

# Youth Sexualities

PUBLIC FEELINGS AND  
CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL  
POLITICS

Volume 2

Susan Talburt, Editor



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## Contents

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### Volume 2

*Acknowledgments vii*

*Introduction: Public Feelings and Youth Sexualities ix*  
*Susan Talburt*

#### Part 1 Toward an Archive of Activisms

##### CHAPTER 1

Approaching Home: A Youth Worker Feeling Youth Work 3  
*Sam Stiegler*

##### CHAPTER 2

Show Up and Show Out: Teaching Queer Latina Femme Pedagogies, Blogging Queer Black Femme Identities 13  
*Ileana Jiménez*

##### CHAPTER 3

"This Is Not a Safe Space": SPARKing Change through Activist Theater 23  
*Dana Edell, Tasfia Shawlin, and Nicosie Christophe*

##### CHAPTER 4

Scarleteen: Sex Ed for the Real World 37  
*Sam Wall*

is made and remade concurrently by members of different generations. In truth, perhaps my own surprise at the reaction from young people when I returned is a reflection of the fact that I was worried my return would be a nonevent. I did not want to return and have no one remember me. I did not want to go home and walk in as if I had never been there, as if my time there had meant nothing. It was not that I was concerned I had not made an impact when I was there; my fear arose because HMI was a place that had healed me and made me better. I did not want the work the youth did to make me better, to make me grow, to make me learn to be in vain. I did not want to forget the home they made for me.

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## 2

### Show Up and Show Out: Teaching Queer Latina Femme Pedagogies, Blogging Queer Black Femme Identities

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Ileana Jiménez

#### TEACHING QUEER LATINA FEMME PEDAGOGIES

I am a feminist teacher. A queer feminist teacher. A queer feminist Latina teacher. A queer feminist Latina *femme* teacher.

Fellow Puerto Rican queer femme scholar, Juana María Rodríguez (2014), writes about the "spectacles of high-femme fabulousness" that are the markers of our queerness and Latinidad (2). She reminds us that it is "someone else's failure of imagination" when they have the "inability to read the moving marks of our gestures" (3). While we queer Latina feminist femmes absolutely relish the "surplus sexuality" of our bodies and voices, the dominant culture finds this excess a threat (2). She explains:

As Latin@s and as queers, we are often represented, if not identified, by our seemingly over-the-top gestures, our bodies betraying—or gleefully luxuriating in—our intentions to exceed the norms of proper corporeal containment. Our bodies dispatch sweeping flourishes or hold back wilted wrists. We swish too much and speak too loudly. The scents we exude disturb the numbing monotony of straight middle-class whiteness. We point with our

lips, flirt with our eyes, and shimmy our shoulders to mark our delight. Our racialized excess is already read as queer, outside norms of what is useful or productive. (2)

My teaching gestures certainly “exceed the norms of proper corporeal containment” (Rodríguez 2014, 2). When I teach, I embody the characters I explore with my students. There is barely any containment when I’m teaching. I become the Puritan hussy, Hester, as she comes out of the prison door in *The Scarlet Letter*, with her sexy halo surrounding her radiant brown hair. I particularly love that Nathaniel Hawthorne points our attention to her bosom countless times, facilitating continuous feminist teaching moments about motherhood, sexuality, and virginity. As I move through the classroom channeling my own Latina femme version of Hester, I think of Bryant Keith Alexander (2005) when he writes about Black queer teaching pedagogies, explaining that “we teach with ourselves as our own most effective visual aids” (254). I use my body to become both hussy and halo, as my hands make a celestial circle above my head as I move slowly out of an imaginary prison door. I love that I can refer to Beyoncé’s song, “Halo,” as a possible soundtrack to Hester’s exit from prison, holding her infant baby, Pearl, not like a badge of shame but instead like a Michael Kors purse, close to her pretty white bosom. Pearl, who is in actuality the manifestation of Hester and Dimmesdale’s desire and heat, is in my classroom, the manifestation of both my and Hester’s “surplus sexuality.” In recreating Hester, I use my own curves and hair and heat to become the ultimate Puritan virgin/whore. Like Hester, I am “naughty baggage” (Hawthorne [1850] 2015, 52).

In doing the work of queer Latina femme feminist pedagogies in my classroom, I wonder how young queer femmes of color respond to my gestures and practices. Do I become a “visual aid” for them to read with all my “surplus sexuality” and “high-femme fabulousness” (Alexander 2005; Rodríguez 2014)? Or do they need other queer feminist femmes of color in the room to help claim themselves? How do they feel when they finally meet and engage with these other femme of color bodies? I wonder, in what ways do they come to own their “surplus” selves in the midst of a classroom pedagogy and politic like mine?

