

# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## *Introduction* Anti-Oppressive Composition Pedagogies

by Julia Havard, Erica Cardwell, and Anandi Rao



ISABELLA JACOB, SWIMMING POOL 13 (2000)

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

- Alexis Pauline Gumbs

The project of creating an anti-oppressive composition issue began with multi-disciplinary, multi-institutional collaboration between Julia Havard, Erica Cardwell, Anandi Rao, Juliet Kunkle and Rosalind Diaz, who crafted a call for community-building and community-transformation: to build tools, resources, and spaces for transforming our classrooms, specifically our writing classrooms; and to approach the teaching of composition in community, with accountability, and with *urgency*. This collaboration started as a working group at the University of California Berkeley, Radical Decolonial Queer Pedagogies of Composition, as a number of instructors at multiple levels of the academic hierarchy struggled with the differences between our writing classrooms and our research. Following Condon and Young, Inoe, and Gumbs, our editing team wanted to create a context and process for rich unraveling of un-teaching oppressive systems through composition.

From the design and scaffolding of course content to the implementation of assignments, from prescriptive grammar to evaluations and assessments, oppressive structures such as white supremacy, ableism, queerphobia, sexism, and transphobia as well as their intersecting and multiplying effects are an inherent part of our composition classrooms. In this issue, we asked teachers to tell us their strategies for combating, refusing, undoing, and confronting these structural forces and the intimate ways they tangle our pens to paper. In addition, these authors supplied us with strategies, tools, theories, techniques, and reflections for generating, creating, validating, enriching, and valuing student work across difference.

To both forge something new and reflect on the work that makes this type of intervention possible requires that we situate ourselves with respect to Critical Pedagogy as an academic field. Critical Pedagogy, as it has become canonized, is often traced to the publication of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1970, followed by Freire's intellectual descendants. While many radical educators have drawn foundational inspiration from the insights of these thinkers and activists, the canon of Critical Pedagogy has also been critiqued for its tendency towards abstract generalizations and universalisms (Biesta 74; Weiler 353); failing to fully problematize the nation-state, limiting its "project of anti-system" (Cho 310); and asking why for so many people this academic theorizing of radical-ness does not feel empowering or applicable to localized projects (Ellsworth 297).

We situate our project in the groundbreaking work that *Radical Teacher* has published over the last fifty years. In 1978, Barbara Smith published the essay "Towards A Black Feminist Criticism" in Issue 7 of *Radical Teacher*. Smith outlines principles to engage with writing that will not simply

comply with traditional legacies of critical pedagogy, but will desire to understand "our political reality and the literature we must invent" (26). Smith offered the intervention of a Black feminist critical consciousness via the platform of *Radical Teacher*. Twenty years later, in 1998, Lennard J. Davis and Simi Linton co-edited issue 47 of *Radical Teacher* devoted to disability studies, at this time an emerging field, that highlighted problematic trends in existing courses on disability and investigated methods of radicalizing curriculum, raising up methods of reading disability as culturally and politically relevant, not simply an issue of biological difference or a tenant of watered-down academic calls for diversity. Davis and Linton describe the methods and reflections of contributors as "open[ing] a window," not providing a holistic assessment of the field but in investigating moments of pedagogical critique, letting light pour down and ripple off of new strategies of envisioning inclusive education (3). Forty years after Smith's call and twenty years after Davis and Linton's, the university has answered this imperative, spurred by decades of painstaking activist labor, via multiple interventions--from Black studies and disability studies departments, to ethnic studies and queer, feminist, and crip pedagogy. But Smith's interrogation continues to simmer: what does it mean when a sentence "refuses to do what it is supposed to do"? How are these vast changes in the shape of academic frameworks reflected in sentence-level choices students make in our writing classrooms? When we teach writing, are we indeed teaching that sentences that refuse are a gift, not a problem, as Smith insisted? From the design and scaffolding of course content to the implementation of assignments, from prescriptive grammar to evaluations and assessments, oppressive structures such as white supremacy, ableism, queerphobia, sexism, and transphobia as well as their intersecting and multiplying effects are an inherent part of our composition classrooms.

***From the design and scaffolding of course content to the implementation of assignments, from prescriptive grammar to evaluations and assessments, oppressive structures such as white supremacy, ableism, queerphobia, sexism, and transphobia as well as their intersecting and multiplying effects are an inherent part of our composition classrooms.***

As we frame Issue 115 of *Radical Teacher*, we know that the equitable survival of all under current political regimes requires us to examine the broken pieces of the educational system and ask ourselves to re-imagine our writing classrooms urgently, in the service of revolution. Some of the questions that grounded us included: How can you teach writing soft and writing ugly, writing with accountability and in community, writing across generations, writing cellularly, writing toward collective access, writing safely but toward bravery? What is the conjure art (Amara Tabor-Smith) of teaching writing

magic? How do you teach writing anti, against, or undoing? How do you teach writing as craft? As grassroots organizing? What is the molecular web of words, methods, and gestures that shapes the space of your classroom to allow for the sparkly and undeniable truths of your students to shine through in text?

