Brother Insider: Towards a Trans* Onto-Epistemology

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Abstract

This paper is an autoethnographic exploration of my engagement with Audre Lorde's Sister Outsider (1984). The purpose of this exploration is to theorize what Lorde's work offers to the conception of a non-binary transmasculinity and how that offering might impact my pedagogical practice as a transmasculine educator. By critically reflecting on my own "crisis of unlearning" while engaging Sister Outsider, I articulate that experience, what I refer to as brother insider, by writing a letter to Audre Lorde and re-reading my experience by analyzing the letter. In writing and re-reading the letter, I am able to identify and challenge my own assumptions to address gaps in my analysis. I then discuss implications for my pedagogical practice and future education research centering Black feminist thought.

Keywords*: Audre Lorde, Gender, Trans*, Non-binary Masculinity, Black Feminist Thought*

This paper is an autoethnographic exploration of my engagement with Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider* (1984). This exploration serves to articulate my experience as a queer Black trans*[1] person, analyze my own reading of Lorde, and re-read (Kumashiro, 2002) my experience to re-orient my work within an onto-epistemological framework. By reflecting on my own experiences, I acknowledge and process the tensions that exist in my own learning. I do this by writing a letter to Audre Lorde in an effort to process my feelings and thoughts of the text. I use letter writing to not only engage my own recursive thinking, but as a way to be in active dialogue with *Sister Outsider*.

The purpose of this exploration is to theorize what Audre Lorde's work offers to the conception of non-binary transmasculinity and how that offering might impact my pedagogical practice as a transmasculine educator. By critically reflecting on my own "crisis of unlearning" while engaging *Sister Outsider*, I articulate that experience, what I refer to as *brother insider*, by writing a letter to Audre Lorde and re-reading my experience by analyzing the letter. In writing and re-reading the letter, I am able to identify and challenge my own assumptions to address gaps in my analysis. I then discuss implications for my pedagogical practice and future education research centering Black feminist thought.

This (recursive) engagement with Lorde's work challenges me to hold both theory and emotion in my own work, leading me towards new understandings of my assumptions in my teaching and scholarship. I call for both an ontological and epistemological shift in how we understand (and teach about) trans* experiences. In moving away from understanding trans* identity within the context of how cisgender identity is constructed, a trans* onto-epistemology orients us towards

1. I use trans(*) specifically as an umbrella term for whom Jourian & Simmons (2017) referred to as "people who move across genders, who challenge or deviate from the traditional binary in some way, and/or transcend gendered expectations" (p. 61).

new ways to think about gender identity and supports creating a paradigm that deconstructs the cis/trans* binary.

Context and Theoretical Framework

During my doctoral studies I participated in a class on queering curriculum and teaching at the intersections of identity. As a queer Black trans* person, I often take up the question: what does it mean to queer one's teaching? And, what does that queering actually look like in a classroom? Reading Audre Lorde's (1984) *Sister Outsider* generated my thinking around that question. A collection of both written essays and speeches, Lorde explored the realities of being a Black, lesbian woman and how her lived experiences both shaped how she understood the world and how she thought about social change. *Sister Outsider* is now a foundational text within feminist thought, still resonating with audiences more than 30 years later.

Audre Lorde herself said that she was not a theorist; she identified as a poet, yet she is considered a central figure in the development of feminist theory. Lorde's work was profoundly personal and therefore, deeply subjective. As theory is often considered objective, this type of writing blurred the lines between self-expression and meaning making. "The white western patriarchal ordering of things requires that we believe there is an inherent conflict between what we feel and what we think--between poetry and theory" (Bereano 1983, p. 9). Lorde's *Sister Outsider* is a fundamental text in challenging the binary of emotion and theory. Lorde's work is the embodiment of the refusal to separate the emotional impact of one's sense making of the world. By writing from a place that evokes emotion, she gives us insight into the ways her identities shape her lived experiences. Her work becomes auto-ethnographic (Hamilton, Smith, & Worthington, 2008) in that way, situating herself within a larger cultural context. It is for these reasons that a class on queering curriculum and teaching at the intersections would include Lorde and her contributions to queer and feminist thought.

