"Ah hah!" Moments: Personal Notes on
Culture, Identity, and Pedagogy from a Feminist and a Womanist

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"Ah hah!" moments reflect the shock of recognition that occurs when members of a marginalized group realize that their place in the “natural order of things” is, in reality, not natural. Through the methodology of autoethnographic self-reflexivity and personal narrative, this article describes the authors’ “Ah hah!” moments that concern dominance, loss and reclamation of worth, and the power of words to escape victimization. The "Ah hah!" moments have influenced the authors to identify themselves as a feminist and a womanist and they shape the authors’ course content and pedagogy. The authors teach culture by revealing hegemonic inequalities among cultural groups in terms of white privilege and hidden bias, by creating a performative space, and by empowering students to respond to life’s challenges.

“Click!” This is the word coined by author Jane O’Reilly in “The Housewife’s Moment of Truth,” the ground-breaking article that was the cover story for the first issue of Ms. Magazine. “Click!” refers to the moment of truth and the shock of recognition when we perceive “the basic disorder in what has been believed to be the natural order of things.” Written in 1971, “The Housewife’s Moment of Truth” presented examples that elicited a “Click!” response from those expected to adhere to the basic disorder of the times. One example described a husband who stepped over his children’s toys and mumbled to his wife that she should put them away. “Click!” The wife responded by saying, “You have two hands.” Another example involved three couples; the females were a writer, doctor, and teacher, and the males were lawyers. The male host chortled that the evening would be successful because of the three lawyers in attendance. “Click!” The teacher responded, “What are we? Invisible?”

The “Click!” response is associated with the awareness of “personhood” during the Women’s Liberation movement of the 1970s. The "Ah hah!" response of the 21st century describes the self-reflexive moment of truth that occurs when any member of a marginalized group awakens to the fact that her or his place in the “natural order of things” is in reality, not natural. The "Ah-hah!" insight can happen suddenly and with a brilliance that is clarifying, and the "Ah hah!" realization can influence identity, behavior, and communication with others. This is as much true for Shelley, a 53 year old white woman who grew up in a Jewish family in California as it is for Venus, a 30-something American female of African ancestry from the streets of Baltimore. Shelley is an Associate Professor of Communication Studies who teaches intercultural communication. Venus is an Associate Professor of Aesthetic Studies who teaches identity formation (race/gender/sexuality/class) through speech-act/literary theory and personal performance. Both authors teach at a mid-size public institution in the southwest. In this article, the authors will use autoethnographic narratives to describe how their experiences and their “Ah hah!” self-reflexive moments influence who they are and how they teach culture as leaders; that is, university professors. First, the methodology, autoethnographic self-reflexivity in narrative is described. Then, identity and culture are defined, and narratives are used to illustrate specific experiences and self-reflexive “Ah hah!” moments. The authors conclude by describing how their experiences and “Ah hah!” moments influence the way they teach culture in their courses.
Methodology

Autoethnography entails writing and research that illustrates multiple layers of consciousness and connects the personal to the cultural. Autoethnography also shows readers how focusing on the process of communication can help them achieve an understanding of circumstances and lives. Effective autoethnography should challenge audiences and affect them intellectually, emotionally, and creatively. Autoethnography also provides readers with opportunities for self-reflexivity, personal transformation, and new ways of experiencing social issues. Self-reflexivity goes beyond self-awareness; instead of focusing on personality characteristics, it explores how cultures shape perception, emotions, and behavior. Within our autoethnographic description of how culture has shaped our personal identities and the way we teach culture, we make use of self-reflexive description, which identifies cultural themes, assumptions, and biases.

The communicative goal of an autoethnographic author is to perform as a creative, evocative, and engaging storyteller. This is why we have chosen to use the narrative paradigm to explain and describe how our cultural backgrounds and experiences have influenced our identities and our cultural pedagogy. Narrative paradigm theory (NPT) suggests that all humans are storytellers. Narratives are stories that recount a sequence of events told from a specific point of view. The point of view is revealed in what narratives leave out or emphasize, and how narratives are told. In spite of different narratives and different points of view, narratives include characters, their actions that are taken in relation to a problem, and the outcomes of those actions. Narratives teach us how the world works; how we should act in the world; how to evaluate what goes on in the world; and our place in the world. "Our place in the world" is also associated with our personal and social identities. Personal identities are influenced by the stories told by our families and passed down from generation to generation. Family narratives that involve us and/or those close to us can teach us who we are and how others see us. Narratives that concern the groups that we value and that we belong to teach us about our identity and where we fit in the world. The narratives that the authors include in this article reflect not only their family-influenced personal identities, but also their social identities and where they fit in the world. It is the authors’ hope that the autoethnographic narratives will be perceived as creative, evocative, and engaging.