The cover art for this issue—"Swimming Pool T3" created by Isabella Jacob—encapsulates an intention of this issue: to understand different techniques, positions, and strategies as resources that can be combined, layered, recycled, and repurposed in moving toward varied yet parallel horizons. The piece is a collage depiction of a swimming pool—a space, like a classroom, haunted by histories of segregation due to fear of the contagion of difference. The pool is crafted out of a multitude of materials, "new and found papers, Braille documents, photographs, seismic records of earthquake events," and the visual lines of the piece point to many different windows at the end of the horizon line, the colors of dusk or early morning suggesting a moment of transition. According to Jacob, "[t]he ritual of cutting/tearing/pasting/layering" is done with materials "infused with their own histories," which Jacob considers her own history embedded within. The positions, viewpoints, and techniques of authors in this issue collectively urge us to shift toward differential horizons, and we believe these models, reflections, lesson plans, exercises, and pieces of theory supply the materials for a carefully crafted re-imagining of composition space, during a political moment that is desperate for change.

These authors collectively answer the question "How can academic writing refuse to uphold the structures of oppression that seek to marginalize teachers and students along lines of difference and how can teachers work collectively, coalitionally, and as accomplices to teach writing toward the freedom of the most oppressed?" Owen, Fahs, and Rodas suggest creative compositional teaching tools such as letter-writing, manifestos, and comics as creative methods of integrating bodies, relationships, and feeling into the classroom space. Marsellas and Boodman write through the radical potential of scaffolding and beyond. These authors are simultaneously writing strategies of undoing white supremacy as a central structuring feature of higher education through a multitude of techniques, re-writing histories (Lisabeth) to shift futures (Fazio). Some of the authors plunge into theory, while others write through their methods, some integrating both as praxis. We ask you, as teachers, to imagine yourself into this archive "against critique fatigue" (Boodman) and unravel what possibilities, methods, technologies, and processes of making and remaking you can draw from and add to.

Yanira Rodríguez collects a "constellation of experiences from organizing spaces to graduate education to forward a multi-modal pedagogy of refusal in composition," grounding her work in Black and Third World Feminist and Critical Race Theories, which hold up writing through personal experience as vital groundwork for theory. The piece suggests and models strategies for "divest[ing] from whiteness as an identity category" in the composition classroom and in the academy more broadly. Rodríguez's piece, through strategic citation, the interweaving of personal experience and

theory, and the creative use of woodcut prints, is a thoughtful and vehement unpacking of the power structures that reproduce white supremacy at multiple levels of academic institutions. Through "word-body-acts of refusal," Rodríguez suggests that decolonial potential can become embodied reality rather than metaphor (Tuck and Yang) as organizing and classroom teaching are presented as entangled and inseparable. As editors, we read this piece with gratitude for the vulnerability of the author to share the experience of holding multiple forms of anti-oppressive labor, the physical and mental impact of this work, and its potential toward transformation.

Nick Marsellas and Eva Boodman, provide a closer read of scaffolding, a guiding tool to the educator that assists in establishing collective goals in the critical classroom. Boodman and Marsellas agree that scaffolding can push students beyond their capacity for analysis and readiness. Marsellas' findings suggest that the "knowledge of an other" is not the most effective tool for breaking down social and emotional privilege in the classroom. Instead, Marsellas believes that unintelligibility or "deep end teaching" involves a vulnerable willingness on a social and emotional level to "not know" and essentially de-center mastery and objectification of marginalized communities. Boodman writes of "the discouragement, demoralization, and disempowerment that groups of students may collectively experience when there is too much 'critical' content, and not enough structured skill-building to allow students to respond creatively, emotionally, practically, and politically/institutionally to the information they are being asked to take in – even if, and especially if, it relates to their own experience." She terms this "critique fatigue" and names "radical scaffolding" as an alternative.

Laura Lisabeth writes an extended review of *Dreyer's English: An Utterly Correct Guide to Clarity and Style* and the genre of English style guides more generally, which unpacks how "standardized English" grammatically embeds white supremacy into writing pedagogy. She suggests that through historical unraveling of this process, investigating under-represented resistive uses of vernacular, and validating students' own unique relationships to language, "students gain a critical understanding of the language of power and the power of language identities that over history have bent the English standard with non-standard knowledge."

Breanne Fahs provides a template for teaching writing manifestos, a method that teaches students to write, through and within emotion around injustice, acknowledging the emotion that exists within the classroom environment that is often invisibilized. She argues that this work imbues students' writing with a sense of their own embodied authority on a topic, reversing some of the harm of academic hierarchies.

