

# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## *Introduction* Teaching for Justice

by Sarah Chinn and Michael Bennett



PHOTO BY MELANY ROCHESTER ON UNSPLASH

*some of you have been blessed*

*or cursed*

*to see beyond yourselves*

*into the scattered wrongful dead*

*into the disappeared*

*the despised*

*none of you has seen*

*everything*

*none of you has said*

*everything*

*what you have noticed*

*we have noticed*

*what you have ignored*

*we have not*

*Lucille Clifton, from "the message from The Ones  
(received in the late 70s)"*

*Justice, justice you shall pursue.*

(Deuteronomy 16:20)

What is justice but the blessing (or curse) to see beyond oneself, as Lucille Clifton puts it? Justice requires that we see “into the scattered wrongful dead/into the disappeared/the despised.” But it also requires that we take action beyond that vision, that we move from noticing to doing, to creating. That transition from recognizing injustice to taking action to counter it is the focus of the articles in this issue of *Radical Teacher*.

We did not plan for this thematic confluence in choosing these articles for publication. Indeed, this issue is nominally themeless, a gathering of essays that were not submitted for any specific cluster, in response to no particular call for papers. And they come from both the United States and the UK, from college professors and teachers working in K-12 schools. The fact that they speak to closely overlapping concerns might tell us something about what radical teachers are thinking about these days.

While these articles vary in topic from a high school “world literature” class to teaching first-year college composition through hip hop to a group of British female academics responding to workplace speed-up in the context of neoliberal structures of higher education, all the pieces in this issue take on the difficult work of building just educational environments. Sometimes the injustice they face is structural, such as the colonial legacies of

development studies that Andrea Cornwall takes on in “Decolonizing Development Studies.” Sometimes it is mostly unrecognized and unspoken, like the effects of corporatization and the inhumane expectations of workers that Sara Ashcaen Crabtree and her co-authors take on in “Donning the ‘Slow Professor.’”

Often, trying to teach for justice requires that the authors look hard at their own unrecognized biases (“what you have noticed/we have noticed/what you have ignored/we have not”) or the unintended consequences of what they assumed were politically radical teaching practices and materials. Most poignant in this regard are the contributions by Sarah Trembath and Andrea Serine Avery. The subtitle of Avery’s essay speaks for itself: “If I’m Trying to Teach for Social Justice, Why Do all the Black Men and Boys on My Syllabus Die?” In reworking a hidebound “world literatures” class for upper-level high school students, Avery consciously put black experiences at the center of her syllabus, from *Othello* to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to *Things Fall Apart* and beyond. But on reflection she saw a disturbing trend in the texts she was teaching: none of the black male characters survived, all dying by murder or suicide. Looking closer, she recognized that in one way or another the black male characters were dehumanized, blamed for their own demise, and/or “overwritten” by dominant white narratives. Whether these phenomena were part and parcel of the ideology of the text (as in *Othello*) or used by the authors to highlight the injustices the characters themselves suffered (in *Things Fall Apart*, for example), they transcended each individual text to tell a story of inevitable – and even sometimes deserved – black male death.

Sarah Trembath found herself in a similar quandary. In “Teaching Black Lives in College When Black Lives Didn’t Matter That Much K Through 12,” she describes her experiences teaching college composition through the vehicle of hip hop. As a black woman teaching predominantly black material, she assumed that she could counter the anti-blackness of the dominant culture, but found that backfiring, as her (mostly white) students took literally the performances of certain kinds of black urban masculinity and ended up rearticulating the racist tropes she abhorred. Like Avery, Trembath realized how difficult it is to counter anti-black racism while dealing with her students’ paucity of personal experience of non-dominant cultures.

***Justice requires that we see  
“into the scattered wrongful  
dead/into the disappeared/the  
despised.”***

Part of Trembath’s response to this conundrum is her embrace of *sankofa*, a worldview that uses knowledge of the past to construct a meaningful and just present and future. Implicitly, Shane McCoy shares this ethos, drawing upon feminist and critical pedagogy traditions to help his first-year composition students “write for justice.” In large part, this pedagogical approach entails drawing upon the venerable Freirean principle of enlisting students as knowledge producers rather than just consumers. But it is more than that. Many of McCoy’s students have academic orientations

that are pre-professional, in accounting or engineering or pre-health. How, then, does one make connections between advocating for social justice and these fields that see themselves as apolitical and anti-ideological? McCoy's technique is deceptively simple and takes advantage of students' favorite research tool: Google. By having them google basic phrases like "engineering and social justice," he launches them on a journey that they must navigate for themselves, and then has them map out what social justice could mean for their chosen professional paths.

In "Decolonizing Development Studies," Andrea Cornwall faces a very different set of professional expectations. Cornwall entered the academic field of development studies through the back door, and found herself teaching in a discipline she saw herself as opposed to. Certainly, she had plenty to object to: with its roots in European colonial and neo-colonial power and its commitment to "helping" – too often by disrupting functioning cultural structures and/or imposing economic schemes that undercut self-determination – the development-industrial complex has much with which radical politics could find fault. In her fascinating account, however, Cornwall found that non-hierarchical teaching methods opened up space for her to rethink development studies and reframe "international development as a global quest for social, gender, racial, and ecological justice."

Cornwall's concerns about international development and the ways it is studied and taught speak to larger issues of structural injustice. When we try to teach for justice, any number of phantoms haunt the classroom, ghosts that take on various levels of materiality for differently gendered, raced, sexed, classed, and otherwise embodied subjectivities within the space we share. Sarah Trembath's impatience with having to teach "Black Men Are People Too through Hip Hop lyricism" hints at the stubbornness of structural injustices and inequalities that occupy pedagogical locations. Radical pedagogy has attempted to reveal how inequities that seem systemically baked in might be dislodged, however slightly, with mixed results.

