, I asked what was a “revolutionary” act that each student had accomplished in her life, a question I wouldn’t ever have asked at OLLI. A woman said she had two illegal abortions; another was a research librarian who ordered “forbidden” books; and another adopted a Black child.

For the last session on Pat Parker I asked the class to write a short response to studying this amazing artist for ten weeks. I was hesitant to request a writing assignment—fearing that no one would do anything—but felt it was important in this context because so much of the writing touched the class on a deeply personal level. I wanted them to actively reflect on the experience. Anything would do, I said: free-writing, a rant, simple notes, even a few sentences. All but one student actually wrote something. Their words revealed Pat Parker’s impact:

Personally, I found the poems that described her experience as an African American child in the South—learning self-hatred, witnessing people being hurt or lynched, being taught by her parents how to behave to protect herself—to be the most powerful. White people can never truly grasp this experience, but Pat Parker made the pain real for me in a deep way.

Her poetry also brought back lots of memories of my early lesbian days in the 70’s and 80s . . . politically correct clothing and all. There was humor

and pain . . . about non-monogamy and other issues of the day.

Another student wrote a spoken word performance piece in homage to Parker’s style that brought the house down:

I want to BE Pat Parker. Lay it on me, girl. Gimme some a your fine fire that tears me up with life raw and true. You drag those places we need to see right up in front a us. Gotta look. Gotta look deep. Hard. Close. All those words come in my skin and start raisin hell . . . Burn that muther down!

Changed me. Her bein out there for her girl. Speakin out for all the women hidin they real selves in a world hatin them for existin. Her ma’s words in my ma’s looks: What child is this?

Teaching lifelong learners changed me profoundly. My respect for the aging process and for what seniors go through on a daily basis was expanded. Each time I enter the classroom, I vow never to let my brain go soft. Constantly, I wonder what unknown universes I can open for both Mosaic and OLLI, as I teach at the highest level of excellence in my thirty-plus year career. I see that I’ve risen to the task of teaching students I was never trained for and take great pride in my accomplishment. The work is particularly meaningful to me in the age of Trump; I participate in political action every day. Because the seniors themselves haven’t quit engaging purposefully, their presence in my life helps me fight off my own despondency at the decline in democracy worldwide and the wanton environmental destruction of the planet. When I close my eyes, I hear the entire OLLI class repeating out loud in unison the last words in ntozake shange’s play *for colored girls*:

*I found god in myself
& loved her fiercely.*

*& this is for colored girls who have considered suicide/but
are movin to the end of their own rainbows.*

Amen, I say. Amen.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://www.library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://www.library.pitt.edu/dscribe/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.library.pitt.edu/).