

RADICAL TEACHER

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Pedagogies of Refusal: What it Means to (Un)teach a Student Like Me

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"LINEAGES I: ENTRE CORALILLOS CON MAMI Y MAMÁ TINGO" BY YANIRA RODRÍGUEZ

We Refuse:

Justice projects which require us to prove humanity or worth.

Justice projects which require us to frontload a lot of learning or consciousness-raising.

Justice projects which require us to appeal to the people who abuse us.

Justice projects which require us to gather an audience of white settlers who are presumed to have agency.

Justice projects that presume compromise as the main avenue for achieving solidarity.

-Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2018, p.8)

This analysis addresses the need to develop an ethos of refusal in Composition Studies and the academy in general, arguing that refusal is a livening rhetorical strategy of survival, that challenges colonial futurity (Tuck and Yang), is generative and generous (McGranahan), and opens liminal space (Anzaldúa, Baez, Lugones) for existing in predominantly white institutions — not at the margins nor centers but at the places of transformative possibility and deep relationality (Ahmed, Bilge and Collins, Licona and Chavez). My experiences as I began to identify and refuse the expected relationality in academic spaces along with my participation in Queer Black POC-led organizing spaces, inform the questions that animate my teaching practices.

- What intra-University community organizing-pedagogies can we develop to dismantle white supremacy, sexual assault, and abolish campus police?
- What intra-University community organizing-pedagogies can we develop to decolonize spaces of interaction? or rather, what intra-University community project-based pedagogies can we develop that foreground abolition, reparations and the return of indigenous land while opening new possibilities?

I am being deliberate when I pose these questions by asking what project-based pedagogies can we develop. But to be more explicit with the language, how can the university be a site for organizing within and against the institution, and our teaching spaces sites to unpack social movement theory as related to student-teacher-workers' urgent demands. I suggest embodying an ethos of refusal and developing pedagogies that foreground refusal has the potential to create abolitionists or what Fred Moten terms an *undercommons*, who do not stop at the recognition of how the interrelated foundations of white supremacy and settler colonialism serve no one but an undercommons who move beyond recognition toward action, as he states: "...what it is that is supposed to be repaired is irreparable. It can't be repaired. The only thing we can do is tear this shit down completely and build something new" (152).

Through a refusal of the bankrupt rewards of "entry" where one is meant to be thankful for simply being included in a still-oppressive structure experienced in academic spaces, we create an opening. Refusal allows us space to examine and gain clarity on that which is being refused.

Refusal helps us unmask seemingly benevolent relations and the function of affect in creating institutional buy-in. Our refusal creates space for resistance to incorporation while simultaneously opening space for us to turn toward another possibility. Our refusal lets us recognize that we are each other's possibility. Through our refusal we challenge normalized coercive violence (e.g. the capitalist reproduction of death, prisons, the dispossession of indigenous lands). Our refusal delegitimizes that which has gained legitimacy by force. As such, our embodied refusal constitutes a decolonial potential.

Refusing the imposed scripts of being and belonging that function as containment and appeasement mechanisms through words like civility, collegiality, dialog, generosity and also community, reveals relationality as fraught, as a process of struggle (see Olwan on assumptive solidarities and Tuck and Yang on incommensurable struggles). There is a crisis of community within institutional spaces, and in the field of composition more specifically, a crisis that scholars with marginalized identities have attempted to address since the moment otherized bodies entered institutions of higher education (see Kynard, Pritchard, Gumbs, Ahmed, Khadka et al, Gutiérrez y Muhs et al). But despite these attempts and despite the crisis, the field of Literacy and Composition studies continues to forward dissonant internal and external definitions of community. The first blankets subjectivity to avoid accountability while the second relies on a sense of community as "those people" beyond the academy, a sense still predicated on a colonial missionary imaginary.

