

# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Teaching 'Trump Feminists'

by Tristan Josephson



PHOTO BY TIM GOUW

This article takes up the question of how to develop effective strategies for engaging conservative students who feel under attack in feminist classrooms. Dealing with resistant and conservative students in women and gender studies is not a new phenomenon, especially in my position teaching at a diverse regional comprehensive public university in northern California. While the university administration is supportive of students of color and undocumented students, it is also heavily invested in discourses of civility and 'free speech.' The recent election cycle and the current Trump presidency have empowered the more conservative students in my classes to mobilize this language to claim that they feel 'unsafe' in class and on campus.

The appropriation of feminist and queer discourses of 'safe space' by students on the right to position themselves as being under attack and vulnerable presents a series of pedagogical challenges. As a professor, I directly confront explicitly racist, misogynist, homophobic, and transphobic comments in class and my course readings rigorously challenge these forms of bias. Personally and politically I am committed to making sure that my students who are actually being targeted by current political discourses and state policies – such as undocumented students, students of color, queer and trans students – are receiving the support that they need. However, I recognize that the mobilization of rhetorics of safety by conservative students is most likely motivated by feelings of unsafety. Students may very well feel unsafe, even if those feelings may not be grounded in material experiences or circumstances of unsafety and threat; that is, the feelings themselves are real and deserve attention. I am invested in challenging all of my students and trying to make my classrooms into spaces of transformational learning. This article explores the question of dissent in feminist classrooms through the problem of conservative students who deploy rhetorics of safety in ways that flatten out power relations and systemic oppression. I do this by thinking through a couple of moments in which I have encountered the ideological formation of 'Trump feminists' in the classroom. What are possible pedagogical strategies that actively engage conservative students rather than silencing and alienating them? How can students' declarations of feelings of unsafety serve as productive moments for examining definitions of safety and vulnerability and how these ideas and affects circulate? I am interested in thinking about how instructors can problematize the notion of 'safety' for conservative students in order to help them – and all students – develop more critical understandings of structural violence and precarity, and of what constitutes 'unsafe' environments.

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Some larger institutional context will be helpful. I am a faculty member in the Department of Women's Studies at Sacramento State University, which is part of the 23-campus California State University system, the largest (and supposedly the most affordable) public four-year university system in the United States. The University Administration likes to call Sacramento State "California's Capital University." The student population is about 30,000; the majority of students come from Sacramento and the surrounding regions, and almost half of all graduates stay in the area after graduation. My department is located in the College of Social Sciences and Interdisciplinary Studies and is one of the smallest of the 10 departments in the College. At the moment we have 3.5 full-time tenure-track and tenured faculty (one of our faculty has a joint appointment in Women's Studies and Ethnic Studies), two long term lecturers who teach three courses a year each, one administrative staff person who works 75%, and about 70 majors. The Women's Studies program has been in existence since the early 1970s in a variety of forms. It has been a department for the last 9 years or so, and like many Women's Studies departments and programs in the United States, we are constantly struggling for funds, resources, and legitimacy from the College and the University.

Every semester for the past three years I have been teaching a Women's Studies course that introduces students to the history and breadth of contemporary feminist social movements, which I focus on feminist struggles that center anti-racist, queer, and economic justice analytical frameworks. As an upper-division general education course, listed in the university course catalog under the rather generic title of "Introduction to Women's Movements," this class attracts students with a range of political perspectives from a variety of academic majors. Out of a class of 40-45 students, there are usually only 7-10 Women's Studies majors and minors. While the majority of the students tend to enter the class with relatively liberal analyses of gender and racial oppression, a significant minority of students have more conservative views. In my first few years teaching at Sacramento State, I was often surprised by some of the students' conservative perspectives on issues like reproductive justice, the inclusion of trans women in feminist movements and feminist spaces, and sex work, because I had assumed that students would be more progressive coming from the Sacramento area. The University Administration, in contrast, has been explicit in its resistance to the actions taken by the Trump Administration towards DACA recipients and trans students. The University President is extremely vocal about the need to protect undocumented students, and the University funds a Dreamer Resource Center and has been providing weekly free legal support and advice from local immigration attorneys to undocumented students and their families. It is this institutional context in which I have encountered conservative students mobilizing feminist discourses of safety and vulnerability to position themselves as under attack in the classroom.

## Example one: unsafe on campus

When I was teaching this course on feminist social movements in fall 2016 to a group of about 40 students, I could feel some anxieties from students in this class and in my other classes leading up to the presidential election. At the same time, this particular group of students had been reticent to discuss political events during the first two months of class, despite the course's focus on contemporary feminist issues, and some of them had expressed rather conservative social and cultural perspectives during our class discussions. So while I wanted to open up some classroom space for students to discuss their reactions to the election, I was wary about predetermining the shape of the discussion in ways that might have a silencing effect on some students.

