Real World Feminism:
A Teacher Learns from Her Students’ Writing

by

Lisa Orta

I remember 1992 as the year the Clarence Thomas hearings and the Willie Kennedy Smith and Mike Tyson rape trials gave me an overwhelming feeling of despair. At the time I was teaching high school English in Oakland, California. Oakland is one of the most racially and ethnically integrated cities in the country. There is a large base of middle class African Americans in Oakland, as well as an alarmingly large number of families living below the poverty line. My class rosters that year reflected the broad racial, ethnic, and economic spectrum of Oakland; my students were almost half African American, about 30% were white, 10% Asian, 5% Hispanic, and 5% Native American. The debates among my students and arguments in the teachers’ lunchroom echoed in my head daily: “Anita Hill? She’s a lesbian. Why else would she put a brother through so much?” “He got off because he’s a rich, white boy.” “She asked for it. All women ask for it.” “Any female stands in front of me naked gets what she’s asking for.”

At 15, the age of many of my students, I was growing up in Los Altos, California, a predominately white suburb which later developed into Silicon Valley. There was a complete absence of cultural consciousness in this particular time and place, so the fact that I was the token Jew and the token Mexican due to my parents’ “mixed” marriage meant nothing to me. Of paramount importance to me was the burgeoning women’s movement. As I navigated the bumpy road from adolescence to young adulthood, feminism presented itself to me as a promise. At first, the hot debates at my high school centered around changes in the dress code—that girls won the right to wear slacks on Fridays was perceived as a significant win, that girls were later allowed to wear slacks on any day and jeans on Fridays felt like a victory on par with accomplishing world peace. Bella Abzug and Gloria Steinem...
began educating us about gender inequity and women's rights. Planned Parenthood and Our Bodies, Ourselves by the Boston Women's Health Collective began educating us about our bodies and birth control through self-help and low-cost health care. I became the first female editor-in-chief on our high school newspaper and took a leadership role in the ecology club. As a feminist, I felt, I could finally begin to do my part to help save the planet.

What a contrast my teenage experience was to what I saw around me twenty years later in Oakland. These girls no more cared about challenging the grammatically understood "he" than they cared about a sign I demanded be removed from our building that read, "Beat Dem Pussy's" [sic] when our school team, the Titans, prepared to play the rival school's Wildcats on homecoming. "They're just having fun," the male teacher advising student activities protested. From where I stood, sexual harassment didn't look like much fun to me. So it was that in 1992 I decided to turn to classroom-based teacher research as a tool to help me make sense of what felt like utter chaos. For my research (and my personal and professional sanity), I decided to focus on gender identity and the development of girls' healthy self-esteem.

As a way to get insight into their perception of gender identity, I asked my students to begin a 15-minute freewrite with, "If I were a man/woman..." taking the opposite point of view. This assignment was inspired by the following poem my teaching partner and I had put in our students' English Social Studies reader:

**WOMAN!!Mujer!!**
by Juana de Ibarbourou
translated by Kate Flores

*If I were a man, in what a wealth of moon, of shade and of silence I should revel! How night after night, I should merely wander through quiet fields and along the shores of the sea!*  

*If I were a man, what a strange, what a mad, invertebrate vagabond I should be! Friend of all the meandering roadways that beckon one to go far away, never to return!*  

*When thus besieged by the need to roam how painful it is to be a woman!*

While the students wrote, I asked myself, "What if I were a man? I wonder if I would have chosen the job of teaching literacy to so many disillusioned and disenfranchised young people?" I imagined myself as a man and saw myself sequestered in a glamorous writing studio, writing, uninterrupted by my children or spouse; I saw myself as an influential publisher, sitting in a corner office with a window, barking messages through the intercom at my secretary. Discouraged and humbled by the sex-role stereotypes that were flying in my face like a fleet of Mac trucks, I tried to imagine what I would write if I were doing this assignment as a high school student twenty years ago. Remembering myself as a teenager, I guessed I would write, "If I were a man, I would be a scientist or a politician or a journalist. I would travel to Europe and be unafraid to hitchhike or accept free offers of places to stay. I would be attached to women who were strong and intelligent, and I would listen to what they had to say. Really listen. My parents would encourage my independence and be proud of my accomplishments." This made me even more curious about what my students were writing about. I looked around the classroom and saw the most cynical and the most reluctant students scribbling in their notebooks. Perhaps I had hit a chord.