Shadia Siliman and Katherine Kearns analyze one such attempt, the so-called "privilege walk." This exercise, which is rooted in feminist standpoint theory, asks participants (usually students) to stand in a line and take steps forward or back depending on different indicators of social privilege. While this seems like a fairly tame and potentially effective way to illustrate how privilege operates in propelling some kinds of people forwards and holding others back, Siliman and Kearns identify the intrusive and artificial elements of the exercise. It demands that participants come out about parts of their identity about which they might (in many cases justifiably) feel vulnerable or unsafe; its educational benefits are primarily for those who have had the good fortune not to have to recognize their own privilege while simply reminding marginalized participants of the obstacles they know they face every day; it reduces students to objects of their advantages or disenfranchisement rather than complex beings; it ignores the dynamic relationships of power and marginalization.

Rather than relying on a single technique to magically teach about privilege, Siliman and Kearns insist that we

value "humility and vulnerability" in talking about structural injustice. They offer a number of alternative exercises, rooting their theorizing about pedagogy in praxis, but ultimately they reorient readers towards exploring the complexities of privilege. Privilege and marginalization are not simply additive or subtractive, after all. Rather, they operate in multiple registers at the same time, conferring and restricting power in interlayered ways. Quantifying injustice is itself a product of a corporatized approach to social justice work, one that looks to metrics of oppression rather than dynamic strategies to both comprehend and address inequity.

A symptom of a neoliberal ethos, the privilege walk ends up undermining the kind of intersectional thinking it seems to support. Indeed, processes of quantification themselves can be a form of injustice, in that they streamline and flatten out lived experience. But, as Sara Ashcaen Crabtree and her co-authors would argue, this is part and parcel of the new orientation of higher education more generally, one that insists on deliverables, metrics, and outcomes; one that regards students and faculty as "stakeholders" rather than producers of knowledge. For Crabtree et al., this attitude is especially pronounced in the UK, where the centralized oversight of higher education has allowed for neoliberal mechanisms of organization and assessment to dominate the discourse.

For faculty, this has meant a seemingly relentless speed-up of work, since they are not only teaching, researching, and writing, but also expected to generate reports about their teaching, research, and writing. In their participatory-action research project to study the effects of the acceleration of workload, they found that people of color and women of all kinds were especially plagued by guilt and anxiety about not doing enough and not doing it quickly. The autonomy that was once an important factor of academic life has given way to a feeling of surveillance and hurry that, as the authors say, "result[s] in demoralizing concomitant decisions of prioritization...which tasks to skimp and who to let down."

In response to this hurry-up culture and the language of "output efficiency," the authors turned to Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber's book *The Slow Professor*, which advocates resistance to the relentless stream of email and the shortening of deadlines (as well as the fiction that online teaching is somehow infinitely "scalable"). As Crabtree and her coauthors argue, the busyness generated by the corporate university is not simple a feeling of being overworked, but rather a "deliberately accelerated conveyer belt enveloping the work culture." Get off email, resist the push towards increased "outcomes assessment," and get a clear sense of the priorities of academic life.

It feels like we're a long way from black lives mattering, however. Are Crabtree et al. really talking about justice here, or simply about the discomfort that any kind of change generates? I'd argue that academic workplace issues – especially those that disadvantage already marginalized populations – are inextricable from questions of social justice. After all, it is difficult to quantify teaching justice in a course learning outcome, especially since the process of political education is accretive and requires a robust culture

of questioning, listening, and rethinking. Moreover, the speed-up that Crabtree and her coauthors identify has been concomitant with the massive growth in the proportion of contingent and at-will faculty in the teaching ranks in the United States. The contraction in the number of secure jobs in academia has distributed more administrative work among fewer full-time faculty, creating a two (or more) tier system in which adjunct faculty are increasingly surveilled and assessed.

Because Nick Hengen Fox's "More than a Slogan: Or, how we built a Social Justice Program that made our campus more Just" is about not just an individual class or series of classes but building a whole program, he and his co-workers had to build a relationship between curriculum, labor, recruitment, assessment, and the campus community. Each of these components had to be developed justly because a Social Justice program is about means as well as ends. In keeping this holistic view in mind, Fox and others built their program at Portland Community College around three traits: (1) centering on projects that are student-led, class-defined, and campus-based; (2) involving collective action; (3) developing a pedagogy that was explicitly *not* neutral. Though this "approach doesn't align with traditional academic norms or common practices," Fox argues that it does "align with commitments of radical pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching." This approach rejects the traditional liberal focus on an abstract and ideal model of "justice as fairness" (Rawls 190) for a more radical and pragmatic focus on "enhancing justice and removing injustice" at the exact points of its impact (Sen 5).

This distinction between formal and substantive justice is the dividing line between conservative/liberal and radical perspectives. Radical theories of social justice ask, "What meaning can be given to the liberal state's promise of 'equal justice' between individuals when there are massive social, economic, and political inequalities?" (Held 105). In their own ways, each of the authors of the articles included in this issue of *Radical Teacher* asks this question, and their attempts to answer it seriously take them beyond a commitment to justice as it is defined by the status quo. Like Shane McCoy, they create microcosms within the classroom of the world they would like to see in a larger context. Or, like Sara Trembath and Andrea Serine Avery, they take on the difficult work of self-critique and change. Together, these writers challenge narrow conceptions of social justice and chart radical paths forward, allowing us, their readers, the welcome task of coming along with them.

## Works Cited

- Clifton, Lucille. *Mercy*. Rochester, NY: BOA Editions, 2004.
- Held, David. *Models of Democracy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987.
- Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1971.
- Sen, Amartya. *The Idea of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](#).



This journal is published by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).