Lorde's work is not only an expression of Black, lesbian woman identity, but a larger perspective on understanding the impact of systems of oppression (specifically racism, sexism, and heterosexism) on our everyday lives. By situating herself within a larger context of white supremacist cis-heteropatriarchy, Lorde illustrates how her unique positioning creates language for her to articulate the pervasive ways overlapping systems of oppression operate. Lorde simultaneously experienced racialized heterosexism from Black communities and queered racism within lesbian/queer communities. Her writing illustrates the unique challenges she faced because of the ways in which her identities overlap and connect.

In *Troubling Education* (2002), Kumashiro used queer and feminist readings of poststructuralism to explore the ways oppression plays out differently in different situations. An example of this would be Lorde's experiences of racialized heterosexism in one context and queered racism in another. Lorde's text provides tangible examples of what Kumashiro asks educators to understand about oppression; it [the text] exemplifies the ways in which "oppression is multiple, interconnected and ever-changing" (p. 52). Kumashiro's conceptualization of oppression offers insight into what queering teaching might look like within the context of teaching about social change. The result of such a pedagogical approach is students understand that their experiences are partial, and context informs how they read how oppression is operating in their everyday lives, both inside and outside of the classroom.

What does one do with this new information? Particularly if it is contradictory to the information and socialization we have received about what oppression is and how it operates in people's lives? Turning to queer and feminist readings of psychoanalysis, Kumashiro (2002) theorizes about the crisis of learning and unlearning. He wrote, "we resist learning what will disrupt the frameworks we traditionally use to make sense of the world and ourselves" (p. 57). In order for anti-oppressive practices to inspire change, the resistance to do that change must be addressed and engaged. There is an emotional discomfort that comes with unlearning, or troubling previously learned oppressive ideas and behaviors. This "crisis" is necessary for change but is often avoided by educators.

> Consequently, educators need to create a space in their curriculums in which students can work through crisis. Shoshana Felman (1995) discusses how her students worked through a crisis they experienced by giving testimonies (self-reflections and analyses) of their experiences of the crisis. She argues that teaching and learning really take place only through entering and working through crisis, since it is this process that moves a student from being stuck into a different intellectual, emotional and political space. (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 63)

Lorde's writings also serve as an example of what Felman refers to as testimonials. Her work is a reflexive engagement of her own meaning making based on her lived experience of embodying the contradictions societal norms of what it means to be Black, queer, *and* a woman. Her writing is an expression of how the crisis space might manifest; an understanding of the multiplicity and inter-connectivity of personal identity and larger social structures; an opportunity to understand the world from a different intellectual, emotional and political space.

Crisis and Reflection

Lorde's work is an embodiment of what Kumashiro's visions of anti-oppressive education can offer, as well as a tool to engage the crisis space of recognizing one's complicity in oppressive behaviors and ideas. As a queer, Black trans person I expected to read Lorde's work with reverence and understanding. I understood what it was like to have a racialized and gendered body; I understood the ways that oppression was layered in my own experiences and how that shaped how I navigated the world. But I never thought Lorde's work would send me into my own crisis space.

I was particularly struck when reading Lorde's essay "Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist's Response" in which she talked about gender. My reading of the essay was informed by my assumptions about the context in which it was written. "Man Child" was originally published in 1979, the same year as Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire.* Second wave feminism had a biologically deterministic politic and embraced an anti-trans sentiment. Most (white) feminists at that time where writing about gender in cis-normative and cis-centric ways. Women of Color, lesbians and trans women were often excluded from these conceptions of womanhood. "Each of these groups, especially in their intersections, was perceived as being too masculine to be truly anti-patriarchal in their politics" (Stewart, 2017, p. 296).

It is for these reasons Black feminism resists a gender-essentialist definition of what it means to be a woman. The 1986 statement offered by the Combahee River Collective affirms:

> We have a great deal of criticism and loathing for what men have been socialized to be in this society: what they support, how they act, and how they oppress. But we do not have

> the misguided notion that it is their maleness, per se—i.e., their biological maleness—that makes them what they are. As black women we find any type of biological determinism a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic. (p. 275)

Many would argue that this Black feminist text offers what Susan Stryker (2017) refers to as "an important foundation for trans-inclusive feminist politics" (p. 124). This statement opens up space for trans* inclusivity, combating the gender essentialist notions of what it means to be a woman. I read this as explicitly creating space specifically for trans women and transfemininity but was unclear about its implications for transmasculinity.