Identity

Identity refers to our self-concept or who we think we are. Identity and communication share a reciprocal relationship. In other words, we come to understand who we are by communicating with family, friends, and others, and we also express who we are in our communication. We all possess multiple identities that are created, challenged, and reinforced when we engage in communication. In addition, identities are influenced by society and our cultural background.

Societal and cultural forces related to history, politics, and economics have a strong influence on how we perceive ourselves. Even before we are born, we are categorized into identity groups based on our gender and ethnicity. Our identities begin with our family of origin in terms of ethnic, racial, religious, and socioeconomic categories. Additional identities that are influenced by society and culture include sexual identity, gender identity, age identity, national identity, and regional identity. To a greater or lesser degree, our personal identity, or our particular idea of who we are, is based on our family of origin and the additional identities influenced by society and culture. The authors’ stories of their "Ah-hah!" moments illustrate
how family of origin, society and culture influence their personal and societal identities, their course content and their teaching methodologies.

**Culture**

In addition to providing us with an identity, culture also provides us with a framework that allows us to interpret the world around us and make sense of our surroundings. Culture can be described as a socially constructed and fluid concept that includes nation-states, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and class. Three approaches are typically used to research and teach culture and communication: the social science/functionalist approach; the interpretative approach; and the critical approach. The social science/functionalist approach attempts to describe and predict behavior. This approach identifies cultural variation based on underlying worldviews, values, attitudes, and beliefs, but often fails to consider the influence of the context or situation on communication and behavior. The interpretative approach describes rather than explains behavior. This approach emphasizes that cultural differences be studied in context vis-a-vis communication, and therefore does not attempt to predict behavior. The critical approach includes a research goal to change behavior. This approach recognizes the influence of economic and political forces that affect culture and communication. In addition, the critical approach asserts that culture and communication are characterized by power. The critical approach has had the most impact on the authors in terms of their identity. For example, Shelley’s culture and significant others taught her that males have power over females. This belief was the foundation of her gender identity for approximately the first two decades of her life. Shelley’s rejection of this belief has influenced class content and teaching methodology in her culture and communication courses.

An additional conceptualization of culture relates this concept to power in terms of relational dynamics. According to theorist Judith Butler, power is the condition in which a subject actually creates and needs an object for existence and vice versa. In this definition of power, power is not regarded simply as some external force pressing down from outside onto a suppressed subject but rather the relational dynamics that include both subject and object. Philosopher, historian and sociologist Michel Foucault nuanced and expanded the notion of power, honoring the traditional usage of power, but also characterizing power in terms of relational dynamics. Said another way, you cannot have a top without a bottom, without “black” there could be no “white,” and without slavery there would be no freedom. Power in relationship to culture can be seen as the need for something that is its extreme opposite; more often than not, its radical antithesis. Culture is subsequently transmitted when stories are shared about moments in a person's life that impact subjective experience in relationship to the very person or thing that is dominating or oppressive. This approach to culture and power is most clearly illustrated in Venus reformulating her identity by using words to reject the relational dynamics of subject and object. Venus' rejection of victimization has influenced the content of her classes and teaching methodology in her courses based on performativity.

Shelley’s Experiences and “Ah hah!” Moments

* Portions of this narrative are included in Lane, Shelley D. *A Stirling Diary: An Intercultural Story of Communication, Connection and Coming-of-Age.* Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2010 ([www.astirlingdiary.com](http://www.astirlingdiary.com)). Printed with permission from the author.
In terms of identity, my formative years occurred between the ages of 18 and 21 in the mid 1970s. I was raised as an only child in a Jewish family that lived in southern California. My childhood was happy and secure, and I grew up learning that I would need to learn how to cook, clean, and sew to be a good wife. I saw my mother awaken each morning to cook breakfast for my father and me, pack us nutritious lunches, and provide us with hearty dinners. My mother completed all of the tasks necessary to keep the house running smoothly. I entered my teenage years at the beginning of the Women’s Movement yet was convinced that I was destined for marriage and family. I began to date when I was 14 years old, and from the start, every boyfriend was assessed in terms of “marriage material.” “Oh, he’s not for you!” my mother would say upon learning that my boyfriends were not Jewish/ambitious/progeny of a well-to-do professional father. I was told and believed that I had to “push” my man to get him to achieve in life and that I should consider quitting school to finance my future husband’s education. All of this meant nothing until at 18 years old. I met Kyle, my first love. Jewish, ambitious, and well-off, Kyle received my parents’ seal of approval. Although marriage was the last thing on my mind when I began to date Kyle, my mother pressed me to ensure that someday we’d marry. Eventually, the desire for a commitment became an obsession. However, following my mother’s example and the example of other women of her generation, Kyle was lord and master of our relationship and his place on top the pedestal was secure. My requests for a commitment were continuously denied, but I accepted his refusals because I knew that he was “the boss.” On one occasion, Kyle asked, “If all you want to do is get married, then why are you in college?” I was confused and had no answer. On another occasion, Kyle slept at my parents’ house prior to a debate competition. Mom and I got up early and served him a hot breakfast. After he left for the tournament, Mom asked, “Doesn’t it feel good when you know that you’ve helped your man? Doesn’t it give you a sense of fulfillment?” I nodded and half-heartedly mumbled something in the affirmative, but on the inside something stirred and gnawed at my sense of identity and purpose in life. I asked myself, “Isn’t there more to life than cooking eggs for my husband?” Again, I had no answer. However, my answer came a short time later in a discussion about Judaism.