In the past I have been much less invested in bringing my more conservative students along, even as I know that ethically and pedagogically, I am responsible for all students' experiences in the classroom. During the two years in which I worked as a part-time lecturer at multiple campuses before getting my current position, I was much less concerned if the more radical material in my classes alienated some students. However, now as a tenure-track professor who is actively involved in developing and expanding my small department – and as a worker who is now paid adequately for my labor and time – I have been thinking more seriously about ways to reach out to conservative students. To be clear, this has not taken the form of compromising on the content or politics of the readings I assign or other course material. But it has meant thinking differently about how to frame the material, how to structure in-class discussions, and how to respond to students. This thinking differently is not motivated solely by my desire to improve my pedagogical strategies, but also by an institutional imperative. About one third of our Women's Studies courses fulfill one or more of the University's General Education requirements, so most of our FTEs each semester come from non-majors who are just taking one Women's Studies course. It is important for our department to meet the FTE targets set by the Dean's office every semester, in order to justify our continued existence and our constant push for more resources in the form of funds, more tenure lines, and so on. I now have an obligation to attract and keep enough students enrolled in my classes, as I am invested in the future growth of my department.

Since I was at a conference in the days immediately after the 2016 election, the first opportunity I had to talk with my students was one full week later. I brought blank notecards to class and asked students to write anonymously on them. I gave them five minutes or so to write down their feelings on one side of the notecard and their critical thoughts on the other side. I then collected the cards, redistributed them, and asked volunteers to read out what was on their card in order to start discussion. I was hoping this process would provide enough anonymity to at least open up some conversation in a more neutral way, although most of the sentiments expressed by the cards that were read were from students who were feeling stressed, anxious, and fearful of the implications of

Trump's election. This makes sense given the racial and class demographics of the student body. More than two thirds of the student population at Sacramento State are students of color – 29% Latino, 20% Asian American, 12% multiracial, 6% African American, 1% Pacific Islander, 0.3% American Indian – and the University identifies half the students as low income and a little more than half as first generation students. The demographics of the faculty at Sacramento State are quite different: two thirds of the faculty is white (California State University, Sacramento).

While this notecard exercise only generated a conversation that lasted about 15 minutes, I felt that it provided students with an opportunity to write through some of their reactions and also to read and hear about a few other students' reactions. However, one student did take the opportunity in this discussion to talk (non-anonymously) about her own reactions. This white student proclaimed rather dramatically, near the end of the conversation, that she felt unsafe on campus given her own political views in this post-election moment. Intentionally vague, this student did not mention any political affiliation or whom she had voted for, but said that she felt like a minority on campus due to her political and social views and that she perceived most other students to be angry about the election. She tearfully described the ways she felt vulnerable and unsafe walking around on campus and how she was worried that someone was going to take a baseball bat to her car. Without having to explicitly identify as a Trump voter or as a Republican, this student claimed a minoritarian and persecuted position based on her alignment with the political party who controlled the election.

***This student had leapt from a place of (political) identity to a position of oppression, and rhetorics of safety offered her a language to express her feelings of discomfort and presumed minoritarian status.***

I must admit that I was somewhat flabbergasted by this confession in class, and felt stymied by her invocation of the language of safety and the manner of her delivery – on the verge of tears, voice trembling. I was vexed by her use of affect to craft an emotional admission that narrowed the range of possible responses; as the professor, I could not really tell her in the moment that her feelings were 'wrong.' Moreover, her words and mode of delivery did make it clear that, however ungrounded in actual risk her concerns may have been, she was definitely *feeling* unsafe on campus. Those feelings are significant. This student had leapt from a place of (political) identity to a position of oppression, and rhetorics of safety offered her a language to express her feelings of discomfort and presumed minoritarian status. Her affective response did particular work in that moment. As Sara Ahmed notes, "emotions *do things*, and they align individuals with communities – or bodily space with social space – through the very intensity of their attachments" (119). The student was participating

in an affective economy that constructed angry undocumented students and other students of color as the objects of fear, displacing critique of the actual systemic sources of threat, such as ICE, the future Trump Administration, and emboldened white supremacists.

I was also frustrated by her appropriation of the very same gendered discourses of vulnerability and safety that we had been discussing throughout the semester as important feminist critiques of gender and sexual oppression, institutionalized racism, and class exploitation. At the beginning of the semester, authors like Cherríe Moraga, Audre Lorde, and the Combahee River Collective had provided us with critical tools to think about feminist politics, and our subsequent units on reproductive justice, immigration enforcement, health care, and domestic labor had made clear how women of color, poor women, immigrants, and trans people are especially vulnerable to forms of state regulation and violence. The student's use of these discourses of vulnerability and safety flattened out the real material differences in power and privilege she has as a white person. In that moment, I wondered what my other students were thinking, particularly those who were students of color, immigrants, and queer, and who were feeling unsafe in the aftermath of a presidential election that had legitimated and activated white supremacist, xenophobic, and sexist beliefs and practices. I did not want to somehow validate this student's use of the language of safety. At the same time, I was aware that I had made possible this admission by structuring the conversation in the way that I did. By trying to create an open space for discussion, I had set up a space that could be turned into a culturally relativist space in which all opinions and feelings were considered equally valid.

