

Teaching Resources

Brilliance Remastered:

An Interview with Alexis Pauline Gumbs

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Feminist teaching is often an isolated and isolating practice because the work challenges the norms that structure so many educational spaces—that power can and should be employed to elicit student performance, that gendered dynamics are natural and should be taken for granted, that learning is best directed towards job market outcomes. Some of us are lucky to have feminist colleagues who help us disentangle institutional politics and challenge us to reimagine how our classroom can work. Others are geographically, disciplinarily, or otherwise isolated from the feminist community. In this latter scenario, how, then, do we connect with others who share our feminist vision?

Alexis Pauline Gumbs's Web site *Brilliance Remastered* forges some space for feminist community. Using media like webinars, blogs, and conference calls, Gumbs aims to connect those with hopes to do work informed by a critical, feminist perspective.

Gumbs completed a PhD degree in English, Africana studies, and women's studies at Duke University, but she continually works outside of institutions of higher education to fortify the efforts of teachers

of all kinds. For example, her Juneteenth Freedom Academy for Educators gathered teachers from all over the United States, including teachers working at the Harlem Children's Zone, yoga teachers, university professors, high school educators, teaching assistants, ministers, and life coaches to, in her words, "create practices to honor the truth that transformative education is not about transforming students. It is about being present for their inherent brilliance and assisting them in transforming their and our relationships to oppressive institutions." Gumbs is also the co-creator of the Queer Black Mobile Homecoming Project, which she describes as an "experiential archive" documenting Black LGBTQ life.

Here, I ask Alexis to tell me more about *Brilliance Remastered* and about the significance of finding feminist communities to fortify us as we do this work.

HLT: Tell me about the *Brilliance Remastered* vision and, specifically, what inspired you to do this work in the world.

APG: As many people know, black lesbian poet warrior mother Audre Lorde said, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." However, what

many people don't know or remember is that immediately after that she said, "This fact is only threatening to those who still define the master's house as their only source of support." Most importantly she said these words to a room filled with her fellow feminist academic colleagues who she saw replicating the oppressive practices that they were theorizing against.

As usual, Lorde's words ring true today when there are many feminist, anti-racist, radical scholars who find themselves isolated from the communities of transformation that gave them their brilliance, all because we fear that we have to conform to academic norms because the university is the only place that will support our lives as intellectuals. We have seen generations of intellectuals that joined the academy for radical reasons feeling more and more isolated from the oppressed communities that birthed or inspired them and more and more beat down by a capitalist relationship to knowledge production.

Brilliance Remastered acknowledges that we are at a crucial moment. We have critical mass. It is time to reclaim our brilliance for its transformative purpose. There are exponentially more scholars of color, feminist scholars, queer scholars, disabled scholars, scholars from poor communities than there have ever been. Many of us embarked on our inspiring intellectual projects out of love for our communities and our desire to transform the world in the image of that love. So it is time to ask ourselves and each other: what *are* the alternative tools that we must use to dismantle the oppression that our communities face? What indeed are the sources of support that can remind us that we don't have to sell our souls to the university at whatever cost it happens to demand (and for many under-represented visionary scholars that cost

is our mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical health).

So I created Brilliance Remastered because I was angry about seeing some of the most brilliant community-minded people I know suffering in isolation while constantly feeling that they were not smart enough or smart in the right ways, or relevant enough to the academic corporations where they were students or faculty. And I started thinking about the technologies in Lorde's texts and my own experiences as the framework for a transformative curriculum to help (re)birth community accountable scholars seeking to actually structure their lives in a way that affirms the power of their brilliance as a collective resource belonging to the communities they love.

HLT: You speak of isolation as if it is endemic to the work of being a radical scholar teacher and the critical need for support. I wonder about your own experiences of isolation, especially in graduate school. And perhaps more importantly, what forms of support inspire your own brilliant work?

APG: Although I had a very positive graduate school experience and a very supportive department (many people referred to me as the happiest graduate student they had ever met), I definitely had moments where the prioritization of whichever dead white man's theories it was important to sell in graduate seminars that year over the issues and passions that brought me to graduate school made me want to scream. I saw my colleagues across disciplines and across the country rewarded for making their brilliance less and less accessible (in the name of specialization) and it seemed profoundly wasteful to me.

However, thankfully, I never expected my academic institution to fulfill all my intellectual desires. Before I even moved to the city where I got my PhD, I con-

nected with several community organizations around the issues that mean the most to me and began to develop a truly intergenerational community of people with a range of expressions of brilliance, mostly located outside of academic spaces. Partnering with three of these organizations I initiated something called Summer of our Lorde, a series of three potlucks sponsored by three different intersectional local organizations discussing three of Audre Lorde's crucial essays. In those sessions people who worked at the grocery store, grandparents, muralists, and also some fellow black feminist grad students, everyone approached Lorde's work with urgency and insight. They were clear that the words we were engaging, debating, and disagreeing on could transform our communities and change our lives. It was one of the most rigorous text-based intellectual experiences my Ivy League behind has ever ever had. That is the community that inspired and continues to inspire me to relate to knowledge not as a product, but as a collective practice and blessing.

HLT: What kinds of teaching are Brilliance Remastered participants engaged in? What kinds of resources do you find that community accountable scholars need as they do their teaching work in the world?

APG: All kinds of teachers have participated in Brilliance Remastered webinars, coaching, and workshops. All of them identify as or want to be community accountable scholars. They have been the founders of theater groups, TA's, drama teachers, social workers, university teachers, high school teachers, after-school program coordinators. I find that community accountable scholars and teachers need tangible ways to connect to the greater purpose that they are manifesting through the action of teaching, tangible rituals that allow them to be present with the communi-

ties (of students and outside of school) and tangible connections to those people they believe to be partners in the world they are creating through their teaching. Those are the tools that can not only dismantle enslaving paradigms but also constitute the world we deserve.

Brilliance Remastered offers support for folks trying to figure out how to do that at every stage, when they are applying to graduate programs, when they are crafting a dissertation or thesis, when they are revising, when they are creating courses, when they are leaving graduate school, when they are creating their own organization, . . . etc.

HLT: Is teaching a kind of community accountable intellectual project?

APG: It is, if it is. At this point it is not necessary to be a community accountable intellectual to be considered a teacher. One could be a test-accountable teacher. An evaluation-accountable teacher. A principal-accountable teacher. An ego-accountable teacher. Of course no one reading this aspires to such a narrow version of accountability but somehow I bet you each know someone whose work at this point would be best described by one of those sad phrases.

At its best, teaching is definitely a community accountable intellectual project. It is also a community-building project and a community-transforming project. But that depends on whether or not we do what it takes to create a context within which folks (including ourselves as teachers) can actually commune.

For more information about Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Brilliance Remastered, The Mobile Homecoming Project, the School of our Lorde, or the Juneteenth Freedom Academy, visit her at <http://www.alexispauline.com>