Every day, the girls of color I teach at the Little Red School House & Elisabeth Irwin High School (LREI), a small, coed, progressive independent school in downtown Manhattan in Greenwich Village/Soho, face the challenges of being Black and female in a majority-White and privileged school. While we have a long history of social justice in our founding DNA—Elisabeth Irwin was a whip-smart White lesbian in John Dewey’s progressive education circle—there are only so many spaces for Black girls to come to feminist consciousness, never mind queer Black feminist

consciousness. Beyond a course I teach on intersectional feminism that centers the work of women of color feminisms, including that of queer women of color, for queer girls of color, the curriculum offers little in terms of seeing themselves. Part of how I address this absence is by making myself a presence. As a queer Latina femme teaching literature in independent schools for 20 years, I consistently place my body and voice as content to be read in the classroom as much as the actual texts in the class. But that doesn’t mean that queer Black femme girls will see themselves in me (or even queer Latina femme girls, for that matter), even if we have similar ways of expressing our gender identity and/or have similar experiences of facing racism and sexism, homophobia and lesbophobia. Because of that, I feel a personal and professional obligation to bring other queer women of color into my classroom as part of my queer Latina femme feminist pedagogy. In design and practice, my pedagogy aims to offer students the full spectrum of how to live authentic and self-loving lives.

#### QUEER BLACK FEMME GIRL IN THE FEMINIST CLASSROOM

In the rest of this chapter, I want to explore how one of my queer Black femme students, Nyasa, claimed her queer Black femme and feminist identity when she took my feminism class in the fall of 2013. As a 20-year veteran in schools, I’ve become increasingly interested in how teaching feminism-in-schools has an impact on the personal and political identity development of my students. In the case of Nyasa, I want to understand how my feminist pedagogy had an impact on her not only through the texts I assigned but also through the presence of other queer femme women of color in my classroom as invited guest speakers. In showing Nyasa’s experience, I aim to exemplify how teaching Black feminist thought and activism can have a transformative impact on high school girls of color as well as on the now and future role of feminism-in-schools within secondary education. By tracing Nyasa’s trajectory in my courses, starting from the end of her sophomore year in an American literature class with me through the end of her time in my feminism elective during the fall of her senior year, I want to illustrate the ways in which she encountered Black feminist writing as mentor texts as well as actual queer Black femme women as mentors. This combination of Black feminists in print and Black feminists in person made the difference in Nyasa coming to her own Black feminist consciousness and, ultimately, in claiming and loving her queer Black feminist femme body and identity. Her emotional responses to both Black feminist readings and fellow queer Black femmes led to a powerful and lasting intellectual, political, and sexual awakening that she continued to develop beyond her high school years.

I first taught Nyasa starting when she was in the 10th grade in 2011–2012. Alongside her peers in my sophomore year American literature class, Nyasa read Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. For Black girls in my classes, reading Morrison always marks an emotional and intellectual turning point. At last, a full-length novel—not an essay excerpt, not a poem, not a video, not an image—that explores the complexity of Black girlhood through a layered lens of racism and internalized racism, colorism and classism, sexuality, and violence. Indeed, for the Black girls I've taught, reading this novel inspires further engagement with Black feminist thought, whether in fiction, memoir, or theory. This was certainly true for Nyasa. Whenever I finish teaching *The Bluest Eye*, I launch an independent reading project that invites students to select a book written from a perspective or voice that they want to learn more about or that they feel is missing in this yearlong course on American literature. Almost always, Black girls choose to read more African American literature written by Black women authors.

That year, Nyasa chose Black Panther Elaine Brown's (1992) memoir, *A Taste of Power*. In the opening of her 10th-grade essay about *Power*, Nyasa acknowledges how reading Morrison shaped her reading of Brown:

Just as moving as the story of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, from the very start, the ideal of questioning the status quo was evident. [In Morrison's novel], Claudia and Frieda were questioning the world around them and displaying misdirected hatred. In many ways, Brown is very connected to both Claudia and Frieda in their search to find a place to fit in, *a place to call their own*. (Hendrix 2012; brackets and italics mine)

By this point in the year, which was the spring of her sophomore year in 2012, Nyasa was also searching for a "place" to call her own in her body, her sexuality, and her politics. Reading *The Bluest Eye* followed by *A Taste of Power* was an immersion in Black girlhood and womanhood that sparked a search for more voices like her own. As a 10th-grader, Nyasa was just beginning to explore how one's Black female body and mind could be a potential site of consciousness. By the time she finished *Power*, she wanted more opportunities to find her place. By the time she was a senior a year later, she enrolled in my junior-senior elective on feminism and activism.