The discussion took place during a car ride with Mom, Dad, and Kyle. Bar and Bat Mitzvahs are the ceremonies that usher Jewish boys and girls into adulthood. When I mentioned that I hadn't had a Bat Mitzvah, Kyle lamented that he hadn’t had a Bar Mitzvah. He further said that if he ever had a son, he’d encourage him to study Hebrew and read from the Torah in a Bar Mitzvah ceremony. Dad responded that if he had a son, he would insist that he have a Bar Mitzvah. We all nodded in silent agreement. And then the thunderbolt hit; it was a flash of lightening that momentarily blinded me so I could subsequently see clearly. “Wait a minute!” I protested angrily. “Are you saying that my sexual organs determined the importance you placed on my religious education?” My parents laughed and changed the subject. “Ah hah!” At this moment, I realized that my culture, religion, and family perceived males as more worthwhile, and therefore more powerful than females. I continued to struggle with this realization and did not have the foresight to understand how this realization would affect my identity and relationships with others.

Despite recognizing the inherent inequality of a patriarchal culture, religion and family, I could not completely let go of the patriarchal relationship with Kyle. We dated exclusively during our first two years of college (primarily because he insisted that I not date others), and since I could not force the promise of an engagement, I decided to live a life-long dream; to study in a foreign country. In 1977, I was selected to study at the University of Stirling,
Scotland, during my junior year. While there, I discovered an independent sense of self that I never knew had existed. I traveled throughout Britain and the Continent and spent time in North Africa. I formed positive relationships with students and faculty, and realized that I actually liked the person who I had become: a person who had an identity other than "Kyle's girlfriend."

I left Scotland when I was 21 years old and returned to the States in June of 1978. A few days after I returned home, Kyle and I rested in each other’s arms on my bed. “I don’t know if I could ever live in Britain,” he began. “And I’d feel guilty holding you back,” he continued.

I was truly puzzled. “What are you talking about?” I asked.

“I know you want to return to Britain, but I refuse to go. I know that will keep you back from doing what you want. I couldn’t live with myself for doing that,” Kyle explained.

Somewhat frightened, I responded, “I don’t understand. We can go to Britain on our honeymoon. I don’t need to live there the rest of my life.”

“Yes, but I’d still have the feeling that I kept you from doing what you always wanted to do, and that’s not fair to you,” Kyle responded.

All at once I felt something well up inside of me. Shock, confusion, and most of all, rage. “Ah hah!” I finally had my answers to the questions that originally had none. Fury fueled my words. I sat bolt upright in bed and commanded, “If you’ve got something to tell me, then tell me now!”

I think I scared Kyle; I had never spoken to him like this before. His eyes grew wide and he stammered, “Uh, well … I don’t know when or if I can ever give you a commitment.”

“Does this mean that if I decide to move in with you, there’s a possibility that you might kick me out when I’m 30 years old because you’re tired of me?” I asked in disbelief.

In a tone that suggested that he admired himself for his honesty, he replied, “Yes, that’s a possibility.”

I once again felt something stir inside of me. It was as if an unseen force directed me to act. "Ah hah!" “THEN GET THE HELL OUT OF THIS HOUSE!” I screamed as I pointed to the door.

Kyle burst into tears, another first in our relationship. He stuttered, hemmed and hawed, and cried. Kyle’s parting words? They suggested neither sorrow nor regret. Instead, Kyle shook his head and said, “This is happening at a bad time; I have final exams!” I was incredulous when he left the house and drove away. I never saw or heard from him again.

I had left independence, happiness, and hope in Scotland. I returned to a shattered world in which my Scottish friends, freedom, and imagined future no longer existed. Anger then consumed me all day and every day, even in my dreams while I slept. I awakened with a knot in my stomach and the knot grew tighter as the day progressed. I also had a new question to consider. “Why, why, why?” I screamed to myself from morning till night. I cried until I was weak, and then when I thought I had run out of tears, I cried some more. Knowing that I couldn’t be heard, I took long showers so I could curl up in a ball and howl in agony like a wounded dog. My pain-filled cries came from a place within me that I never knew existed; they were so primal and raw that they could pierce the heart of the most hardened cynic.