The internal definition of community (the one that circulates through the field, our departments, the academy) simultaneously professes to "recognize difference" while deploying robust rhetoric and actions to contain that difference, or rather to contain what Lugones terms "the problem of difference" (68). The external definition of community, one used by community writing/publishing, relies on a sense of community as beyond the academy, where those who are out there "in the community" do not make it in, or rather, if and when they do, they must become hyper visible as tokens/brokers of diversity or must become abstracted less their difference become a problem. In this process, there is a continual pitting of bodies and knowledges of people with marginalized identities against one another.

Dreaming in Radio Waves

I was an 8th grader, newly back from Quisqueya and attending school in Harlem. Sleeping on the floor of la abuela's bedroom, we would go to sleep listening to late-night Spanish radio comedy shows. Occasionally I would hear her laugh or I would laugh, but we were mostly laying there silent, in the dark, with the echoing voices from the radio lingering in the interstices, the day closing out, a black hole. It wasn't until I recognized this need for sonic comfort in my daughter, la hija that I realized I too, fall asleep, to these voices, mediating the night. These entangled beings, la madre, la abuela la hija, la nieta transmitting the needed codes for survival.

The abstraction functions as a way to disenfranchise people with marginalized identities from their experience-based knowledges. One example is the deployment of rhetorics of “community authenticity” weaponized against people of color in the academy when we attempt to call out problematic “community” work. Refusing the stories they tell becomes a way to turn and tell our own.

What promise does the settler-colonial academy hold for me who feel the years from and of this moment always in circular motion extending me toward *mi abuela*, toward *mis nietas* to be. May they never *sense upon* me and find I’m working for our oppressors as an infamous curator of our life-line-*conocimientos*.

I am tempted to write that we should move away from the term community and toward the term collective struggle, but I fear the quick uptake of terms that help to avoid accountability through window dressing with the right language. Instead, I will say that if as composition

teachers we are committed to co-create a community that works for all, if we are committed to move beyond pseudo communities whose foundation is conflict avoidance (Peck, 2015), if we are committed to refuse the kind of justice projects Tuck and Yang outline in the epigraph above, if we are committed to take the needed risks with and for each other, if we are committed to anti-racism, to decolonization, then it feels important that we become “fluent in each other’s stories and struggles” (Tuck and Yang, 2012, p.30) . What comes through in this essay is my attempt to give readers a sense of what some of us experience and risk through this political continuum of colonial violence.

Focusing on refusal as performative, rhetorical, and *undisciplined* (Pough, Durham), and following in the lineage of Black and Third World feminist and Critical Race theories on narratives as political tools, I share a constellation of experiences in and beyond the classroom to forward a multi-modal pedagogy of refusal in composition. More specifically, I share this piece, which bridges academic critique with counternarratives, mini-*diálogos*, and art prints to signal to the composing practices that are possible and necessary in our shared spaces of learning.

During the 2016-17 academic year, in the midst and post the election, I taught first year composition. The climate included university administrators across the nation espousing rhetorics of dialog and support for students who were Trump supporters. These rhetorics often equated students subjected to anti-Muslim hate speech to white students feeling uncomfortable in the classroom. This climate was echoed at Syracuse University, where I was teaching at the time. The student newspaper published an op-ed titled: “Feeling unwelcome, Trump Supporters at Syracuse University want Civility.”

In the article a self-identified Trump supporter attributed getting a C+ grade to being graded on his politically conservative ideas and not the quality of his work. The article also recounted stories that ranged from a conservative student being “verbally attacked” by a TA for

wearing a “Make America Great Again” hat in class, to conservative students not having good mentors due to the lack of conservative faculty (Hippensteel, et al. 2017).

Informed by this particular climate I want to share a few counterstories that are representative of the classroom and mentorship at a predominantly white institution, counterstories that are representative of the kinds of interactions/relationalities graduate students and faculty of color encounter and that invariably affect our pedagogical approaches as we commit to anti-racist, anti-oppressive pedagogies. Rhetoric and composition scholar Aja Martínez defines composite counterstories as a practice that “critically examines theoretical concepts and humanizes empirical data” and that are composed using “...statistical data, existing literatures, social commentary, and authors’ professional/personal experiences concerning the topics addressed” as grounding material (69). As Martínez notes, counterstories have been used by critical race theorists such as Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, and Tara J. Yosso. The counterstories I share below follow the trajectory of a composite character, a graduate student named Rainy Cruz, as they attempt to navigate graduate education, teaching and mentorship.