I began to wonder: *what would Audre Lorde have to say about someone like me?* A person who is both queer in sexuality *and* gender? A Black Latinx, transmasculine person who moves through the world read as a cisgender Black man. A person who had a girlhood I strongly identified with but grew into an adult manhood. In "Man Child" Lorde reflects on her experiences of being the lesbian mother of her male child. I was struck by Lorde's use of language that I read to assume cisgender status and makes declarative statements about the assumed limits of gender identity.

> And our sons must become men—such men as we hope our daughters, born and unborn, will be pleased to live among. Our sons will not grow into women. Their way is more difficult than that of our daughters, for they must move away from us, without us. (Lorde, 1984, p. 73)

What do we make of our sons who *do* grow into women? What do we make of our daughters who *do* move away from their mothers, without them? And what do these questions offer us in how we understand gender in more expansive ways? How do these answers impact how I teach about gender?

Throughout reading Lorde's work, I felt conflicted. I deeply resonated with her writing, as someone who spent 22 years of my life as a woman. Particularly the rage she specifically speaks of in her body as a Black lesbian woman. She recognizes the impact that kind of rage has on a person; when we don't have anywhere for that rage to go, we take it out on each other. I think about all the rage that lived inside me as a Black girl that got buried even deeper when I decided to walk away from womanhood. So repressed, it has manifested into my own internalized misogyny and femme-phobia. What happens when I walk away from womanhood? Do I give up my ability to heal that anger? Or do I have more responsibility to wield that rage into change because I now have more privilege? Is there space for me to hold being privileged and oppressed in the same body? Or must I always choose one over the other?

These questions spurred the catalyst to my crisis space. I wondered *was Audre Lorde transphobic*? I don't think so, but with our limited language of how to describe gender or describe the microaggressions and/or antagonism trans* people face (often conflated with and reduced to transphobia) someone might argue she was. It was my reading of the language of limiting gender possibilities that stuck with me. In the midst of being affirmed by Lorde in all the ways she spoke to how I grew up to understand myself as a Black queer woman, I was rendered invisible in the same breath. My crisis was a combination of my own resistance to critiquing Lorde, my renegotiating my understanding of my own gender identity, and a reaction to both feeling visible *and* invisible in the process. While I saw my younger self reflected in many ways, things didn't always

resonate with the current iteration of my gender. Being read as straight and/or cisgender, particularly by other queer and trans* people, left me often feeling as if I was not really being seen for the totality of my experience. I assumed Lorde would read me the same way.

I became hyper aware of this positionality, what I conceptually named as *brother insider*. I resonated with so much of Lorde's work because I had experienced those things myself. Every time I see a queer, Black woman, my eyes beg to be seen. For them to know that *I was once like them.* I *knew* what those experiences were like, yet I was always just read as another brother. *Brother insider* is the straddling of those identities in different times and spaces. A familiarity and proximity without a congruence.

I began to ruminate in these questions and possibilities, ultimately trying to engage with the crisis that was emerging for me; the implications for embodying these societal contradictions. "In revisiting the crisis through testimony, students are not merely repeating the crisis but are supplementing it, giving it new readings, new meanings, and associations with different emotions" (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 63) Since I was struggling with the implications of Lorde's work, I needed to develop my own testimonial to processing this crisis, rather than just looking to Lorde's work for examples of manifestations. I hesitated to engage my classmates around these ideas; I was not sure if people would understand my perspective, as there were no other queer Black people or Black women in the class.

This led me to engage testimony in new ways. I decided to write Audre Lorde a letter. I began letter writing as a practice with two goals; to help process my emotions around the discomfort I was feeling (working through the crisis) and to figure out what to do with that information. How does that newfound insight impact my pedagogy? How and what can this crisis offer me about queering my teaching? Instead of speculating what Lorde might think based off my own reading of her work, I decided to ask her directly. Letter writing created a space for me to think through direct questions, noticing my own gaps and assumptions. It gave me an opportunity to be reflective of my experience while also troubling it.