My “why?” question was answered during my first semester of graduate school when I saw John Gossett, Kyle’s former roommate. John and I walked to the cafeteria for some coffee and then the bomb dropped. “From the moment you left, Pauline Morelli took over,” John said angrily. "Kyle and Pauline were practically living together while you were in Scotland,” John continued. Pauline was a “friend” from high school who used to copy the clothes I wore, the books I read, and the clubs I joined. I realized she had also “copied” the guy I thought would
eventually be my husband. I sat in stunned silence as his words slowly sank in. Kyle wrote me letters about how much he loved and missed me, but all the time he had sex with Pauline. In an emotional tone-of-voice, Kyle expressed his love for me during our transatlantic phone calls, but all the time he was emotionally attached to Pauline. Kyle ate at my parents’ house, accompanied them to restaurants, and slept overnight in my bed, but all the time he shared his apartment with Pauline. Kyle assured me that he would help me adjust to California life once I returned, but all the time he planned to continue his relationship with Pauline. I understood that this was the era in which a quick wink and the phrase, "boys will be boys" could excuse all sorts of bad behavior. Kyle was a man in a man’s world and his actions were socially acceptable.

“Ah hah!” At 21 years old, I decided that I would never let a man run my life. I’d not gain my identity by cooking for a man, putting a man through school, or in any way allow a man to dictate my life. I vowed that I would live life on my own terms and would become an independent and successful woman who didn’t need a man in her life to feel fulfilled. I became a feminist based on "Ah hah!" moments that concerned dominance and the loss and reclamation of worth. My feminist identity influenced my decision to earn a Ph.D. and this identity continues to influence how I teach culture and communication.

Venus’ Experiences and “Ah hah!” Moments

When I was 16 years old I was put out on the streets. The people who hurt me the most were not some invisible hegemony or “white people;” instead, they were family members and foes frontin’ as friends. Drug dealers, addicts, prostitutes, and strippers were my kin. Where I come from, personal loyalty is valued more than skin color, money, gender, or your sexual partner. I lived in a culture where survival was paramount and anybody could be bought or sold or traded for the sake of staving off death—physical, mental, emotional, and social—from one moment to the next. Orlando Patterson’s Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study addresses the way a slave is a social non-being. The slave’s body is a site for punitive consequence for stepping out of line. The Hegelian notion of the slave and master dialectic has everything to do with the emerging of consciousness on behalf of the slave when he engages in a physical life or death struggle. In terms of "Ah ha!" moments, my body was being hurt (again) and I was too stunned to defend myself. I was a social non-being, so of course I could not speak-up or move. My body was being hurt because I had stepped out of line and to ward off the threat of death, I was still and quiet. It was only afterward when I looked at my damaged body and said to myself, “I cannot do this” that the Hegelian notion of consciousness emerged. It was in that moment that I defined a “me” that was separate and distinct from my circumstance. The “I” in the sentence “I cannot do this” is a speech-act, a performativa utterance that serves as a shift from subject to object in language. This performativa utterance also was an “Ah hah!” moment for me as it signaled a personal paradigm shift in terms of identity formation and who I was as a conscious being. From that private statement to myself I began to strategize and to take actions to get out. It took me four years to get out of the situation but my getting out put me on the streets and in more jeopardy. I didn’t tell anyone because where I come from, you never tell. Telling is seen as weakness, ratting someone out, and betrayal. I slept outside and at various people’s homes for as long as I could. I also lived with some kin who could house me for short spells. All the while I went to school.

One day I came to school smelling like urine (one of the challenges of living outside is physical care, especially if one is female). The students ridiculed me and the teachers turned a blind-eye. Except one. Mrs. Francis, my ninth-grade math teacher did not embarrass me; she just
let me get myself cleaned up at her home and then dropped me off on a street corner so that I did not have to explain. This was one of the first and profound “Ah hah!” moments in my life. In that moment as a social being, I was born—I was recognized as a person who warranted kindness simply because I existed. The kindness was unsolicited and unearned. It was this simple act of kindness that altered the course of my life. I began to see myself as a body that mattered enough to someone that she would offer me a consideration my mind could not conceive.

I began to hang-out after school to help Mrs. Francis clean the chalkboards and put up her seasonal displays. She let me read in her class and we began to trade books. One day I told her that I wanted to go on a trip but did not have the money. I think it was a college fair. She said she would pay for it, and this was first time I had experienced someone giving me something without me having to ask or pay for it in some way. This was a revelatory moment for me. I started to imagine something different from what my lived experience said was possible. I started to tell her little things. I told her about the kids laughing at me, or how I really liked the book, Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah, by Richard Bach that she gave me to read. I told her I was hungry, even though I was a little shame-faced for saying it out loud. She would listen to me talk about things that came out as bits and fragments and she would feed me and then drop me off at various street corners. It was in this safe space, without judgment, that I mustered the courage to tell her that I did not have a place to stay. She said that I could come stay with her. And I did. Mrs. Francis let me name her and I found a name from a romantic novel we both loved about a woman who loved and looked after a young brilliant priestess even after death; that is who "Nanna" is for me.