My anger is and isn’t about you.

Pedagogy as refusal of the “classroom”: Rainy Cruz and the problem of teaching composition to soldiers

Audre Lorde was teaching remedial writing to an interracial group of police officers that wore their full uniforms, including their guns to her class each day (Gumbs, p. 302)

What does the memory of [ten-year-old] Clifford Glover [murdered by police] teach the teacher who teaches policemen to become authors, who teaches policemen to write, who authorizes the language of police-in-training? (Gumbs, p. 313)

Rainy Cruz is teaching first year composition in the midst of Trump’s election. Though she has been used to teaching mostly white students, this year her first year writing class is comprised of mostly white men in the STEM and Forensics and National Security fields. After a summer where rhetorics of dialoguing and engaging in deep listening of Trump supporters were pervasive and taking that as an indication of what awaited teachers who do anti-racist pedagogy, Rainy Cruz spends the summer planning for the class. She started thinking hard about developing a kind of pedagogy that would minimize violence while still unpacking the reality of the moment. While Rainy Cruz decides she will not bring news about Trump and the election into the classroom she remained committed to introduce students to Black feminist composition texts and to unpack the commonplaces around meritocracy and individualism and happiness that reduce reality and criticality to the soundbites that foment fear and fascist ideals.

One student, Pete, persistently shows up wearing a Meninist sweatshirt. And a few times a week, Pete, a white, tall and burly man, also shows up to class in full camo military garb since he is an ROTC student. At a university with deep ties to the military, it was not Rainy Cruz's first time teaching composition to a soldier and while the specific political context was not new, racist and misogynistic students seemed particularly emboldened by national rhetorics that espoused hate and violence. This deepened the tension of teaching composition to a soldier in training in full knowledge that soldiers were consistently being deployed to contain people of color such as in Ferguson and the Mexico-U.S. border. A few months before the start of class in the very city where Rainy Cruz is teaching, military tanks were sent in to control a largely Black and Brown community in outrage after a police officer shot and killed an unarmed innocent man. This is on Rainy Cruz's mind as she is teaching Black feminist scholars such as June Jordan and Audre Lorde in her composition class, scholars who wrote about what it means to teach composition to cops who kill Black children, women and men. Rainy Cruz decides to recommit daily to teach against violence despite how shaken she is to be in the classroom with a white-soldier-man-student. She shows the class the white men, including students, who marched on the UVA campus with tiki torches shouting "blood and soil" and "you will not replace us" alternated with "Jews will not replace us." Rainy Cruz asks the class how did students their age come to participate and support such actions. The responses to her pedagogy start to come in.

Rainy Cruz the "unamerican" teacher:

In the same class, another student, Pete's friend John, in response to an assignment on a reading on meritocracy, proceeds to write a four-page response through which, as he states, he was going to give Rainy Cruz, a lesson on reality. The student writes: "My job in writing this to you is not to uncover the truth about all this phony bologna stuff about the American Dream being a lie but to show you facts and give you questions that will leave you asking 'how are minds thinking like this.' Well to start off we all live and thrive in America."

John then goes on to capitalize certain phrases in case Rainy Cruz didn't get their meaning: "We are given rights, hence, THE BILL OF RIGHTS, we are given choices, hence THE FREE MARKET ECONOMY." This goes on for four pages with statements that begin with phrases such as: "My question for you is..." and "I want you to think about, seriously think about..." And then it wraps up with this concluding question and thoughts: "What American would criticize America? This is a wonderful country full of opportunity and triumph," John writes. "Living here does not make you an American. Embracing this country makes you an American."