This practice of both reflecting and troubling my own experiences created space for *brother insider* to emerge. I used this letter writing practice to articulate my connections and contradictions to Lorde's work. I complicate her writings with my own story in an effort to push my own understandings of how gender manifests in her work and its implications for my own teaching as a queer Black trans* person.

Dear Audre,

I'm not quite sure how to start this letter, but I knew that I should write to you. Writing has become rather difficult these days. I'm in graduate school, so writing and reading aren't exactly fun all the time anymore. I've been reading your work and surrounding myself with people who constantly invoke your name. I've felt close and so far away from you. I've honestly been a bit scared of you. That's not because you are scary by any means, it's because I am afraid to talk to ghosts. Especially when I know so many of my own have been waiting for me to say something. Fear is something I've constantly struggled with. Things I don't understand, things that make me uncomfortable, things that shake my spirit, things I can't embody. All because of fear. I know that our emotions always teach of something, but this feels complicated. I'm writing you this letter to face my fear.

*You would have been 84 this year. My dear friend Marilou just recently passed, she was 84. I was afraid of her too. She had opened the Women*s Center in 1981 and ran it*

*with an iron fist until she retired. I inherited her beloved Women*s Center. Her legacy was daunting and her shoes way too big to ever fill, but that's not why I was scared. She asked my boss at the time "who the fuck is this man you got, bout to run my center?" You don't know what I look like and I don't exactly identify as a man...But I do get to walk through this world viewed as a man by other people. I was scared of Marilou because I wasn't a woman (anymore). I think Marilou thought she had an idea of what trans looked like and I wasn't it. She didn't understand but she was open with and to me. She was generous and critical. She was receptive to me.*

I'm writing you this letter because I can't help but keep thinking, what would Audre have to say about me? What would Audre have to say about my work being in a Black feminist tradition? How would Audre feel about the resonance of her words as if they were on my own tongue? Those are scary questions. I assumed that Marilou wouldn't like me, trust me, care about me. I was wrong. So instead of assuming what you'd think I figured I'd just ask you. What do you think about someone like me? Someone who is trans, who used to be a woman? Who had a girlhood but grew up to a manhood? What do you think about my work being in a Black feminist tradition? How do you feel about me feeling as if your work speaks to me, knowing I move through the world like this?

I am sure you know why I am asking you these things, since your work is so clearly for and centering Black (queer) women. But today your words mean different things. I wonder if my story and experiences give me a place in your work without denying my true self? I think the way woman is conceptualized today is a bit more expansive. I read the way you talk about women as cis-normative and cis-centric. I feel complicated even saying that to you because that language was not a part of how we talked about gender, when you were writing. I wonder if you think I'm a traitor? If I have a right to connect with your work in a way that feels personal? Do I lose my ability to be a part of the audience you speak to and center?

I felt the anger you describe when I read your work. It has been such a visceral reaction. It lives in my body, but my body has changed. I move through the world in a completely new way. Do I still get to talk to you about this anger? Am I no longer allowed to engage with the experience of a woman? What do I do with that rage? I've seen many Black trans men turn that rage into misogyny (including myself). Push as far away as they can from womanhood and femininity. Reject their own histories to embrace a new "free-dom." I don't want to do that. I don't want to betray my womanhood and how it shaped me into the man I am today. But I feel complicated even saying that. I'm not a man. Trans for me is not about "opposite," it's about expansion and transcendence. I am not a man, but I am also not a woman. I get the privileges afforded to me of a straight cis male, but I am actually none of those things. It feels like a lie I tell over and over and writing about it is the only truth I have.

I know that my silence won't protect me and nothing I accept about myself can be used against me. Writing feels precarious, but I know I must. I have to if I am going to imagine a different world, a Black feminist world. You're right, poetry is not a luxury, it is often the only way I can create language for the depth of how I am feeling. My voice is sometimes all I have and yet I constantly struggle with it. I learned from you the power of feeling behind my words. No one can take them from you, when they speak your truth. I so often feel like I must objectify my own words. Make them rational, scientific, make them

easy on the white man's ear. But you have taught me something here and I wonder if that is ok?