The larger irony of this moment was that we had just started our final course unit on feminist responses to violence, which examined different forms of racial, gender, and sexual violence through a focus on mass incarceration and immigration detention in the United States and transnationally. For this day in class, students had read the introduction to Beth Richie's book *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America's Prison Nation*, in which Richie presents a compelling analysis of the nexus of interpersonal violence and state violence experienced by many poor black women, and illustrates how the mainstream anti-violence movement has historically failed to address race and class issues. The student who expressed concerns over her own personal safety had clearly not used Richie's analysis to reflect critically on her own feelings. (Or was she able to read Richie's critique as an endorsement of her own use of discourses of safety?) This student was asserting herself as an individual subject of trauma over structural forms of trauma, which also disregarded the ways that trauma and violence are part of everyday life for many communities in the United States. Identifying herself as a victim enabled her to reattach

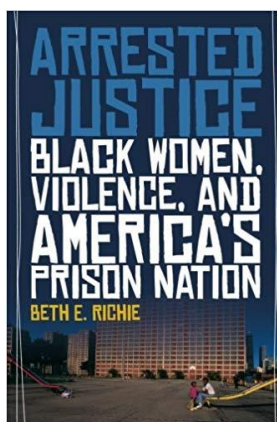
herself as a wounded liberal subject to forms of whiteness supposedly under threat.<sup>1</sup>

Because I had struggled to respond to this student in the moment, for the next class meeting, I decided to begin class with an exercise on safety and violence. I reminded my students that the language of 'safety' had come up in our discussion on the election in the previous week's class, and explained that I wanted to push this discussion further to think about the relationship between safety and power. This was also the week after then Vice-President Elect Pence had been booed by audience members at a performance of *Hamilton* in New York, at which Brandon Victor Dixon, the black actor who played vice-president Aaron Burr, had read a statement from the stage to Pence that expressed alarm and anxiety about the new Administration and called upon Pence to "uphold our American values and to work on behalf of all of us." In his mode of response that has now become horribly routine, Trump immediately tweeted that Pence had been "harassed" by the cast and that the theater should be a "safe" place (Mele and Healy). I also mentioned this incident to students as an example of the multiple ways the discourse of 'safety' can be deployed, and how 'safety' can serve as a floating signifier detached from material conditions of risk and violence, to the extent that it can be actually used to silence critical perspectives on state violence from marginalized populations.

I asked students to do another freewriting exercise responding to questions like: "How are different people feeling unsafe? What are the actual conditions of safety? How do different types of violence (interpersonal, structural) affect different groups of people? What does safety mean to you?" After the students had written through these questions, we had a larger class discussion and then moved into the material for that day, which was about practices of criminalization and the prison industrial complex (Oparah).

To be honest, I am not sure how effective this exercise on safety and violence was as a response to the student's comments in the previous week of class. In our discussion, I attempted to make a few specific connections to Trump and his rhetoric during his candidacy in order to get students to think more critically about what safety means in the context of state-sanctioned structural violence, but I was also trying not to put that particular student on the spot. I think that I could have developed a more robust discussion on the definition of safety and

pushed students further to more specifically identify practices that constitute an "unsafe" environment. In some ways, I was (too) focused on getting students to recognize state processes like policing, incarceration, and deportation as forms of violence that create conditions of unsafety for entire populations of people. Asking them to enter into this conversation instead through the ways that particular individuals mobilize rhetorics of safety might have been more effective. I have also been thinking about the temporal pace of the current moment; what I have



ARRESTED JUSTICE: BLACK WOMEN, VIOLENCE, AND AMERICA'S PRISON NATION BY BETH E. RICHIE (NYU PRESS, 2012)

described above reflects my usual pedagogical approach of using the next class period to follow up on more contentious moments in the previous class period. But maybe in this particular political moment, in which every day feels urgent and pressing, these usual pedagogical strategies are mis-timed? Even though I do try to think about teaching as a way of planting seeds rather than as discrete moments in which transformations occur, this can still feel inadequate in terms of pushing students to think more critically about the relationships between their individual lives and larger systems of state violence.