Nanna could have related to me in terms of what I looked like, smelled like, and talked liked. She didn’t; she related to me like I was the most brilliant, beautiful, and precious person that could ever be. She never said this; she simply influenced me to believe that I was brilliant, beautiful, and precious by her actions, her attitude, and availability. She listened to me like I mattered. I literally became the vision she saw of me behind the Salvation Army clothes, the urine, and the silent panic that was the norm for me. She taught me how to sleep in a bed and how to eat with a fork. There was a six-month period during which I did not speak at all. It hurt too much to speak, so Nanna said, in her no nonsense, direct manner, “Well if you’re not going to talk, write.” So I did. The thoughts came out as poetry. She read my poetry quietly and then typed it up and entered it in a United Negro College competition. I won 2nd place. This was a profound “Ah hah!” moment for me. I did not think I could write and even if I could, who would want to listen to anything I had to say? I would never have sent anything off; my self-confidence was nonexistent. Nanna was so proud of me when I won 2nd place that my sense of self manifested. So between reading books and writing my thoughts, words became the access to me creating my life instead of trying to manage or even work with what I had been born into. My life comes from my ability to create contexts with words and this realization has influenced my willingness to engage in self-reflexivity and to claim a personal power I was unable to imagine. My "Ah hah!” moments have influenced me to impact society by looking inward and by teaching my students about the power of words.

I use words not to blame, but to have a say in how I relate to life’s challenges. This is the basis of my pedagogy. I realize that it is never the incidents that cause our suffering, but rather what we make the incidents mean about us; people; life. My “Ah hah!” moments have been the road map for me getting out of the ghetto. My words are my power and I use the power of words to transform survival into salvation instead of victimization. My "Ah hah!” moments and my
words reflect who I am, a womanist. My womanist identity influences my artistic, scholarly, popular and pedagogical methodology in that I focus on the power of language and the belief that being a victim or being victorious are personal choices. I get to say.

Feminism and Womanism

Historically, power has been seen as an outside force regulating a subject to a lower station, making the subject subordinate; feminism is based on this definition of power. Feminism is a response to the historical reality that women have been excluded or included in meaningful ways in male accounts of the world. Feminism is usually associated with historical movements (such as the Suffragette movement and the Women's Liberation movement), which struggle to secure economic and political agency. In addition to the recognition that women are discriminated against throughout the world, feminism works toward overcoming oppression. Undoing the oppressor/oppressed power structures is a focus of feminism. However, unlike feminism, womanism focuses on the intersectionality of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Womanism also focuses on survival needs and rather than social systems, the individual ability to transcend power differentials. Womanists understand that people – men and women - can’t really worry too much about voting rights if they cannot feed their kids because they cannot get a job due to their skin color. Womanists also believe that the circumstances of life and history are what they are and that we have the power to determine who we are going to be in the face of the past, be it historical or personal. We can empower ourselves to move beyond the institutional restrictions based on our race and gender.

Alice Walker, who coined the word "womanism" in her book *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, states that “womanism is to feminism what purple is to lavender.” Perhaps in this Obama age, there are other ways to relate to power that will give us new actions to take, new stories to tell, and new histories to make. A profound willingness for self-reflexivity as a reclaiming of personal power, not by pointing the finger outward, but by looking inward, may give us new approaches to impacting society.

Shelley’s Approach to Intercultural Education

Reflecting upon the experiences and “Ah hah!” moments that occurred between my 18th and 21st year, it becomes apparent that they result from gender inequality and a power differential that is institutionalized in western culture. These experiences and “Ah hah!” moments have influenced me to teach culture and communication from a critical perspective. A critical approach to intercultural communication views culture beyond nation-state and, similarly to womanism, focuses on the intersections of gender, class, race, etc. A critical approach also focuses on power and attempts to give voice to less privileged groups within a culture, such as the underclass and racial and ethnic minorities. A critical perspective on intercultural communication reveals hidden power relations and inequalities so they will no longer be reproduced, maintained, and perpetuated. From a critical perspective, culture is a contested space in which tension arises from shifting power differentials. I therefore teach “culture” not only in terms of worldviews, values, attitudes, beliefs, and norms, but in terms of power. I specifically strive to make clear the underlying hegemonic structures and assumptions that exist within a culture. It is my hope that revealing the inequalities among various cultural groups will encourage my students to work towards more equal power relationships between those in power (typically, white, WASP, straight males) and those who are not (typically, everyone else).
"Ah hah!" Moments

