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## Writing Ourselves into Existence: Healing Through Collaborative Curriculum Development

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## **Writing Ourselves Into Existence: Healing Through Collaborative Curriculum Development**

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*Here we offer an open exchange / evaluation of our experience as facilitator and editor (Bianca) and writer and collaborator (Sara) during the inaugural Women of Color Sexual Health Network Curriculum Lab which took place November 2017 in New Orleans, LA. In two months, 7 women and femmes of color who are sexuality educators wrote a robust curriculum for our communities that centers pleasure, social emotional learning competencies as early Freedom Schools implemented, sex and pleasure positive, using an intersectional framework and praxis, disability justice framework, inclusive of LGBTQ communities, and does not assume HIV negative status. This is one of the first collaborative curricula to fill in the gaps of the insufficient evidenced-based federally funded curricula. We offer a conversation that highlights how collaborative curricula for sexuality education classes supporting participants of color is a form of healing and community restitution for educators and facilitators.*

**Keywords:** Curriculum Development | Education | Sex Education | Sexuality Education | Healing | Community Restitution | Sexual Health

Despite centuries of contributions to the field of sex and sexuality in both body and mind, women of color have been systematically marginalized, silenced, and erased in this work (Flowers, 2018). As the field of sex and sexuality research and practice has evolved and become more formalized, particularly as a result of the federal government's prioritization of risk-reductionist evidence-based interventions (EBIs), the practical and professional expertise and lens of people of color remains on the sidelines.

In documenting this collaborative, this writing will formally recognize the ways that communities of color produce, share, and utilize collective knowledge. Furthermore, it will expand on the ways that existing sexual health education curricula fall short in acknowledging the value of the intersectional identities of the people it strives to educate, while also offering a one-dimensional risk-reduction lens of sex education.

In 2009 the Women of Color Sexual Health Network (WOCSHN) was created. Three Black women, Trina Scott, Mariotta Gary-Smith, and Bianca I. Laureano, are the WOCSHN Foundresses. Together the Foundresses have created a membership organization of over 450 women and femme of color sexuality educators, workers,

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therapists, writers, and media makers worldwide! WOCSHN is dedicated to maintaining women of color in the US sexuality field, retaining women of color in livable wage positions, challenging the white supremacy the US sexuality field was built upon, and supporting women and femmes of color.

As one of the first offerings of the 2017 year the WOCSHN Curriculum Lab was created by Foundress Bianca I. Laureano. After reaching out to the National Sex Ed Conference to host a Curriculum Lab in 2016, which they chose to not collaborate with WOCSHN on, we reached out to Black women run reproductive justice organization Sister Song, a public policy organization in Atlanta, GA that was hosting their Let's Talk About Sex conference in New Orleans, LA in October where Foundress Bianca I Laureano lived. It was here that we were able to find a home to host and hold our inaugural Curriculum Lab.

The goal of the Curriculum Lab had multiple purposes. One of the main reasons was because we have waited too long in believing what we do is vital and how we engage with curricula that actively erases us is a microaggression we survive daily. Our daily acts of subversion save lives in the sex ed classroom and our tactics are always already rooted in justice because they value young Black femmes. These are critical elements missing in our field. Other purposes included allowing women and femmes of color to become published and earn income! Yes, there was training that came along with how to build and construct a lesson plan; and many women and femmes of color in the US sexuality field are underemployed and underpaid. Our survival of capitalism was vital to this workshop. We found a way to survive capitalism and nurture ourselves and our communities in a collective and collaborative way. Revolutionary love guided us. Revolutionary love for self, community, each other, truth, and pleasure!

Our agreement was to sell curricula, *Communications MixTape: Speak On It Vol 1*, to individuals for \$50 or to organizations for \$125, we each keep 100% of the sales, and we each receive publication credit for the entire curriculum and for our individual lesson plans. Some of us published multiple lesson plans and others co-wrote lesson plans. We followed standard grammatical rules and also challenge the way citation and attribution erases so much of our work and labor. Because we chose this path we use the curriculum as an anthology. If we are citing the full curriculum any one of the 7 authors have the right to identify as first author as long as they include all 6 other authors. Our goal was to provide multiple paths to the same outcome. If you find the curriculum through Sara and her academic ties you will find me. If you find the curriculum through Latinx sexuality or media justice in the classroom, you will find Sara. And you will find the other 5 authors of the curriculum: Rev. Lacette Cross, Mariotta Gary-Smith, MPH, CSE, Elicia Gonzales, LWS, MEd, Ashleigh Shackelford, and Abeni Jones.