I look like a man, I move through the world with people reacting to my body like this. But it feels like a lie and yet I still chose this reality. I sometimes wonder if you would have compassion for that? Most would think I chose not to be a woman. I chose to transition, to take hormones and have surgery. But my body isn't the totality of my gender. I don't have breasts anymore, but it feels important to me to never lose my vagina. I don't need a penis to please my lover and I don't need one to please myself. I am a body of mixed genders and sensations. I am not a man and came to that conclusion because I also knew I was not a woman. Do I get to complain about not being seen? Do I get to complain about people's misconception? I do not come from the place where (cisgender) men come from, but often feel held to society's expectations of manhood, I have to take on that narrative even though it is not my own.

I am afraid of what people think of me. Do you think I am just a manifestation of the patriarchy? Do I believe that? Where does that leave me? Someone who grew up like you, cried like you, bled like you. But as an adult no longer moves through the world in the same way. I don't feel liberated, but I feel different. I feel lighter. I dropped the constant harassment to adopting the assumption of harasser. Queer men reject me because of my trans body, queer women reject me because I look like a man. Every day I look in the mirror and wonder where I belong.

I am a teacher and much like you didn't necessarily receive formal training. You said, "I know teaching is a survival technique. It is for me and I think it is in general; the only real learning happens. Because I myself was learning something I needed to continue living. And I was examining it and teaching it at the same time I was learning it. I was teaching myself aloud" (Lorde & Rich, 1981, p. 719). That's how I came into teaching. Sharing and thinking through things I was trying to embody in my own life. Would you still want to teach if you were still here? I wish I could be your student and would be humbled if you were mine. I think we'd have a lot to share with each other. It is on days like this, when I write like this that I miss my dear friend Marilou. She would have so much to say if she saw where my work was headed. I wrote to you because I didn't want to be afraid of you anymore. I didn't want to be afraid of the feelings your writing stirred up in me. I didn't want to be afraid of my own words anymore. I hope you write back. Will you be one of my ancestors? Can I pray to you when I am scared? Will you guide me? Will you teach me to be deliberate and unafraid? I hope you'll consider. Until next time.

Re-Reading Brother Insider

Writing the letter proved to be more difficult than I anticipated. It was a challenging engagement of both emotion and theory; an articulation of feelings while also attempting to analyze how I construct my own identities and the contradictions that exist in my own lived experience. Re-reading the letter created an opportunity for me to recognize my own assumptions and gaps in my analysis. Upon re-reading I noticed incongruencies with how I was describing my own experience and how I theorize about trans identity. In the letter I refer to myself as someone who "used to be a woman" and who "looks like a man." Later, I conceptualize trans* identity as a transcendence of gender yet I refer to my own experience within binary constructions. I read this contradiction as a manifestation of my own struggle between theory and emotion.

> I have been taught that (a) man is recognized by certain sights, sounds, touch, smells, and tastes. Yet, given my location in the academy, I have also been trained in the critical theoretical paradigms that resist it. Therefore, I find myself stumbling over this rejection of gender essentialism. Postmodern feminism and queer theory disrupt the premise that biological sex determines gender identity or that biological sex is itself static (Jourian, 2015). Yet, gender is constructed socially in community with others and awareness of academic theories of gender seems inadequate to refute the internalized gender essentialist and phallocentric definitions of (a) man and masculinity. (Stewart, 2017, p. 293)

Here, Stewart (2017) described the tension that arises when trying to conceptualize (their) masculinity outside of its hegemonic norm; something I also struggled with. Being socialized within a cissexist society, I have internalized the theorization of masculinity within binaristic norms. Because of this, I had internalized the idea that the only way to be respected as someone who was "not a woman," I would have to be a man. Even as I intellectualized a different conceptualization, I have often assumed that I must explain my gender identity in binaristic ways for people to respect my identity. This also caused me to assume the way people perceive my gender expression. While I do not identify as a man, I have chosen to medically transition; and with a balding head, full beard, flat chest, and traditionally masculine aesthetic, I am often read as cisgender, even by other trans people. This phenomenon brought up feelings of being misunderstood and unseen; feelings I felt when I first started to reconcile that I might be trans*. I assumed that medically transitioning would do away with this feeling, but it only got stronger as I moved closer to my masculinity.