Rainy Cruz gets evaluated:

At the end of the semester when it was time for evaluations, a third student, Mark, writes a pretty damning evaluation of Rainy Cruz which he then signs with the

hashtag "#Trump/Pence." Rainy Cruz finds the evaluation striking because despite the elections Rainy Cruz made a decision to protect the few students of color in the classroom (and themselves) by not teaching specifically about the elections. After all, to Rainy, Trump's antics and bankrupt electoral politics were nothing new.

Rainy Cruz is advised

At that same time as this was happening in the teacher's classroom, during an advising session Rainy's advisor went on and on and on about their inability to stay "neutral" in what felt like an invitation for Rainy Cruz to share their reactions about the political moment or rather their own "inability to control themselves" in the classroom. Rainy Cruz found this odd, because it presumed she was teaching about Trump but was also meant to elicit an admission of a lack of "neutrality."

Mini-diálogos: Convo with a "mentor"
You have to place your ideas in the field!
Qué field?
The field! the field! the field!
La tierra? Si! Sembramos palabras
We grow the words we're going to need.
How is your work connecting to the field's scholarship?
I grow bougainvillea's y framboyanes.
What is your specialization?
I press their fallen flowers in useless oppressive books. To commune with brutalized trees.

Advisor: I am usually pretty good at staying objective and separating my political responses from my teaching but I am finding it difficult, how about you Rainy?

Rainy Cruz: Sorry to hear you are having such struggles, it is a tense political climate.

Advisor: I mean I am just finding it hard to stay objective, do you find this to be the case?

Rainy Cruz: These are difficult times.

Advisor: My family are long-time progressives who support Hillary Clinton and it is just...

This line of questioning went on for a while and Rainy Cruz began to feel that they were being baited and gaged for whether or not they could handle teaching Trump supporters, whether they could be "objective." This sense was not a function of paranoia but rather an accumulation of discreet interactions. Rainy Cruz listened for a while and finally responded.

Rainy Cruz: I am not teaching about Trump and I don't support Hillary. But I do want to talk to you about some dynamics in the classroom. Completely ignoring the assignment, a student decided to write a problematic response which was decidedly directed at me.

Advisor: It is understandable that would happen in this climate, likely a function of the election.

Rainy Cruz: Would you like to read it?

Advisor: No need. Just keep me posted.

Later in conversation with a fellow teacher and friend, Rainy Cruz shares these happenings.

Rainy Cruz: The advisor was going on and on about Hillary and her family when what I asked for was advice on how to handle problematic students in the classroom.

Fellow teacher: Did you get any?

Rainy Cruz: No, instead I received this talk about Hillary based on some strange assumption that I am at all invested in electoral politics. I wanted to do an Ash Shakar and say, "I am a revolutionary communist, you idiot!"

In that brief opening, the friends find space to laugh together. When I learned of the 300+ mostly men marching with tiki torches on the UVA campus, I saw explicit connections to these discreet moments in the classroom and other spaces of relationalities, moments as the ones I describe above, seemingly mundane moments that are not one-offs of a particular incident or institution (see Kynard's account of being accused of writing her student's dissertation).

As we commit to collectivize risk and build the courage to teach in these times, our relationalities will also reveal that teaching has always demanded a particular kind of courage from specific bodies. That is, as the current political moment and movement work have opened a wave of hiring of faculty with marginalized identities and has pushed for more diversity initiatives that also inform curriculum, what practices and principles will be developed and implemented to sustain these faculty through their anti-racist work in and beyond the classroom?

Thus, when I say teach, I mean teaching despite all the ways some of us are pushed not to teach and supporting people placed in those positions. I also mean thinking about pedagogies and practices that extend beyond the classroom, that broaden sites of learning. I mean teaching white people not to kill or erase Black, indigenous, people of color. When I say *in these times*, I don't mean these times are some fixed moment or new or exceptional (see Kaba), instead I am referring to a currently emboldened repressive state that has been in place for so many for so long but that by relying on "white shock" at newly discovered excessive use of force it creates a false hierarchy and division of violences. This hierarchy in turn renders some violences more acceptable than others. Under this model, curricular repression or classroom microaggressions become dismissible when the threshold for violence is set at Black students being brutalized and dragged out of classrooms by police or when a Black student using a glue gun for a class project ends up with a SWAT team being called to campus (Svrluga, 2017).