Our curriculum was designed by artist and educator Abeni Jones, a mixed race Black trans woman. Abeni agreed to a barter to do the design of the curriculum. Most of Abeni's graphic design work for clients are ones she may use in her portfolio but may not receive profit. Abeni worked with Bianca individually to co-write one lesson plan and her own individual lesson plan featuring her community healing and wellness worksheet she has been sharing throughout the US in TQLGB (trans, queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual; because her first priority are trans communities) spaces. In return, Abeni offered up to a 60% discount to WOCSHN and she also received publication credit as designer and

author. As a result Abeni has a writing credit and sells the curricula as all other authors do to allow her the ability to continue to make money when the project ends.

This Curriculum Lab and the final curriculum were intentional every step of the way. If there are mistakes, which we are sure there are, they may primarily be in grammar. Each lesson plan has a suggested citation because we refuse to allow our work to not be cited. We offer suggested citation in MLA, APA, and Chicago style. Our introduction is 16 pages long on purpose. We knew it was time to “put our shit on paper” as Gloria Anzaldua (1981) guides us to do. We knew we had to do this for ourselves, our careers, our families, our futures, and for the legacy we have inherited as outlaws, disrupters, educators, agitators, and artists!

### **Overview of Sex Ed Curricula and Missing Justice Frameworks**

Federally approved sexuality education curricula developed to serve youth have evolved from utilizing a predominantly teen pregnancy prevention and risk-reduction framework to a framework that attempts to be more inclusive of broader issues that are directly related to sex and sexuality including gender, sexual orientation and healthy relationships. Curricula have also attempted to respond to the cultural, ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic diversity of various intended audiences with measured success/impact.

Women of color sexuality health educators have discussed the ways in which the federally-approved curricula they are required to implement miss the mark with the young people they serve, and described ways that they use a combination of their professional expertise, sociocultural understanding and situational awareness to make adaptations to curricula as-written in order to better respond to the lived experiences of the people they serve (Flowers, 2016).

The Curriculum Lab is innovative in that it is intentional about recognizing and addressing the reality of people’s intersectional identities in the lessons it puts forward. Curriculum Lab authors understand the ways that intersectionality functions in individuals and communities; this knowledge enacted in a community focused on healing through writing and collaboration deconstructs the silos that were erected in earlier sex education curricula development.

The Curriculum Lab also uses the Freedom Schools of the US south as examples of liberatory collaborative education. We believe it is at these Freedom Schools where much of what we identify and understand as “social emotional learning competencies” (casel.org) were seen as an imperative part of educating Black students in the US. With a focus on social and self-awareness, responsible decision-making, and self-management, all which were early elements when educators collaborated to create Freedom Schools, and are still used today.

In what ways may we, two women of color, two Black women with racially white mothers, who are sexuality educators create a space for our communities to be held and honored in a sex ed classroom? Bianca dreamed of a Curriculum Lab that had these elements and she organized her community members to join, strategize, write, and implement! Here we offer a conversation between two homegirls: Sara C. Flowers, DrPH and Bianca I. Laureano, MA, CSE. Both women have traumatic experiences with writing and both found healing in doing this collaborative writing process that allowed them to

tap into their erotic power of creativity as Audre Lorde (1984) encourages us to find as often as possible.

This open exchange invokes the work of a variety of women of color and feminist scholars. Our focus on the lived realities of Black women's writing and labor as a form of theorizing comes directly from an intersectional theory (Crenshaw, 1981) and a Black feminist thought praxis (Collins, 1980), both of which have a focus on justice and examining oppression and power.

This practice of reflection and self-assessment is guided by the social emotional learning approaches that are found in testimonio (Latina Feminist Group, 2005) where women of color share their lived experiences with one another and they write their experiences together. As Rigoberta Menchu (1984) said this is "the testimony of my people" (p. 1). As the Latina Feminist Group demonstrated, sharing written and oral narratives can be a form of theorizing our lived realities (Latina Feminist Group, 2003). In addition, feminist autoethnography where participants observe others and themselves, and reflect upon those experiences, guide this exchange (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011; Tedlock, 1991). Considering this archive of knowledge production and honoring women's lived experiences as spaces to theorize, we choose to also apply these frameworks and praxis to a process of collective healing.