For example, my culture and communication courses include readings and discussions about “white privilege,” an institutionally-based set of benefits that are given to people who resemble those in power. Students read Understanding White Privilege: Creating Pathways to Authentic Relationships across Race by Frances E. Kendall (NY: Routledge, 2006) and Tim Wise's narrative White like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son (NY: Soft Skull Press, 2007). My students learn about institutionalized racism as it relates to politics and the law, health care, housing, and education. We read that white people typically see themselves as individuals with little connection to others in their racial group - - and that this is a form of white privilege. My students and I discuss how the dominant white group has the power to define verbal symbols, nonverbal symbols, and people; in particular, people as they relate to and are associated with marginalized groups. Students in my "American Culture and Communication" course are required to write a personal narrative about influences on their identity formation, and some of my students appear to have their own "Ah hah!" moments when they realize that white people have the privilege of making decisions that affect everyone without taking others into account. This realization most often comes about when students of color share stories of stereotyping and prejudice, such as school counselors who discourage a choice of profession and communicate low expectations that are racially-based. My students also learn that white people are privileged in that they typically won't be followed by police officers while shopping or stopped while driving just because of the color of their skin.

Students in my culture and communication classes also learn about manifestations of other forms of hegemonic power relations. I often ask students to bring up current events and we analyze them as a class in terms of culture and hidden assumptions that reflect power. One story that received attention in all of my culture and communication classes concerned Sonia Sotomayor. The first female Latina Supreme Court justice, Sotomayor caused outrage for some when she mentioned that her identity as a “wise Latina” would influence her judicial decisions. Republican Senator Jeff Sessions remarked that heritage and background should have no bearing on judgment, as in the case of the white male justices confirmed before her. After reflecting on a few questions, students concluded that white male nominees have just as much ethnic background and personal experiences that affect their judicial decisions as those who are female and are persons of color. Students realized that the Sotomayor hearings brought to light the hidden cultural assumption that being white and male is the same thing as being "neutral" or "normal."

In my "Intercultural Communication" course, I formed small groups to discuss a current event that illustrated additional hegemonic bias. The situation concerned a large cross in the Mojave Desert that was erected to honor the fallen soldiers of WWI. Now a national preserve, a former National Park Service employee sued because he thought the cross celebrated one faith over another and therefore was an improper display on federal land. Justice Antonin Scalia remarked that the war memorial was erected to honor all the war dead, not just Christian soldiers. However, my students had earlier discussed symbols and connotative meanings and one group observed that just as a memorial Star of David would not include Christian soldiers, a memorial cross does not include any soldiers other than those who are Christian. We discussed as a class that this incident illustrated the idea that those in power can decide what symbols mean to the detriment of less powerful groups. A number of "Ah hah!" moments occurred when the class realized that those in power perceive their symbols to generically relate to all, when in fact, such symbols exclude and marginalize those with limited or no institutionalized power.
Most students leave my classes with knowledge of culture and communication and the ability to go beyond what is considered the "natural state of things." One astute student in my "Intercultural Communication" course revealed a hegemonic assumption when she noticed a source mentioned in the course textbook. The source included information that distinguished those who are white from those who are non-white. "Non-white," is "white" the standard or norm against which all others are measured, and are those who are "non-white" considered non-standard or not normal? "Ah hah!"

Venus’ Approach to Intercultural Education

My artistic, scholarly, popular, and pedagogical methodology reiterates the power of language. I view culture as related to power in terms of relational dynamics, and students learn that their use of language can be empowering. I teach that language has the power to create and functions to create power. My favorite texts to teach are J.L Austin’s How to Do Things With Words (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962), Judith Butler’s Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex (NY: Routledge, 1993), and Jacque Derrida’s Writing and Difference (IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978). I use these texts, and others, such as The History of Sexuality by Michel Foucault, Vol 1 and Introduction (NY: Vintage, 1990), as the theoretical basis for my courses because all of these texts have language as the premise of societal ideology. Most of my students, graduate and undergraduate, come to class relating to culture as feelings, thoughts, points of view, circumstances, or effects of economic, psychological, and historical events. My favorite texts gently introduce alternatives points of departure. My students first learn to imagine that life is a function of language. My approach to cultural education focuses on performativity, which is the use of language to create instead of describe. Austin’s performative utterance is a wonderful entry point for students to learn to relate to language as that which creates effect, expectation, and material consequence. For example, one can use language to describe (i.e., “That dress is blue”) or to create (i.e., “I declare you husband and wife” or “I promise” or “I bet”). Words do things. Therefore, when teaching culture, I make use of interviewing, personal narrative, and creative discursive (written, visual, and experiential) exercises that range from creating collages that reflect various stereotypes to writing raps and sonnets (see Table 1).
Table 1. Assignments, and Topics