I am arguing that instead of a hyper focus on the current repressive administration all of us should already be shocked into action by the demographic composition of our classrooms, shocked by how so many students struggle to meet basic needs, some of those being the need for safety and belonging (Parks 2019), shocked into action by the curricular changes meant to depoliticize (and police) our pedagogies, shocked into action when graduate and undergraduate students of color share the racist, ableist and

heteropatriarchal macro and microaggressions they are experiencing, shocked when colleagues are disrespected, silenced, policed. When the shock comes after 20-something-year-old white male students are marching on college campuses with tiki torches, it signals that we have missed intervening at the incremental moments that build on each other to create the conditions for a fascist state.

Refusing the Classroom

It should be unconscionable to think that your little assignment or assessment strategy is offering a radically transformative end-game in this social system. That's academic marketing— and a catering to white comfort. It's not anti-racism. Your pedagogy is not unshackling 400 years of slavery for any slave or her descendant. Your classrooms are not untying the noose of Jim Crow lynch law, past or present, for any Black bodies that have hung from trees. And you are not breaking down today's prison walls and borders. So comfort and a feel of ease are not options. All that we have— when we think in terms of racial realism— is struggle. That's it. The hope is in the process of the struggle. It is in the constant work, not the end result or an eventual sign of progress because that is not forthcoming... not in the lifetime of anyone in this room. Being a racial realist changes the way you approach and politicize the work.

-Carmen Kynard (from Notes on Racial Realism)

In what follows, I will share some classroom practices but these practices are highly contextual and should not be taken up as the formula of what needs to be done. As Kynard via Derrick Bell argues in the epigraph above, the classroom is not going to save us and in fact it often functions as a space to avoid accountability. What does it mean to emphasize liberatory pedagogies in the classroom while we continue to neglect other spaces in the academy, where faculty and students with marginalized identities bump up against the oppressive workings of the institution and its actors? Kynard's statement reveals that the classroom is not separate from the rest of the institution, nor a contained space sitting outside the rest of the social order. She challenges us to think that the kind of learning and action that we need must happen everywhere, at all times. We can't afford to think that the 15 weeks of the discreet space of the classroom is achieving something ungrounded and separate from movement history or the greater demand for justice that necessitates continued struggle.

Her statement also helps us deal more clearly with the fear of failure that is pervasive among our students and that we often ascribe to "teach for the test and the grade" models of education that they have been exposed to but that also signal to a crisis of belonging. Thus, using the movement language of struggle allows us to include failure as part of our pedagogy. Liberatory progress requires struggle, and struggle means that we can't be afraid of failure. In an effort to remain attentive to the connection between struggle and

possibility, and having shared some of the less uplifting moments of the classroom, I will also share some pedagogical strategies.

Pedagogy as Struggle

With some students I don't begin from a place of "this is everything you don't know," but rather from a place of "you live it so you already know and together we can do something with what you already know." With many other students the approach is different and is informed by who makes it into the classroom. To get us closer to a shared even if fraught sense, I try to cultivate a livening pedagogy, a kind of sci-fi voyage, a blend of soundscapes, printmaking, collaging and writing. All these forms are "texts and tools," and all composition assignments in our classroom can be approached in these and many other ways. Students often love this approach and other times they resist it.

Following in Toni Cade Bambara's lineage, I conceive of my work as a teacher as that of a cultural worker and my pedagogy and the temporary communities of the classroom as spaces where we can work collectively "to make the revolution irresistible" (Bambara 35). In an interview with Kay Bonnetti, Bambara states:

The task of the artist is determined always by the status and process and agenda of the community that it already serves. If you're an artist who identifies with, who springs from, who is serviced by or drafted by a bourgeois capitalist class then that's the kind of writing you do. Then your job is to maintain the status quo, to celebrate exploitation or to guise it in some lovely, romantic way. That's your job... (35).