Bianca I Laureano is an award-winning sexologist and educator. She identifies as a LatiNegra, Black Puerto Rican, queer, fat, femme. Bianca's focus has been on creating intersection and inclusive curricula for trans and queer youth, immigrant youth, and supporting seasoned professionals in evolving their practice. She is the foundress of ANTEUP! a professional development virtual freedom school. She's been in the US sexuality field for over two decades and has written several curricula and lesson plans.

Sara C. Flowers is an advocate for evidence-informed practice and emotional intelligence in sexuality health education. Her research interests focus on fidelity and adaptation of sexuality health education curricula, and other sexual health topics as they relate to disparities, youth of color, and abortion access. As the Director of Youth Initiatives for Love Heals Center for Youth & Families at GMHC, Sara oversees the implementation of all aspects of sexuality health education and leadership development programs for youth of color. Sara was recently appointed to the Board of Directors of Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), and previously served as manager of data and evaluation on the Board of Directors of the New York Abortion Access Fund (NYAAF).

### **How is the collaborative Black femme sexuality education curriculum writing process healing for educators in the field?**

#### **Bianca**

It is healing to be in a space with other Black femmes. Black femmes save lives! These environments provide us the opportunity to take up space, be quiet, get work done, support one another, write, and be creative. There are no writing retreats for an educator to write lesson plans. There has been this idea that writing lesson plans must be this difficult and solitary experience, when really, that is not how we teach or how we all learn. When we also place the focus on Black femmes in a learning environment we are

conjuring the multiple ways we were once and still are students, how we are too learning about our erotic power and pleasure through writing, that we are writing the lessons and conversations we needed and know we needed, and we are building an archive that begins and ends with Black femmes. This to me is revolutionary love. This to me is radical education. This to me is liberation through writing and education. Simply thinking about that space gives me goose skin and makes me excited for our next Curriculum Labs and the way we will saturate the communities we are a part of with the work we know has outcomes that save Black femme lives.

### **Sara**

Working in collaboration with Black femmes places us in a protected space in which our expertise can flow freely, develop with brainstorming, and be supported without having to argue or make a case about the existence and perpetuation of white supremacy in this work. Essentially, our lived experiences both personal and professional, paired with our expertise of the content and our understanding of our intended audience allows us to create lesson plans without having to prove or explain how white supremacy erases us, our ancestors, or our experiences. It also allows us to heal by acknowledging the ways that we've grappled through and survived white supremacy, and use those lessons and strengths to help other community members. We could not do this work if we first had to prove it to colleagues in the room. It would be too exhausting and would whitewash/water down our ability to create valuable, accessible and relevant lesson plans.

### **For whom and how will this curriculum enable and support healing for future facilitators and youth?**

### **Bianca**

These curricula are written for people of various facilitation and education backgrounds. For me, writing lesson plans is about ritual. Sometimes there are topics we know must be discussed, yet we are unable to find exactly what we need, or a guide or script to support us in facilitating such conversations and knowledge production. When I write lesson plans I imagine doing them myself and figuring out how I would read the instructions, how I would deliver them and how they would be implemented. In what ways may I be isolating students? In what ways am I offering a level of comfort for others who are often isolated? In what ways am I becoming more myself? We also chose to create a gender neutral, inclusive curriculum. A curriculum where facilitators are challenged to not assume that everyone is living HIV negative or is heterosexual. We also invite educators to push themselves to challenge the way ableism is in our work and chose to not use terms such as "brainstorm" which isolates those of us who process information in a particular way and assumes brain function must be done in one linear way for it to be "right." In addition, we included options for how to implement activities that allow for those with various disabilities to still engage. This requires facilitators to be more aware and present with their populations and participants. We wrote this with the vision and

idea of inclusivity and filling the large gaps we know Black femmes experience in the US educational system.

### **Sara**

This curriculum validates lived experiences of those who exist at the margins; furthermore, it centers the marginalized in ways that don't often happen in predominantly white spaces/fields.