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<td>Beginnings</td>
<td>Episode 1- The Difference Between Us</td>
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<td>02 W/May 26:</td>
<td>RA: <em>How to do Things with Words</em> RACE: THE POWER OF AN ILLUSION:</td>
<td>brief</td>
<td>Generatives</td>
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<td>Language</td>
<td>Episode 2- The Story We Tell</td>
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<td>03 H/May 31:</td>
<td>RA: <em>The Presentation of Self In Everyday Life</em></td>
<td>Brief (email)</td>
<td>Conversations</td>
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<td>04 H/Jun 02:</td>
<td>RA: <em>The Psychic Life of Power</em> RACE: THE POWER OF AN ILLUSION: Episode 3-</td>
<td>collage</td>
<td>Co-creation</td>
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<td>Power</td>
<td>The House We Live In</td>
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<td>05 H/Jun 07:</td>
<td>RA: <em>Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice</em> 1-2 Intro and Central</td>
<td>sonnet</td>
<td>Superstition</td>
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<td>Difference</td>
<td>Problems</td>
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<td>06 H/Jun 09:</td>
<td>RA: <em>Cultural Studies</em> 3-4 Questions of Culture and Ideology &amp; Culture</td>
<td>rap/spoken</td>
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<td>Ideology</td>
<td>Meaning, Knowledge</td>
<td>word</td>
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<td>07 H/Jun 14:</td>
<td>RA: <em>Cultural Studies</em> 5-6 Biology, Evolution, Culture &amp; New World</td>
<td>bedtime story</td>
<td>Morality</td>
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<td>Stories</td>
<td>Disorder</td>
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<td>08 H/Jun 16:</td>
<td>RA: <em>Cultural Studies</em> 7-8 Enter Postmodernism and Issues of Subjectivity</td>
<td>monologue</td>
<td>Recreation</td>
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<td>Identity</td>
<td>and Identity</td>
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<td>09 H/Jun 21:</td>
<td>RA: <em>Cultural Studies</em> 9-10 Ethnicity, Race, and Nation and Sex, Subjectivity and Representation</td>
<td>dialogue</td>
<td>Skillful Speaking</td>
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<td>Representation</td>
<td>and Representation</td>
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<td>Politics</td>
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<td>11 H/Jun 23:</td>
<td>FINAL PRESENTATION</td>
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<td>Jun 07</td>
<td>250 word abstract of project due</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jun 21</td>
<td>Project logs due</td>
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The multiple creative tools listed in the “Creative Tool” column in Table 1 are used to train my students to use language in different ways. Each creative tool has a set of rules and guidelines embedded in the form. When students have to distill the main arguments of a theoretical text using the assigned creative tool, they bump into their own personal bias, prejudices, opinions, and points of view about both the assignment (i.e., “Rap is ‘too Black’” or “A sonnet is for rich educated and people,” etc.) and their own self-image (i.e., “I’m not a poet” or “I’m too stupid to do a storyboard,” etc.). By the time we get through the various assignments, students can readily identify what they say to themselves about themselves. They have experientially learned how the language they use influences how they know themselves as themselves and their self-imposed place in the world.

In my course “Storytelling as Cultural Studies,” students craft a list of twenty-five questions and are instructed to interview people in person, on the phone, and on-line. They learn to listen to the worldview, assumptions, prejudices, and bias in the background of the speaker because they have already identified the worldview, assumptions, prejudices, and bias they bring to the interview through in-class creative tool activities. My students are taught to listen to what people are not saying and to discern the context from which people are speaking. Great texts like Doing Research in Cultural Studies: An Introduction to Classical and New Methodological Approaches (Introducing Qualitative Methods series) by Paula Saukko (London: Sage, 2003) and Chris Baker’s Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice (London: Sage, 2003) provide methodological approaches and distillations of the seminal historical developments of culture as a function of language, viewing language through critical, cultural, anthropological and ethnographic ciphers. My students are trained to think through complex ideas in multiple genres using their own lived experience, perspectives, and yes, bias. The bias they and we all bring to class becomes an opportunity to explore how we are more alike than different. When students are empowered and enabled to bring their humanity to their work, a sense of self is validated and confirmed in a way that breeds confidence and innovation they may never have imagined. That is what Nanna provided me—a safe space to see myself in a way I never would have imagined. In turn provide a safe space, structure, and activities for my students to experience themselves the same way.