## Example two: "I voted for Trump *and* I'm a feminist"

In Spring 2017, I was teaching the same Women's Studies class on feminist social movements. On the first day of class, before we get into any of the course material, I usually ask students to think about their definitions of feminism and feminist issues. Classes had started the week after the Women's March on Washington, so on the first day of class, I also showed students some clips of the speeches given at the March, including those of the more progressive speakers like Janet Mock and Linda Sarsour (Democracy Now!). We used this material to have a conversation about how students define feminist politics. This usually produces wide-ranging discussion that both demonstrates the breadth of what can be considered feminist politics and allows me to highlight the ways that feminist movements have generated a critique of larger structures of power, in order to give students a preview of the course material for the semester.

That semester, however, I was surprised by a student who began her comment with a critique of the Women's March on Washington. This student – who was also a white woman – began by saying that she felt the Women's March was not as inclusive as its rhetoric had promised. I was initially pleased by this statement, since I hoped the student was going to continue with a critical assessment of the March. Perhaps she was going to comment on the racial demographics of the march participants, and say something about what it meant that so many white women showed up for the march in January but that many of those same women had not been showing up for racial justice events such as the Black Lives Matter actions over the past few years. Or perhaps she was going to continue with a critique of the preponderance of so-called pink 'pussy hats' worn by many of the women at the march, and think about how this symbolism could signal a particular type of trans-exclusionary gender essentialism. This student said none of this. Instead, she stated that she was dismayed by the fact that anti-abortion activists had reportedly not been welcomed at the march, and that as someone who voted for Trump *and* identified as a feminist, she took issue with what she saw as the exclusionary feminist politics of the Women's March on Washington.

Despite the experience from the previous semester, I was taken aback by this second encounter with a Trump feminist in a Women's Studies classroom, and I struggled to respond to her assertion. I did not want to dismiss or

confront a student's personal politics on the first day of class. What took me by surprise in that moment was the student's willingness – in fact, her insistence – on identifying herself explicitly as a supporter of Trump. This was in contrast to the student from the previous semester who was intentionally vague and ambiguous about her political views. Both of these students, however, mobilized discourses of safety and vulnerability to argue that they were marginalized on the basis of their political positions. This conservative appropriation of wounded white identity is not new (Brandzel and Desai), clearly, but its articulation in a feminist classroom poses particular challenges. In retrospective, I wish I had been able to turn her comment back on to her, and ask her to explain in more detail how she was defining feminism. That could have opened up the conversation more and allowed me to respond with an explanation of feminism as a political project invested in challenging and dismantling larger structural oppression on the basis of race, gender, class, and sexuality.

## Conclusion

What have these smaller moments taught me about navigating the phenomenon of Trump feminists in Women's Studies classrooms? As I have discussed, my immediate responses in these two specific examples felt inadequate at best and like failure at worst. These reactions have helped me think about the larger questions of silencing, complicity, and dissent in Women's Studies classrooms. I have found at my institution that directly challenging students who express conservative perspectives does not work because it puts them on the defensive, causing them to drop the class or stay silent. Yet adopting the liberal rhetoric of diversity of all political beliefs is not an effective pedagogical strategy either, since it perpetuates a relativism that ignores structural inequality and oppression.

Since these encounters with Trump feminists, I have felt a renewed commitment to helping students understand the role of white supremacy in our contemporary moment, especially since many of them have internalized post-racist perspectives, the kinds of perspectives that undergird white students' claims to marginalization. I have reminded myself that many Trump supporters do experience other axes of marginalization; many of my students, including my white students, are working class and low income, and therefore do feel marginalized in terms of their class status and access to resources. Many of my students have children of their own and most work at least one job while earning their degrees. That is, their senses of being marginalized are often grounded in their material experiences of capitalist exploitation, and in the effects of the dismantling of social services and support systems in the U.S. since the 1980s. These conservative students are in some ways articulating their feelings of insecurity through the rhetoric of safety. The challenge for me is to help them think critically about the actual causes of their feelings of unsafety and disempowerment without allowing them to resort to a depoliticized position of victimhood. Understanding and acknowledging explicitly in the classroom how their socio-economic backgrounds contribute to them feeling victimized is helpful to framing

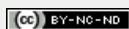
conversations in class, since one of the biggest obstacles for them is being able to make connections between their own personal situations and larger structures of inequality. In more recent classes, for example, I have had success assigning readings like George Lipsitz's *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* in order to help students understand whiteness as a "structured advantage." I have coupled that reading with the sharing and discussion of anonymous in-class writing about how students have benefitted from whiteness as an institution. This has opened up space for me to navigate moments in which conservative students mobilize discourses of safety and vulnerability in resistance to course material that they find challenging to their political beliefs.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Kiran Asher and Lezlie Frye's paper, "Power, Politics, and Push-back in Feminist Classrooms," presented at the American Studies Association conference in November 2017, for this last point.



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