For me, the opportunity to be a part of this community was healing, both personally and academically. It allowed me to feel an integral and contributing member of the Black community, healing the chasm of otherness that I felt at various times in my childhood and young adulthood. My fellow writers affirmed my place and contribution in a way that I was not conscious of needing until I experienced it at the time, and then reflected on it during the composition of this manuscript.

I believe that the lessons put forth from our Curriculum Lab -- both written and lived -- will strengthen our experience of community as both educators and learners. The opportunity to convene in a space that is truly safe and nurturing is healing. The opportunity to think and create lessons that center youth of color is empowering. The opportunity to pilot and implement those lessons, and see how they resonate with those intended audiences is heartwarming and gratifying and reminds us how invaluable our voices and minds are in this work.

**Editing Experiences: Bianca and Sara are homegirls and in this capacity Bianca and Sara had to actively share power constantly. Here they share what this process was for both of them.**

### **Bianca**

I had a very traumatic writing experience through higher education. Being pushed out of a PhD program 12 years ago because my writing was too "accessible" was very rough. This was a women's studies PhD program where I had earned a 4.0 GPA and was dismissed when my writing was not deemed theoretical enough for the field. My writing and I have a stressful relationship. There are moments where I think of all I've published that those faculty members who pushed me out are clueless and disconnected from our communities and what we all really need to have to survive day to day. It's been so long since they were young Black femmes in middle and high school. It was also such a different time for Black femmes then too. Then there's other moments where I struggle and wonder if what I write will be good enough to be published. There was a lot of resistance I experienced in considering applying to the Journal of Critical Thought & Praxis. That close friend Imposter Syndrome is always around and will our collective experience of writing ourselves into existence through sexuality education curricula be deemed as vital and life saving as we know it to be outside of the sexuality field? For me editing this collaborative curriculum was healing for me. Healing because I spoke with

and to the other femmes and women of color in ways I needed to be spoken to and supported yet was not in 2006.

Often I share I'm a better editor than I am a writer. After all I've edited numerous dissertations over these 12 years. Perhaps this was the perfect fit for me: supporting creative processes of writers, building skills together, establishing close relationships with others, and filling in the gaps and leading by example in gentle and tender ways.

### **Sara**

The trauma Bianca experienced is so real for so many femmes of color in academia. For me, knowing Bianca's story and knowing Bianca's brain and capacity and expertise and the fact that gatekeepers in the field didn't value her contribution is a painful reminder of how people invoke their power, privilege, and white supremacy tactics in the academy and other systems where we do this work. As someone who had a different experience that resulted in earning a doctorate, I see my own experience as a type of privilege and am intentional about trying to use that privilege to support others who did not have the same access to support that I did.

### **What was your (Sara) experience working with an editor? With Bianca as editor?**

### **Bianca**

Sara and I have known one another for almost a decade. We are in the same field and we very quickly made a long-lasting friendship during one of my most difficult times of my life: the death of my mother two years ago. Sara was one of those people who showed up for me in a way I never imagined. Being her editor was an honor. Being able to witness how her brain processes information and how she can be most supported to shine was so joyous for me to demonstrate an inventive way of loving her.

### **Sara**

Working with an editor, and Bianca specifically, was both nurturing and enlightening. My experience working to develop a lesson plan from scratch with other women and femmes of color allowed me to intellectually grapple with and respond to gaps in existing sex ed curricula, while being challenged to think creatively and considerately about HOW best to respond.

When I think back to what it was like to be in that room, getting ready to draft the lesson plans, I remember feeling such excitement and promise -- it was crackling in every corner. I remember listening to folks introduce themselves and being in awe of the diversity of knowledge and perspectives. I remember the enthusiasm. I also remember the vulnerability people were holding, and how others, especially Bianca, held and uplifted that vulnerability -- imposter syndrome incarnate -- so that it transformed into a lesson on the page from which others could learn, grow and shine.



Let it be known that The Curriculum Lab was a professional workshop complete with intellectual property agreements and handouts about how to draft appropriate measurable outcomes. Bianca enacted her expertise as an educator in the ways that she developed the materials needed to draft lessons. In advance of the workshop, she developed a step-by-step manual to help the writers to break down the components of a useful lesson, and then explained how those components fit with one another in a teaching/learning dialogue. The utility of the way that Bianca helped participants understand the value of each of the piecemeal components before asking anyone to write was an integral part of the curriculum development process for me. And including all writers in the learning (not just those who self-identified as new to the curriculum development process) ensured that our curriculum would present as a uniform educational tool rich with diverse opportunities for learning and enrichment from lesson to lesson.