In my 20 years of teaching, I have always been a feminist teacher and have always brought a feminist pedagogical lens to my curriculum design and practice. Even so, my feminism class elective for juniors and seniors is a laboratory for feminist teaching that is unlike any other course I teach or have taught in my career. It is there where I experiment with a range of texts and media by women of color from both the United States and globally; it is there where I take students on a range of trips to feminist events

throughout New York and beyond; it is there where I invite students to share their ideas for cocreating the course with me on topics for action and activism as well as for self-reflection and self-actualization. I fully subscribe to the idea that the feminist classroom I am trying to create is one in which students will discover a more meaningful version of themselves. I agree with bell hooks (1994) when she writes that "many students enter feminist classrooms because they continue to believe that there, more than any other place . . . they will have the opportunity to experience education as the practice of freedom" (15). This freedom is not only for students but also for teachers. Feminist teaching in and of itself is the practice of freedom; feminist learning is as well.

As part of teaching with a feminist pedagogy as the practice of freedom and self-actualization, I am intentional about inviting a range of feminist women of color to my classroom, including queer feminists of color. I do this so that my students can see the full spectrum of how intersectional feminism lives in the physical bodies and emotional gestures of other feminists besides myself. As hooks (1994) asserts, teachers who "embrace the challenge of self-actualization will be better able to create pedagogical practices that engage students, providing them with ways of knowing that enhance their capacity to live fully and deeply" (22). As part of providing students with these "ways of knowing," I populate my classroom with the Black and Brown feminists who can model their own paths to liberation through their writing and thinking as well as their activism and advocacy. I want my students to know that I am not the only one who embodies these gestures, this fabulousness, this untameability. As Alexander (2005) points out, as teachers, we "place our bodies in the instructional gaps negotiating the tensions that often exist between our teaching persona and the fullness of our being" (258). As a queer Latina femme, my "teaching persona" is all of my selves, which includes the full range of my emotional, political, and intellectual self that I bring as a complex text to the class. But even in my queer Brown self, that text may still not be enough. I must invite others to be a part of my feminist teaching practice.

For Nyasa, I acknowledge that I may have been the first adult in her life who identified as a queer Latina feminist femme of color. As a teacher, I played an important role in her intellectual development from the time she was in 10th grade through her graduation. She even chose to attend a women's college as I did. But that does not mean that I have always represented, even in the "fullness of my being," the right queer femme of color body that helped Nyasa claim her Black queer femme identity, especially when she was at that turning point of exploring various texts from Morrison to Brown to the Combahee River Collective and others (Alexander 2005). While I am a woman of color and there are Afro-Latinos in my Puerto Rican family, I am light-skinned, and I acknowledge the privilege

that it provides me within the context of my queer Latina femme identity. In other words, I am not a full mirror text for Nyasa. As we shall see in the blogging she did for my feminism class, in order for Nyasa to come into her full consciousness and identity, she needed the presence of another queer Black femme to embark on a process of deeper self-actualization and self-love. Ultimately, she needed to see and know that other queer Black femmes like her existed.

### BLOGGING QUEER BLACK FEMME EMOTIONS AND IDENTITIES

For many of the girls of color who take my feminism class, blogging on our class Web site, *F to the Third Power* (2010), is their first time articulating a feminist identity online. Founded in 2010, the blog is a living archive of posts written by the students, both young women and men, who have taken my feminism class. It is there where they document their experiences in the class and where they begin to articulate a feminist analysis of the issues they most care about that emerge from our discussions and readings, trips, and activism. The site allows students, whether they are White or of color, cisgender or transgender, to explore their feminist identity while also examining their racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, gender, and sexual identities.

For the girls of color in the class, this is especially true. As Jessalynn Keller (2016) argues, blogging is part of a larger history of girls' writing practices that range "from the diaries kept by Victorian girls to the zines created by 1990s riot grrrl" (7), and these practices in and of themselves "have a liberatory effect on girls, allowing them a sense of freedom, a source of pleasure, and site of fantasy and identity exploration," particularly "feminist and activist identities" (7). A search through recent *F to the Third Power* blog titles reveals the ways in which girls of color in my classes have done just that. Titles like "Say My Name: Don't Make Me Choose between My Race and My Gender"; "Finding My Asian Feminist Identity, Seeking Solidarity"; and "Latina Women: We Should Be United Not Separated" illustrate the kinds of political and identity-based questions the girls of color are asking themselves and each other as they move toward identifying with a liberated feminist politic. A site like this is critical, then, for Black girls in my class to document their political consciousness online, as it reveals both their emotional reactions to and their growing intellectual awareness about Black feminism.