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Ages 15 to 19, my students were born between 1973 and 1977; their parents were young adults during the American feminist political movement which tried so hard to change notions set in the 50s and 60s of what men and women could be to each other and to the world. My hope was that the bra-burnings and demonstrations, the affirmative action policies and sexual harassment prohibitions, the equity legislation such as California's Title IX, had in some way filtered down to a feminist consciousness in at least some of my
students. After 15 minutes I told the students to stop writing and called for volunteers to read, and as they shared their freewrites with the class, the dark cloud of frustration hanging over my head grew denser. Hands down, the girls expressed great interest in being dominant, self-assured womanizing men. None of the girls expressed Ibarbourou’s yearning for the kind of freedom that affords adventure and leads to self-fulfillment. The boys felt that as women they would be vulnerable to physical and psychological pain, and that they would be obsessed with their looks. Thinking about themselves as men gave the girls feelings of possibility; thinking about themselves as women made the boys feel victimized.

We went on to read and discuss the poem. Students easily understood Ibarbourou’s message that women are shackled to their duties and responsibilities and are not free to roam, as opposed to men who may wander (and, if they so desire, leave) at will. “Yes,” students said, appreciating the cross-cultural similarities, “that sure is how it is for us too. Women have to stay put because they have to take care of the babies. Men can up and leave any time they like, and go where ever they please, but women have to stay home with the children.” Although students seemed to fully understand the meaning of the poem, they had no interest in a deeper analysis of gender roles in their lives. There was no willingness or interest in challenging the usefulness or advisability of social conventions which assign women the role of homemaker and child-raiser and allow men the freedom to roam at will. I collected the student writing and prepared myself to see the truth. What was the feminist consciousness level of my students? Did all the girls perceive boys as unfaithful, abusive and irresponsible? Did all the boys feel girls were in great physical and emotional danger? And the bigger questions: Were students writing about their lives and the lives of those around them? Were these wishes or fears? Dreams or nightmares?

In categorizing the girls’ writing, I saw that they did three things: They created themselves as the dream man, the man to whom they would be attracted; they identified and showed a longing for male privilege; and they defined the negative aspects of contemporary men.

First, the perfect man would be physically attractive:

I would lift weights not so I can look like a bodybuilder, but enough so I will look firm. I’ll have a nice chest back, stomach legs, and [be] very well endowed.

I would be of about 6’2” with black hair and black eyes, or maybe hazel. I would go to school and workout at the gym with all my buddies. I would drive a red convertible Corvette with major boom — why not?

These girls were very clear on the physical attributes of the boys to whom they were attracted.

Next, the ideal man would provide well for his family:

I would also take care of my responsibilities, for example family, medical care, house, utilities, look forward to major investments.

My only worry would be to supply my family and I would do really good because by that time my life would be very controlled and situated.
[Men] are expected to generally make more money only to support their women and children.

The girls envisioned themselves as responsible males, committed to working hard, earning money and supporting their families. While a small number of girls in this sample actually lived a nuclear family, the fantasy of such a family — a wife, husband and their children — was strongly emphasized. Intelligence and academic success were qualities missing from these "dream" men. These attributes were never mentioned. Girls saw themselves as men who had the skills and drive to obtain and maintain employment, but there was no concern for intellect or career choice. "If I were a man," wrote a straight-A female student, "I don't think my grades would be the same." The ideal man would leave in the morning, go somewhere, and come home with a healthy-sized paycheck which he would then dedicate exclusively to his family. "I would have to mow the lawns, fix my car, and be the head of the house," wrote a Hispanic girl.

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The girls were very clear about how they would treat women if they were men. Here they seemed to measure the ideal man against the men they knew:

If I were a man, I would treat my girlfriend really good. I wouldn't try to be so macho.

If I had sisters or a girlfriend I would have the utmost respect for girls and not ever lay a hand on them.

That the ideal man was physically attractive, a good provider and respectful towards women seemed fair, and a little encouraging. That he was so one-dimensional, though, was a little troubling to me. When girls considered the privileges of being male, they seemed aware of the social and professional freedoms that would be theirs. Girls imagined themselves escaping stereotypes and restrictions put on them by external definitions of femaleness and femininity, and again, the primary emphasis was on looks.