I had hoped that a medical transition would shift how I was being perceived by others, but was unsure about what that new perception might actually look like. I also noticed that as my perceived gender identity shifted, that shift also impacted my perceived racial identity. As a person of both Puerto Rican and Black American descent, before medically transitioning I was constantly read as a (masculine) Latina woman, but after I began to medically transition, I was read as a Black man. As a visible shift in my masculinity occurred, my proximity to Blackness also shifted. As a light-skinned person, I was noticing the ways that my gender presentation was being attributed to my Blackness, rather than my actual skin tone.

This reading of how I am perceived by others, informed by my socialization of hegemonic masculinity (Jourian, 2017) within the gender binary, created a plethora of assumptions for the best way to navigate how people were interacting with my gender. Because of my own fears of how gender is policed in my family and communities, I assumed that being read as cis-gender would be the safest manifestation for me to walk through the world. But it was those feelings of being misunderstood, the very feelings that lead me to exploring my transness, that created a dissonance that ultimately caused me to write a letter to Audre Lorde.

Brother insider then emerged differently for me. It manifested as a space that held the contradictions of unlearning hegemonic masculinity (Stewart, 2017). It became a catalyst for shifting my understanding of my own gender identity. A moving away from womanhood, without it being a rejection; a moving towards masculinity, without investing in (hegemonic) manhood. It became the space to articulate my disidentification (Muñoz, 1999) with a binary gender identity. Building my capacity to hold contradicting conceptions of gender in these ways creates new understandings of how gender and power manifest in everyday life. How I intellectualized my gender was through cis-gendered norms, constantly mapping my experience onto a construct that actually couldn't

contain the totality of my being. I assumed that Lorde would also read my identity from that place. That I would be read incorrectly, withheld from the opportunity for self-determination. I both assumed and expected that I would be read that way.

New questions began to emerge for me: How do my assumptions and expectations shape how I conceive of my own gender identity and how I articulate it to others? How do they impact how I hold space for others to articulate their genders? How am I limiting the opportunity for people's self-determination by imposing the restrictions of my own conceptions of gender? What are the implications for my teaching? How can I employ *brother insider* to support me in making space for conceptions of masculinity outside of a cis-normative binary? What are the ways in which my own assumptions and fears contribute to how I expect other people to enact their genders? By examining the ways in which my own lived experiences create both limits and possibilities for understanding gender, I recognize the need for both an epistemic and ontological shift in my own autoethnographic analysis.

Towards a Trans* Onto-Epistemology

"We don't obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world" (Barad, 2007, p. 185). Here Barad articulates an onto-epistemological stance, an assertion that both knowing and meaning are not mutually exclusive; how we know things is contingent on our *being* in the world. So much of how I have understood my own gender identity has been based on how I *think* I can articulate it to others, assuming that those others ascribe to a cis-normative gender binary as well. One of the difficult tensions of being trans* is the lived reality of the experience, while also constantly processing how to make sense of that experience when navigating a cis-centric world. In my own attempts to be legible, I have (often unconsciously) privileged the discourse of trans* identity over the reality of my lived experience. Therefore, my teaching of and about gender inadvertently gets communicated from the same place.

By privileging discourse that centers what it means to identify as trans* within a cisgender context rather than what it means to *be* trans*, we perpetuate the understanding of trans* experiences within a cis-normative gaze. Trans* scholars Jourian and Simmons (2017) defined trans* people as "people who move across genders, who challenge or deviate from the traditional binary in some way, and/or transcend gendered expectations" (p. 61). Rather than offer fixed notions of what trans* identity is, this definition leaves space to understand trans* identity outside of how cisgender identity is conceptualized.

I call for an ontological and epistemological shift in how we understand trans* experience by thinking of trans* as a *transcendence* of gender. This understanding dismantles the cis/trans binary to leave space for what it means to be trans* in multiple, partial, and incomplete ways. The affective reality of what it means to be trans* is often dismissed in an effort to stabilize and quantify gender. With a new understanding of the limitlessness of gender rather than solely its limitations, we create new possibilities for gender. Nicolazzo (2017) called for a trans* epistemology within educational research; "imagining a trans* epistemology moves one beyond just the mere recognition of trans* bodies, but embraces a trans*-centered ethic of approaching knowledge creation and the world in which that knowledge is used to transform society toward liberatory ends" (p. 19). I want to push further for an ontological and epistemological shift in understanding gender. Rather than limit our critique to how our understandings of gender shape knowledge production, I want to challenge us to question fundamentally how we understand gender to be. When we limit our understandings of what it means to be trans* only within the confines of what it means to be

cisgender, it is the cisgender gaze that creates the larger narrative of how gender shows up in systems of schooling. Those are the assumptions that inform how we create possibilities and/or limitations of safer spaces for trans* students.