For Nyasa, her blog posts became a place where she wrote about reading Black feminist texts as much as she "read" Black feminist bodies. When Nyasa met Jasmine Burnett, a queer Black femme, who visited my class in

the fall of 2013 to talk about reproductive justice, Nyasa's blog posts immediately reflected her excitement and identification with Burnett's mind, body, and spirit. An activist, writer, and prolific tweeter at @blkfeminst, Burnett has visited my feminism class throughout the years to talk about how Alice Walker's womanist theory informs her own reproductive justice activism, her feminist writing, and her self-care practices. Walker's (1983) womanism distinguishes itself from definitions of feminism that have been historically shaped by White women; that is, Walker centers Black women's experiences of self-love in the face of institutional structures of racism and sexism that erase them. A section of Walker's definition reads:

2. *Also:* A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. (xi)

Based on this definition, for Burnett and other womanists, womanism is not only a way of doing politics but also a way of life that involves self-care, spirituality, and the survival of Black women in community with one another both "sexually and/or nonsexually."

When Burnett came to my class during Nyasa's senior year in the fall of 2013, Nyasa suddenly realized that womanism could be a design for living that she could emulate. Just by walking in the room and speaking to my students for an hour, Burnett taught Nyasa how she blends feminist activist politics with womanist body politics. For Nyasa, meeting Burnett was an exciting awakening to what a Black feminist lesbian could look like physically and politically. In her blog post about Burnett, Nyasa asserts her own queer Black femme pride as a result of meeting the "beautiful" Jasmine (Hendrix 2013a). Much the same way that Rodríguez's queer Latina femme fabulousness inspires me both in person and in print, Burnett's entrance into my classroom sparked a visceral response from Nyasa. Indeed, for Nyasa, Burnett embodied the very "spectacles of high-femme fabulousness" (Rodríguez 2014, 2) that she so longed to see since the days of reading Elaine Brown in 10th grade. Right away, Nyasa admired Burnett's clothes, shoes, and makeup. Through her words, we can feel Nyasa luxuriate in Burnett's femme swag that is a "triple threat." She is mindful of Burnett's body walking into "our classroom wearing bright colors, heels, and lipstick! (a triple threat)" (Hendrix 2013a). Burnett's body quickly becomes a queer femme text through which Nyasa can read her current and future self. She becomes the "visual aid" that Nyasa has always wanted (Alexander 2005, 254). She suddenly feels confirmed that to be queer can also finally mean wearing the markers of traditional femininity: "bright

colors, heels, and lipstick." Even after seeing me wear black-heeled boots and lip gloss and playing hussy and halos since she was in the 10th grade, it was really Burnett's queer Black femme body and womanist mind that gave her the permission to realize she could be Black and queer and femme and womanist too.

As the post progresses, Nyasa acknowledges how both Burnett and Walker have taught her how to navigate the world as both a feminist and womanist, moving her to understand the "importance of personal self" and how she needs to "take care" of herself before changing the world, "which I plan on doing," she writes (Hendrix 2013a). Throughout her post, Nyasa thoughtfully examines both Jasmine's explanation of self-care and womanism alongside Walker's definition, creating an emerging personal methodology of how she sees herself potentially living her own life and activism. Nyasa ultimately declares that learning about womanism and Black feminism from both Burnett and Walker catapults her into "another realm of coming of age" as a queer Black femme feminist:

The third connection emerged from meeting the beautiful Jasmine Burnett. She walked into our classroom wearing bright colors, heels, and lipstick! (a triple threat). She had come in and shared her experiences and her work.

But it soon became a personal matter when she asked, "Who would we be if society didn't limit us?"

At that point in time, I hadn't had an answer. To me it had been hard to even imagine, even for a second, a world that did not have limits.

But Jasmine and Alice Walker's definition of womanism have helped me answer that question.