An attractive African American girl with long hair wrote:

I could buy all the men's fashions from Ralph Lauren and I could finally have short hair without being called bald headed.

The star of our girls' basketball team:

I would have the best haircuts because I would do it myself every other day. I would have the best wardrobe and a hundred pairs of shoes, I would be well built and very strong.

As boys, girls envisioned liberation from the stereotypical media model of what women should look like; as boys, girls would have more freedom to express a unique and personal style. This surprised me because given the ethnic and cultural diversity of our school, my perception was that girls at our school did not imitate a singular teenager "look" in their choice of hairstyle and dress. The danger expressed here is that the girls are already trapped in a perceived mold of what they can and cannot be, juxtaposed with the perception that boys can create their own individual style and thereby, perhaps, their own lives.

Girls also envied what they perceived to be the superior athletic ability of boys. As boys, girls felt they would have the bodies and minds to play sports seriously:

If I were a man I would play professional basketball because when girls play they look like gladiators trying to win a battle.

Our basketball star writes:

If I were a man I would be 6'5", I would be the greatest player in the NBA and have the most money.

One Asian girl thought that if she were a boy she "would be able to enjoy sports as well and play them in a better and understanding manner." Another girl commented that the first thing she would do would be to "try out for all the professional sports that only men are allowed to do (i.e. baseball, football, hockey, etc.)."

The girls expressed interest in sports, yet they felt their gender identity kept them from playing sports seriously. This unrequited yearning for playing the "serious" sports, and for being taken seriously as
athletes, reflects the way a lot of American women feel about athletics. As a skilled and/or professional athlete, a woman is somehow feminized. The great talent of African American athlete Florence Griffith Joiner seemed to popularize bewitching fingernails more than it did running track. The girls saw physical strength and accessibility to professional sports as keys to masculine privilege. Masculinity was also seen as the key to courage. An Asian girl wrote, "I would like to have more muscle to be a man. If I were a man I would not be afraid of thunder sound, being alone at night or just being in a dark room by myself, to sleep by myself."

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Men were also envied for their perceived success, their status as business leaders and political figures in American society:

If I was a man, I would be taken more seriously because I’m demanding and I’m a leader and not a follower and some people don’t see women as leaders. I would have a stronger chance of running for mayor or president.

Men seem to have it easier in this world when it comes to politics, jobs and positions of authority. After all, there’s only one woman on the Supreme Court, and it must have taken a lot of hard work for her to get that far.

These imaginings were very sophisticated in their accuracy and cynicism. The girls saw that even though Oakland’s mayor is African American, modeling political opportunity for African American and other minority youth, their gender would limit their access to political and professional authority. While there are now many more women in positions of leadership than there were in the years when I was becoming a feminist, these girls still viewed the upper echelons of business and politics as a man’s world.

Girls also believed that men had the privilege of making life choices independent of social conventions and concerns for physical safety. A Greek girl whose family dictated that she either choose a “feminine” career or go to Greece and marry a man chosen for her by her family writes from her masculine perspective:

Marriage, why should I ever get married young? I’ll probably get married around 30 or 35 to a young girl in her mid or early twenties. I wouldn’t want to worry about cooking or cleaning or taking care of my children or even having them. My wife would take all these responsibilities. After high school I would probably join the armed forces and then continue with being a policeman. That line of work just seems fascinating and interesting... If only I were a man, I wouldn’t have to worry over money in my family because I would inherit everything father owns, not like my sisters who have to either work or marry someone with money.

Others fantasized about physical freedom:

If I were a man my parents wouldn’t have put me on a curfew. If I were a man they wouldn’t ask me where I’m going and when will I be back. If I were a man my father would let me drive his Porche.

If you’re a guy rather than a girl your parents would treat you different like for instance if I asked to walk to the store at night if I was a guy my mother wouldn’t trip but if I was a girl she would say no. All parents, no matter what, with girls they are going to watch out for them more.

The yearning for freedom is a universal teenage emotion, but the girls perceived themselves getting far less of it than boys. We know that women are at much greater risk of the threat of violence than men, and that the concerns of these girls’ families are loving and realistic, but it is important to see that girls felt imprisoned by these restrictions. Again, the quest for personal identity was conferred by gender identity.