Bianca understands lesson writing, implementation and audience learning, and is a gifted editor in that she can help a writer get to the core concepts of their learning objective/goal without the writer losing their voice/autonomy. She does so by asking probing questions and framing them from the perspective of the learner. She thinks about the ways language, visuals and examples might be perceived and does so employing many lenses: race, ethnicity, cultural, historical trauma, body size, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, gender identity, and socioeconomic status. In doing so, she deconstructs barriers in language or activity that would divide/isolate folks' identities, and instead reinforces the critical importance of centering intersectional identities.

**How was our collaboration as writers a form of healing from the ways our writing has been institutionalized and pathologized?**

**Sara**

The collaboration was healing because it reminded us (me) of the power and expertise we hold, and didn't have to convince others of its usefulness or ask them for validation.

**Bianca**

Collaborating to write lesson plans with other women and femmes of color had me think of what the educators of early Freedom Schools in the US must have created. The efforts to find a space and location to host this collaboration. The focus on food and needs of nourishment. Roles of those in the room and how to support their writing but also support their role in the room. We could only have one computer logged into the WIFI in the room and we really were writing in a quiet room. I also did one on one talking with those in the room who needed support to imagine and get started on their ideas. There was a lot of emotional support and labor I had no idea would return or would need to be held for other writers. I realized how important it is to have a space for us to write lesson plans and there are no literary space for this vital work! We made the "kitchen table" wherever we needed to be. We used virtual spaces to continue the editing process at the end of our time together and for six weeks we went back and forth on an open source Google document where we could archive and discuss our ideas and discuss questions for

writing. We took tools that were available to us and we made something out of nothing! We are alchemists and writers.

### **Evaluation: What could be done better?**

#### **Sara**

From a healing standpoint, the community-building piece at the beginning (especially informal) is invaluable, but needs to be its own entity. Essentially, we need to have writing time separate and apart from community building, which should happen before the writing, in my opinion.

#### **Bianca**

I agree. We also need access to the space in advance. The 45-minute delay pushed us farther back than expected and we still created an amazing curriculum in six weeks! We also need to figure out how to get our curricula evaluated. All of the learning outcomes are measurable yet it is a challenge to figure out how to have people self-select to complete an evaluation. If there are any folks out there interested in evaluating the curriculum reach out to us we are here to imagine what that could do for independent Black femme writing!

For the money, we need more time to meet, connect, build, write, and revise. This could be a 2-3 day retreat where we leave with a final draft of a curriculum by day three. Maybe a curriculum-building retreat in the future.

#### **Sara**

Make it a full week!! Talk about self-care and healing as a radical act!! I'm all about this.

### **What was / is healing about this next curricula?**

#### **Bianca**

The next curriculum, *Communications MixTape: Speak On It Vol 2*, we created it from being honest with one another. When one of the other writers, our Daniel Phoenix Singh scholarship recipient, Aisha, an immigrant queer Pakistani femme and I were texting how to prepare for participating in the Curriculum Lab. She had shared “I am an immigrant as well and was naturalized as a minor. Decolonization is my theme for life. And I’ve been thinking a lot about how we decolonize our bodies even when our families and parents don’t get and support you. Might be too personal but it affects my RJ work so much.” To which I responded with: “Hmm. yes. I think of how that connects to new or different ideas of privacy and body autonomy which is central to RJ! Also challenging /

maintaining family and coming ‘out’ fits there too! Maybe I could suggest we write lessons for each other: what would I want you, another immigrant and South Asian queer woman, like me w no children, about what trauma i have w Puerto Rico and use of terms like decolonize etc. maybe you can write a response lesson plan or each of us or respond to our lead lesson land w another to show a cross cultural exchange where whiteness is not what we resist bc we investing in each other no room fur white nonsense. What happens when we talk to each other like this and support these convos and experience in our communities? Like open letters but open lesson plans” (personal communication, January 30, 2018). And this is what you may expect for the next curriculum.

The healing practice of writing and editing is rooted and guided in love. This exchange and self-reflection and assessment and sharing is part of an extensive process that will result in continued healing for authors, for communities, and hopefully for future curricula.

If you are interested in purchasing the curriculum you may contact the authors directly.

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