Pryzbylo and Savonik emphasize the revolutionary potential of publishing student work. In "Publishing Revolution: Publishing Praxis in the Classroom," Ela Pryzbylo works in collaboration with her students with the premise of publishing as a radical act. In their work, students "begin with an exploration of the ways in which publishing is necessarily a political praxis, and one that can be effectively

utilized in feminist, antiracist, and anti-oppressive projects of world-making." Savonick similarly interrogates the practice of student publishing in the article, "What Can Our Writing Do In the World?: The Feminist Praxis of Publishing Student Writing." The author invites students in First Year Composition classes to participate in creative modes of publishing to formulate their context and thinking in the early onset of their academic career. Savonick is interested in "curriculum that aims to transform undergraduate students' cognitive schemas by forming new 'impressions' (Ahmed) of social justice," through witnessing themselves and their peers as writing "publicly."

Julia Rodas' comic/essay, co-published with her students Mamadou Barry, Madeline Lewis, Eric Moore, Luis Moreau, and Julio Rodriguez, demonstrates a method of teaching anti-carceral feminisms through comics. The piece winds between art-making and composition to suggest multi-modal forms of student engagement that validate students lived knowledge and feelings as a resource and that open multiple creative points of entry to a project. She models this approach, drawing and writing through the process that brought her to anti-racist education and confronting the feelings that arise teaching across racial difference. In showcasing her student work, Rodas models what fellow authors in this issue urge teachers to engage in: Savonick's "feminist praxis of publishing student writing" and Przybylo's "publishing revolution." Rodas also includes alternative text for each page of comics for the purposes of making her piece accessible for disabled teachers and students who may be accessing her piece through a screenreader, which hopefully will serve as a model and call to action for others to make their work accessible to all teachers and students as well.

Ianna Owen's teaching note illustrates the use of letter writing in composition classrooms as a strategy, grounded in African American literature and practice, of spreading information about prison abolition through a network of relationship student kinship ties and developing writing as a practical strategy that creates ripples of intimate action to "politicize vulnerability in writing and to turn more hearts and more resources toward the long project of freedom for all people." Michele Fazio's teaching note illustrates how composition courses can focus on undoing racism through texts, assignments, and communication around difference. She tracks us through the construction of a course at University of North Carolina-Pembroke, taking into account the specific racial history and classroom demographics that she employs to inform course material and conversation.

The authors of this issue write the body into the composition classroom, those of the student and teacher and of the complex ridges of hierarchies between us. In the affective economy (Ahmed) of the classroom, these authors imagine strategies for composition to materially advance the position of the marginalized student, while examining modes of undoing whiteness and the way it seeps into academic structures, teaching modalities, language, and relationships.

We hope that this issue provides radical teachers with concrete methods to undo oppression in your classrooms, to highlight and subsequently unembed the covert ways that hierarchies structure our language use and essay construction, and that it provides tools beyond and between words to emphasize the power of art-making, relationship, feeling, listening, and refusal in order to write and embody more just worlds. We hope this work can ripple through your intimate kinship connections (Owen) into your classrooms and that the intellectual community crafted through this process can work in accompliceship with readers toward deeper communal growth and more resourced classroom organizing.

## Works Cited

- Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*. Duke University Press, 2010.
- Biesta, G.J.J. *Good Education in an Age of Measurement: Ethics, politics, democracy*. Paradigm, 2010.
- Cho, Seehwa. "Politics of Critical Pedagogy and New Social Movements," *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 42:3, 2010, 310-325.
- Condon, F., & Young, V. A. (Eds.) *Performing Antiracist Pedagogy in Rhetoric, Writing, and Communication*. CSU Open Press, 2017.
- Davis, Lennard J., and Simi Linton. "Introduction." *Radical Teacher*, 47, 1995, pp. 2-3.
- Ellsworth, Elizabeth. "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy." *Harvard Educational Review*, 59, 3, 1989, pp. 297-325.
- Talley, Heather Laine. "Teaching Resources Brilliance Remastered: An Interview with Alexis Pauline Gumbs." *Feminist Teacher*, 22, 2, 2012, pp.165-167.
- Inoue, Asao B. *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future*. Parlor Press, 2015.
- Smith, Barbara. "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism." *Radical Teacher*, 7, 1978, pp. 20-27.
- Tabor-Smith, Amara. "The Practice of Conjure Art." *Dance*, September 1, 2015, <http://dancersgroup.org/2015/09/speak-practice-conjure-art-making-earthbodyhome/>.
- Weiler, Kathleen. "Myths of Paulo Freire." *Educational Theory*, 46,3, 1996. 353-371.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://dscribe.com/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.pitt.edu/).