Lastly, the girls were very poignent in defining the negative aspects of contemporary men. Infidelity, violence and insensitivity were strong themes:

If I were a man I would have a lot of girlfriends and cheat on all of them just to see what it feels like to be unfaithful.
If I were a man I would most likely be fighting all the time. I would feel couldn’t no other man beat me and I am the best looking. I’d always be after the ladies and have the freshest car to help pull ‘em.

I would probably be in a gang hanging out on the streets.

Physical violence, arrogance, and distance from emotions are seen as masculine traits to be admired here. As men, the girls would merely have to reach out and grab what they wanted. And the perception is it’s all there for the taking.

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As a man, Ibarbourou claims she would enjoy the richness and solitude of nature. She would travel unencumbered, a rootless vagabond following her own impulse to roam. Ibarbourou bemoans the fact that woman cannot “go far away, never to return,” and this restriction on our freedom, she says, makes it “painful to be a woman.” These girls were defining a different kind of freedom. To be sure, it is a 90s freedom to imagine walking to the store alone at night, getting a job as a law enforcement officer, driving dad’s Porsche, sleeping around, joining a gang. While these yearnings reflect the urban reality the girls in my classes lived, they are devoid of the innocence and abandon of Ibarbourou’s poem. As I see it, these are negative freedoms, pointing to the pain and frustration of being trapped in a gender identity that allows for little creativity or promise. They seemed spiteful and in some cases self-hating. As men, the girls looked forward to the opportunity to burden other women with the pain that had burdened them.

While the girls expressed a lot of envy of male privilege, the boys seemed confused and intrigued by their perceptions of themselves as women. Boys in this sample expressed disdain, fear and some sympathy for what they viewed as the female role. In categorizing the boys’ writing, I saw that they did four things: They grappled with the notion that women can “have it all”; they advised girls to be more like men; they expressed fear and repulsion of female body functions; and they fantasized about what the perfect woman would look like.

First, in attempting to imagine themselves as women, the boys saw themselves having more depth and complexity. As women, some of the boys felt they could have it all. One Asian boy who was shy and well-liked by his peers wrote:

If I were a woman I be proud and strong. I be a kind of woman to stand up to any conflict in life. I would be a strong and kind woman. I would also feel the pain of being a woman. I would feel the ups and downs of being a woman. I would feel the joy of being a woman. If I were a woman I be a little of everything.

Others wrote:

I would have a lot of money, take care of business first, then comes pleasure. My hair would be long and black. I would have a world class figure, I would have green eyes.

If I was a woman I would dress in 60s clothing. I would also want to be a Super Porno Star. I would listen to updated music and work. I would want to have 2 kids and a big white house with a picket fence.

There is a tone of envy here which could easily stem from the trouble boys have at this age with identifying and expressing emotion. As women boys felt they could be physically attractive, financially successful, and emotionally strong. But the tone also idealizes and possibly demeans the fantasy of femininity. For most women, having it all doesn’t mean being a “Super Porno Star” while living in a big house with children and a picket fence.

Second, boys expressed a strong interest in showing girls how to be girls, and much of this advice centered around how girls should really be more like boys:

If I were a woman I would want a man’s mentality and intuition. I would be a very intelligent woman and I would be the leader of some major company.

My career interest would be in business, so I could start my own. Some things would be hard to be a woman. First off, I’d have to get used to monthly
attitudes. Then I'd have to learn to deal with guys and their stupid games.

An African American boy who lived in perpetual motion with his mother, moving from one apartment or house to another, wrote:

I would take self-defense classes so I wouldn't get raped. I wouldn't get married because I don't want to get hurt. I would carry a small pistol in my purse. I wouldn't let anyone tell me what to do.

Others wrote:

I would try to date as many men as I could. I would only fool with men who have lots of money. I would be the finest woman in Oakland. I wouldn't be sexually active.

If I were a woman, I would have to watch my back because there might be a horny perverted male out there just waiting to harass me.

The fear of emotional intimacy here is remarkable as is the advice on how to avoid it. Boys advise girls to be professionally and physically strong, but emotionally wary. The fear of physical attack is also very close to the surface. As though they are the ones who put the girls in danger, the boys advise girls of ways they can fight the boys off — be equipped with knowledge of self-defense, be armed, remain independent and chaste.