Jasmine described womanism as the:  
*embodiment of self-care: the work you do for yourself so you can be stronger. So you cannot just show up but show out. A personal way of life.* (Hendrix 2013a)

For Nyasa, Burnett's notion to not just "show up but show out" becomes the basis for a feminism that is rooted in a "personal way of life" that brings together the sexual, the spiritual, and the political. Nyasa learns that in order to live the life of a Black feminist, she must learn how to engage in a womanist "embodiment of self-care" that is responsible to oneself first before taking on the world. In order for Nyasa to "show up" for others, she must show up for herself and then "show out" to the communities she wants to be a part of for social change. Reading Walker's womanist definition followed by meeting Burnett in person ultimately gave Nyasa the permission to reimagine her young, queer, femme, Black feminist identity as a "coming of age ritual," leading her to embrace feminism as nothing but "power and positivity":

Alice Walker's definition of womanism includes this phrasing: "Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as

natural counterbalance of laughter), and woman's strength." This had a huge effect on me, making me understand the importance of personal self, and how I need to take care of myself before I can try to change the world, which I plan on doing.

So, I consider coming into my feminism and womanism as a coming of age ritual mainly because when you are a little kid, people constantly tell you what it's like to be a grown up . . . but you reach an age where you actually feel it.

Through feminism and womanism, I've passed another realm of coming of age, perhaps the most important. I have reached the age where I know things are bad, where I see bad things happening everyday and now I can do something about it all. As Jasmine Burnett simply put it, "Feminism is the muscle that I've developed to say: feminism is power and positivity." (Hendrix 2013b)

At the end of Burnett's visit, Nyasa immediately approached her after class. They exchanged contact information for continued "power and positivity." I was elated to see this encounter. That moment alone made my vision for feminist pedagogy and practice in the high school classroom that much more real. These are the moments feminist teachers wait for, the turning point when feminism becomes not a theory but a way to live one's life, a way to love one's self, and a way to use that love for uprooting the very systems that try to erase the most marginalized, the most unloved. As her peers exited the classroom, I watched Nyasa's excitement as she nearly jumped over and talked to Jasmine. I knew right then that something had happened that shifted her life forever.

Just before the course ended in December 2013, just a month after Jasmine's visit, Nyasa declared in her final essay: "I am a lesbian and only four people in my family know" (Hendrix 2013b). By the following fall, Nyasa enrolled at a women's college, from which she will graduate in 2018. Since that time, I have friended and followed Nyasa on both Facebook and Instagram. True to her feminist awakening in high school, Nyasa's social media posts reflect a stunning womanist ethic of care and a Black feminist ethic of activism that would make any feminist teacher proud to claim her as their own former student. Each post is crafted with attention to her very own triple threat of "bright colors, heels, and lipstick" (Hendrix 2013a). Nyasa now infuses everything in her life, from her fashion sense to her art history major, with a queer femme aesthetic. As I watch her over and over again reject the notion that being a lesbian means being "ugly," I remember her first womanist encounter with Walker and Burnett (Hendrix 2013a). Moving from the printed page to the online page in both high school and college, Nyasa's embodiment of a queer Black femme feminist politic is ongoing and evolving, never fixed or answered completely. Fluctuating between her own hussy-and-halo moments, her own fabulous gestures,

and her own “surplus sexuality,” I see the origin pedagogies, both texts and mentors, that have shaped Nyasa’s current untameability, and I know she is showing up and showing out exactly the way she always wanted.

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## 3

### “This Is Not a Safe Space”: SPARKing Change through Activist Theater

Dana Edell, Tasfia Shawlin, and Nicosie Christophe

#### GRACE

(Standing on a milk crate on the sidewalk and shouting at passersby)

If you only knew. If you only fuckin’ knew the pain that we endure, you wouldn’t allow it to continue. If you only saw us as human beings—not sluts or temptresses or bitches or hoes or any of the one-dimensional tropes women are seen as so our pain can continue to be dismissed and unheard. Can you see us? The girls who were coerced into doing things we didn’t want that leave us feeling empty and violated. Can you hear us? The women whose trust was violated by people we love. Do you even want to know about the harassment and groping and stalking and physical, financial and emotional abuse? No? You don’t? Well, too fuckin’ bad. Because I want to show you. I want to tell you all of our stories. I want you to see our pain and hear the tears and the shame that choke our voices . . . We will keep talking for our sisters that can’t speak their truths. I want to document our voices and our tears and our stories so you can know and people across the world can know and the next generation can know. Because if everyone knew the pain that rape culture causes, it would end.

GRACE, the teenage girl played by Emma in SPARK’s 2015 outdoor theater production *This Is Not a Safe Space*, follows this speech with an