On the other hand, the job of the artist-writer-teacher accountable to their communities is revolution, one whose foundation is to uphold and celebrate life through the production of love. This approach in all spaces of relationality refuses the competitive pull and disciplinary separation and ownership often evidenced beyond the classroom.

Approaching the work of the classroom from this perspective has allowed me to transform research writing courses, for example, into interdisciplinary spaces where we engage with artist and art exhibits that respond to the social political moment. We do collective research on various artistic social justice interventions including how artists have

created work to critique and upend police brutality, gentrification, war and empire, food injustices, immigration abuses, etc. The idea is not merely to "study" artists and their work, but to learn and practice cultural production, to learn about the tools and the lineages of resistance they are connected to. In this class students make art together, responding to a social political issue of interest, with the intent of engaging in other forms of meaning making. In my journalism classes the ends are similar even as the means take on other forms such as learning and applying the history of the underground press, creating zines that

respond to important campus concerns, and other journalistic interventions taking on issues such as sexual assault, unequal distribution of resources, segregated unsafe housing. These stories which usually include a multi-media component have the explicit purpose of making an intervention as they often do when they are published in the school newspaper. In some ways my journalism classes afford different possibilities as I often have the same students over several semesters. As students respond to social concerns, their own histories and issues come into the room and this is a fraught process that necessitates struggling through the faulty tools we are given to make sense of the violences we witness, impart and personally experience. My classroom is always an attempt to dislodge the mechanistic way many students (due to economic and other pressures) have come to understand their education and its value.



"REFUSAL AND POSSIBILITY" YANIRA RODRÍGUEZ

Pedagogies of the Wind and Stars

The social relations that we (were never meant to) survive, also live in our bodies painfully, and Audre Lorde is not here to remind us of this lesson herself, except in as much that she is present in the pedagogical wind. But wind is our teacher (74).

-Alexis Pauline Gumbs

Through this work I join in a long lineage of scholars who write narratives about the possible and untenable in our field with the hope that we can think together about a pedagogy of refusal that extends beyond the classroom to all spheres of relationality with people and the natural world. The classroom and other narratives I share above leave me with deep longings. In writing these narratives I find myself asking: How can teachers of color and marginalized

identities stay alive in the classroom? By alive, I mean, how can we keep the pedagogy, ideas and questions alive as well as our bodies? I mean, how can we keep our students alive? our colleagues? How can we engage in an unrelenting refusal to allow white people to keep killing us?

The urgency of that question informs the knowledges we share in the classroom as well as the collective work of reflection that we do in my composition classes. I try to make sure we leave both my current composition and journalism classes reflecting on the intellectual lineages we have connected to through the readings, the artist tools we have used and the skills we have gained. I try to guide a collective reflection on how we will put these knowledges and tools to use, to what end goals, to what ancestors will we call on for strength. That means I also spend time trying to connect white students to their ancestors who fought against oppressive evil but also other lineages. Refusing and turning toward liberatory knowledge lineages reveals pedagogies of refusal as intergenerational and as refusing the capitalist reproduction of death (Gumbs, 319); as refusing a notion of arrival predicated on hierarchies; as refusing a hyper-focus on the classroom and instead extending to all spheres of relationality; as refusing the policing and containment narratives of the "other" that dominate a white supremacist imaginary; as refusing the avoidance of struggle that devolves into fatalism or detached optimism. In refusal, we find movement and space to turn toward a livening pedagogy.

As I write this, the Highlander School's archives have been burned down, with preliminary reports indicating it was done by a white supremacist. The burning of Highlander's archives reminds me of the many discussions I have had with my close colleague-comrades about how sometimes it seems like the slow, deliberate, painstaking interventions we make get trampled and undone by students' experiences beyond our classroom. But then I am encouraged by what I know to be possible because I have lived it, because movement histories, which remain alive through people in collective struggle, prove it to be so, the insurgency takes hold.

Notes

1. <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2017/08/torch-bearing-white-supremacists-descend-on-uva-ahead-of-unite-the-right-rally.html>

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