Third, the boys were aware to the point of obsession of female physical functions:

One thing I would definitely hate are all of the natural occurrences that accompanying being a female.

The number one reason I don't want to be a woman is having a baby. Having a baby is a very hard and difficult thing to go through. Nine months of having something inside you. Too much pain.

If I was a woman I don't think I could handle the struggles of a woman such as getting pregnant, dealing with our society and being a woman and being on my period. I heard this is the most stressful time of most women, and I do not think I am strong enough to handle these problems. Being a woman is very hard, that's why I'll be better off as a man.

It is in this dimension of femininity that boys sincerely envy women their strength. Here, fear of "having someone inside you" extends from the emotional arena to the physical. It was heartening to observe the respect the boys expressed for women's ability to create life, but instead of wonderment at this miracle of nature the boys seemed much more repulsed and distanced by it. Developmentally, although several of my students (boys and girls alike) were already parents, boys at this age want nothing to do with the actual experience of menstruation and pregnancy. It was the only category in which the girls' strength was fully acknowledged by the boys.

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Both the girls and boys had definite views on what makes a member of the opposite sex physically attractive, and this formula for attractiveness seemed to cross all cultural and ethnic lines:

I really cannot imagine myself as a woman. But if I was I would be about 6 feet tall with a figure of 32-22-32. I would be very famous like Whitney Houston.

If I were a woman I would be tall, skinny with long hair, fake fingernails and other things. If I were a woman I'd wear beautiful dresses with stocking and high heel. I would expect my boyfriend to treat me as if I were a queen and the most beautiful woman in the world.

Most boys had no trouble romanticizing what their ideal woman would look like, and she sounded a lot like Barbie and those fake Disney images to me. Some perceptions, however, were more negative than idealized. An African American boy who lived with his mother, a professional woman who worked as a loan officer in a local credit union, wrote:

If I were a woman I'd keep myself up, unlike most women who are smelly and don't have any care about themselves.
From a Samoan boy who maintained a “tough” image and rarely participated in class or did his homework:

If I were a woman I would cry. Like they worry too much about how they look and they take too much time to put on make-up. I think if I was a girl I would be a prostitute selling my body for money. I might be a crack addict and throw my life away.

These boys were clear: The pessimism and anger expressed here is a distancing device from all things female.

This data led me to raise several questions. Why did the girls ignore their strengths? Why, for instance, didn’t any of the girls mention what they would learn or gain from women if they were men? Why did the boys bring male attributes to their images of women, attributes such as making money, keeping people at a distance, carrying a pistol? Where did the girls learn to long for boys’ qualities? Why are the qualities labeled as masculine labeled that way? It seemed that girls wanted to be boys for the advantages they have; boys reluctantly became girls because they know that as girls they would have “none of the gain and all of the pain.”

Informed by my students’ writing, I began to pay closer attention to how my feminist views had skewed the ways I saw my students. I observed that feminism is a delicate topic among them. There wasn’t much in the media and in their real-life experiences that showed them that women could be strong physically and intellectually without losing their femininity or that men could express emotions and insecurities without risking their masculine image. There was no willingness or interest in challenging the usefulness or advisability of social conventions which assign women the role of homemaker and child-raiser and allow men the freedom to roam at will. It became important for me to acknowledge that many of the privileges girls see given to men are culturally, economically and religiously prescribed, and many of these gender-related privileges promise what my students didn’t have — security, predictability, confidence, hope. My original position now seemed dogmatic and shortsighted. I saw more clearly that I had expected everyone to subscribe to my brand of feminism and that I had ignored layers of societal pressures and personal longings which influence the perspectives of students and teachers alike.

After teaching high school, I went on to teach a fifth grade writing workshop, and then to my present job of teaching English at a California community college. In every classroom I now begin the semester with the writing prompt, “If I were a man/If I were a woman…” I started my research with the conviction that we as teachers must help girls grow strong, to show them that they don’t have to accept vulgar salutations in the hallway, and to encourage them to reject belief systems which endorse any kind of oppression, including sexism. It is most gratifying, in my present job, to see so many women come to school with the intention of creating a better life for themselves through education. It is possibly even more gratifying to see the male students learning to help their female peers by developing an awareness of the need for gender equity. If I were a man, it is my hope that I would be teaching exactly the same lesson — and feel just as hopeful doing it.

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