A trans* onto-epistemology would not render cisgender identity invalid, but rather would open up space for understanding gender beyond the limits of cis-heterosexism. Trans* onto-epistemology would offer an integration of private and public queer discourses. With a trans* onto-epistemology, "closets" wouldn't exist. The gendered assumptions that uphold notions of what "passing" is (or isn't) would be unnecessary. A trans* onto-epistemology would allow folks to identify within a larger web of entangled identities rather a dichotomy of experiences.

> The white western patriarchal ordering of things requires that we believe there is an inherent conflict between what we feel and what we think—between poetry and theory. We are easier to control when one part of our selves is split from another, fragmented, off balance. There are other configurations, however, other ways of experience the world, though they are often difficult to name. We can sense and seek their articulation. (Bereano, 1983, p. 9)

A trans* onto-epistemology offers us a different configuration of experiencing the world. By honoring affect as a critical part of understanding what it means to *be*, a trans* onto-epistemology would embody the connection between theory and emotion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I reflect on Lorde's essay "Poetry is not a Luxury" (1978) as a framework to understand my experience with this autoethnographic engagement. By writing in ways that center both theory and emotion, I can begin to shift my own ontological understandings of my experiences and positioning of my future work. I return to the perspective of *brother insider* and situate it within a trans* onto-epistemology. Lorde (1984) says "For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence" (p. 37). Previously I would have read this statement assuming that trans people were excluded from this notion. Understanding that while even if the text does not explicitly exclude trans* people, I (we) am always looking for myself, and when I don't see myself reflected in text, I assume I (we) have been forgotten. Through trans* onto-epistemology the perspective of *brother insider* is considered in this statement. I am reminded, that as both a marginally racialized and gendered body, poetry is not a luxury.

What can a trans* onto-epistemology offer conversations of gender within a Black feminist tradition? I turn to Green's reflection (in Green & Bey, 2017) on where Black feminist thought and trans feminism meet.

> I seek a Black feminist praxis that can hold all of these people, but in order for that to be the case we may have to disentangle ourselves from a reliance on "woman" and instead think through the ways in which femininity and masculinity are moving in and across all kinds of bodies. The category "woman" remains attached to notions of biological authenticity and realness that inevitably reaches its limits when trying to capture bodies that shift, trans bodies. Basically, what I am getting at is that we can and should shift our grammar and language to be more inclusive but understand too that the way we think of women/men,

> this binary is undone (and sometimes redone) by transgender and gender-nonconforming people whose gender journeys aren't always linear. (Green & Bey, 2017, p. 442)

A trans* onto-epistemology creates opportunities to articulate an existence outside the limits of the gender binary; it enacts what Green and Bey are asking for. It pushes us to center ways of knowing as constructed through ways of *being* that center marginalized identities while nuancing and contextualizing their experiences. Trans* onto-epistemology is partial, multiple, and contextual, creating space to re-orient conceptions of gender based on the lived realities of trans* people. Rather than understanding trans* within a cisgender context, it articulates the expansiveness of trans* identities as a source of knowledge production. This destabilizes attachments to hegemonic binary gender identities and re-centers what Green and Bey (2017) assert, that "femininity and masculinity are moving in and across all types of bodies" (p. 442).

This process was one of both self-reflection "in which they [students] ask how they are implicated in the dynamics of oppression" and self-reflexivity "in which they bring this knowledge to bear on their own senses of self" (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 64). *Brother insider* is my process of self-reflexivity, situating my sense of self within the broader cultural context, destabilizing my assumptions around my own identity and offering insight into shifting my scholarly and pedagogical approach. This exploration serves as a response to the call Lorde offered almost 40 years ago; an integration of theory and emotion, a paradigm shift, a centering of those most marginalized, honoring a Black feminist tradition.

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