I am committed to my students knowing through my actions that they matter and they have a say in their lives. I give to my students the grace that Nanna, my 9th grade math teacher, gave me: the experience that I have something of value to say to the world. I also share myself and I adapt the class to what is wanted and needed with the group of students I have, instead of insisting they follow a syllabus written in their absence. This way I can tailor the class to the students I actually teach instead of imaginary ones. I base my grading on points instead of grades so that students have multiple opportunities to know themselves as winners, completely capable of mastering culture as a function of language. Over the span of the course, my students learn to trust their minds—and they come up with brilliant projects they did not realize they had in them to express (“Ah-hah!”). For example, one student created a movie short that won a major film festival. The film was about an interracial couple—Black male and White female—who fall in love and have to deal with their families’ and friends’ responses. The couple use language to argue why they should be together and that race is not real. The short was funny, witty, and irreverent. Another one of my students wrote a one-man show about the discourse of Black funerals and performed it at the National Black Theatre Festival and off-Broadway. Still another student traveled to India to educate women about how to use their power as a means for self-actualization through creative self-expression, specifically through song and narrative. My
students learn how to use performative language in diverse settings, situations, and interests as a way of life that makes a difference for others.

Because I set up the class as a performative space and a creative process instead of an astringent destination, and reward students for personal honesty instead of academic bravado, they create their own “Ah hah!” moments—and I am afforded the honor of bearing witness to the mental shackles disappearing in the light of truth. Personal truth is much more effective than any theory. I begin each class with a story about a personal truth I am experiencing which ties to the readings. The students listen to my sharing and take notes. Afterwards, I ask them, “What are you hearing and how does what I am sharing tie to the text?” They respond by connecting my story to one or more theories. Then we look at each person’s assignment as a form of public discourse. The student whose work is being articulated gets the opportunity to express what point of view, bias, or perspective influenced the assignment. The students who observe have the opportunity to demonstrate their ability to identify the various theories illustrated in the work presented. I end the class with the question, “What are you taking away from this session that you will use in your future work or final?” Each student gets a chance to speak and be heard. I then acknowledge the students for their work and discuss the assignment for the next class.

I make it a point to ensure that each student leaves class with the experience of being respected intellectually and emotionally, as well as with the experience of being heard. I also express what is real for me in that moment, which in turn gives permission for the students to do the same. Lastly, I let students help me. I let them know that I cannot do this course, this production, or this program without them. I have had students leave after the first meeting and I have had students drop for various reasons. But the ones who have stayed have stated that my courses have impacted the quality of their lives tremendously. I have had students tell me my class has impacted the quality of their lives tremendously. I have students take what they have learned in my courses to deal with miscarriages and broken families. Students learn to listen without judgment and to create an empowering context in the face of life’s challenges. As a leader, as professor, and as a person, I have the experience of leaving a legacy of love and empowerment for future generations through my students.

Conclusion

Just as "Click!” moments associated with the Women's Liberation movement of the 1970s reflect the awareness of "personhood," “Ah hah!” moments of the 21st century describe the self-reflexive moment of truth that occurs when members of any marginalized group awaken to the fact that their place in the “natural order of things” is not natural. This article describes the authors’ “Ah hah!” moments through the methodology of autoethnographic self-reflexivity and personal narrative. Shelley’s "Ah hah!” moments are associated with male dominance and influenced her to become a feminist, someone who brings to light mechanisms that reflect and perpetuate relations of power and oppression. Venus’s "Ah hah!” moments are associated with the loss and reclamation of her worth and the power of words to transform victimization to victory. These "Ah hah!” moments influenced her to become a womanist, someone who can empower herself to move beyond the institutional restrictions based on race, gender, sexuality, and class. Shelley’s "Ah hah!” moments have shaped her course content and pedagogy in that she teaches culture and communication from a critical perspective, one that reveals hidden inequalities so they will no longer be reproduced and maintained. Venus’s “Ah hah!” moments have shaped her course content and pedagogy in that she focuses on the power of language and the idea that victimization is an option. Through personal notes about culture, identity, and
pedagogy, the authors hope that their autoethnographic narratives will be perceived as evocative and engaging, and will inspire self-reflexive "Ah hah!" moments for their readers about their place in the "natural order of things." We also hope that our narratives will inspire self-reflexive "Ah hah!" moments in women leaders who communicate in a variety of intercultural environments. Women leaders in any field in which they have the potential to influence others can use their personal stories to encourage empowerment and to resist victimization. In particular, women's narratives and "Ah hah!" moments can promote personal, social and political change in the law, government, and the academy; institutions that discriminate against and perpetuate inequality among marginalized groups. Whether self-identifying as a feminist or a womanist, a woman's personal narratives and "Ah hah!" moments can be shared, discussed and used to promote the eradication of oppression, both institutional and/or self-imposed.
"Ah hah!" Moments

2 Ibid.
9 Bochner and Ellis
"Ah hah!" Moments

26 Walker, Alice. In Search of our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983. Print. Here is the Alice Walker's entire definition of womanism: 1. From womanish. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "you acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. Serious. 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. Traditionally a universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige and black?" Ans. "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time." 3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless. 4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.