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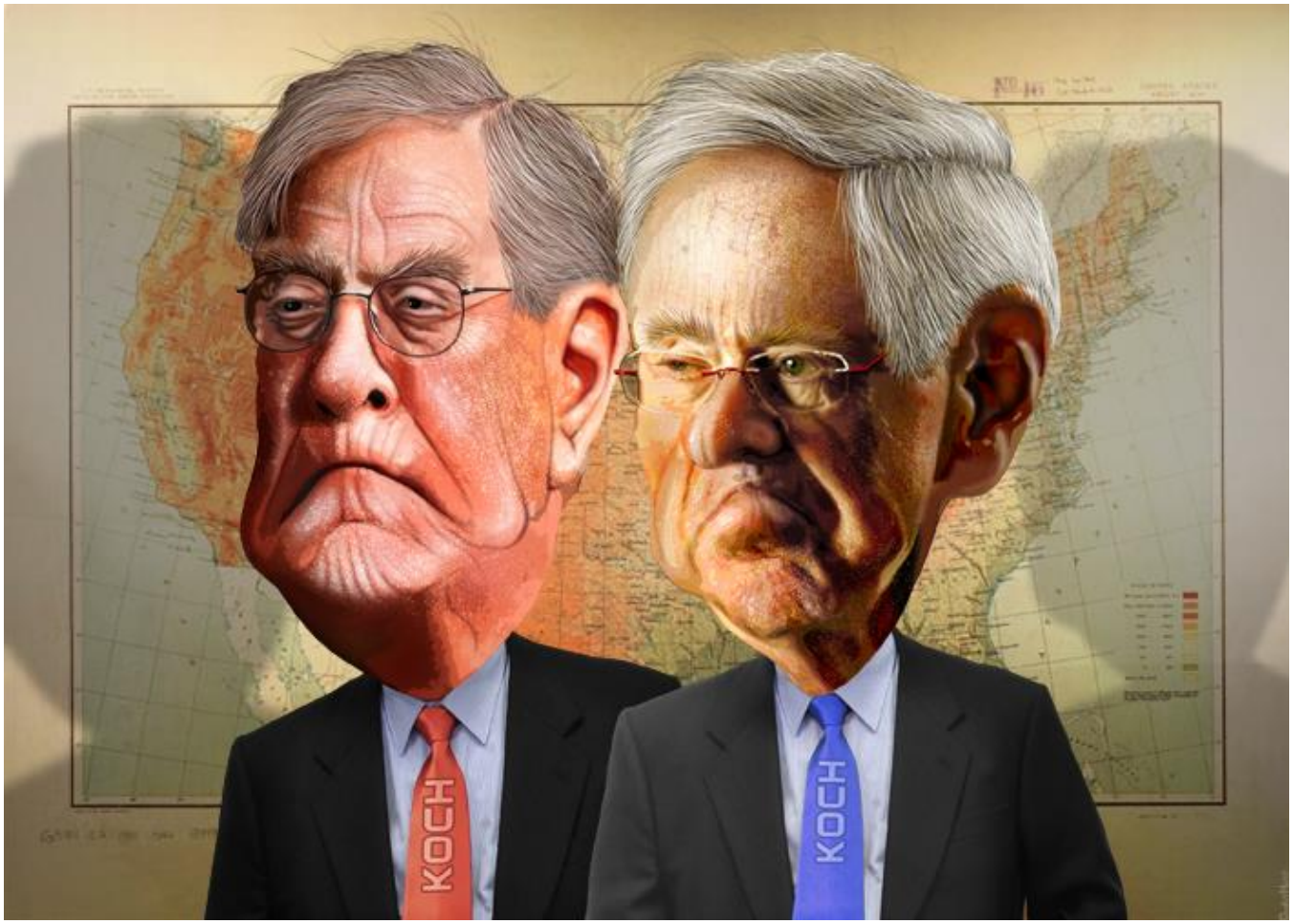
A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Teaching Radically with Koch Money

by Dan Colson



CHARLES AND DAVID KOCH - THE KOCH BROTHERS BY DONKEYHOTEY, 2015

In 2014, Kansas's Emporia State University (ESU) announced the opening of the Koch Center for Leadership and Ethics, a new initiative with the mission "To explore the impact of principled entrepreneurship in a free society and to apply market principles to management."[1] As *Radical Teacher*'s readers might expect, this news elicited mixed responses. Many of us worried the Koch Center's origins (it was funded largely through donations from the Fred and Mary Koch Foundation, Koch Industries, and three Koch employees/ESU alumni) signaled the further encroachment of right-wing influence on our campus. The university, though, insisted the new center was a boon; and, lest any of us who don't want Koch funds shaping our school be concerned, the self-congratulatory announcement ensured us that "the work supported by the Koch Center will be grounded in academic freedom and will positively impact students, faculty and the community."

Obviously, the trite adoption of "academic freedom" and the empty claim the Center would have positive effects did not allay our concerns, but this is the reality of decreased state support for education: colleges and universities—even public ones—will seek external funding; and forces that wish to counter the bogeyman of left-leaning, purportedly radical, anti-American higher education will gladly fund programs that espouse free-market values.[2] So, while we clearly should resist the influx of money from groups like the Koch Foundation, for many of us, we must also ask a dishearteningly practical question: what do we do once that ship has sailed? Once our campuses have Koch Centers?[3]

This essay narrates my efforts to do precisely that: to take meaningful (if admittedly small-scale) political action that fights my own university's embrace of right-wing, free-market "investments" in higher education. In what follows, I explore my campus's Koch Center as an example of the neoliberal rhetoric, objectives, and initiatives that accompany the influx of money from these sources. Then, I recount my experiences taking some of that money with the express purpose to use it for radical ends: to work directly against the Center's agenda. By focusing on students' responses to the class, I describe one model for—and, more importantly, the stakes of—resisting higher education's seemingly inexorable shift rightward by reshaping these free-market proponents' emphasis on "freedom."

Neoliberal Rhetoric in the Contemporary University: The Struggle over "Freedom"

The Koch Center opened during ESU's previous president's tenure. He oversaw a campus-wide push toward "leadership," so the Center's website still contains a large amount of language emphasizing this focus:

> The center's goal is to engage students, faculty, and others in an open and ongoing discussion about ethical leadership in the life of an individual, in business and other organizations, and in communities. Our activities and research will explore how ethical leadership can be most effectively taught and learned within any field of study or endeavor.[4]

On its surface, this language may be filled with buzzwords, but it's notably missing explicit references to free-market ideals. The Center's website offers similar "guiding considerations" for its work: "What qualities result in ethical leadership?" and "How can these qualities be taught and learned?" These considerations, however, are built on a foundation of right-wing, capitalist ideology, because, as their mission statement suggests, "ethical leadership" is always connected to "principled entrepreneurship" and "market principles" in a "free society." The perhaps palatable emphasis on leadership and ethics is inextricably linked to pro-capitalist, free-market politics. All of the Koch Center's activities—the efforts to propagate its distorted vision of "leadership" and "ethics"—radiate from this reductive vision of free-market-neoliberalism-*cum*-freedom.

In Fall 2014, I received an email announcing one of these activities: the ESU Koch Center's faculty grant program. This ongoing initiative offers substantial grants to redesign or develop courses to align with the Center's objectives. Had the program called for proposals explicitly addressing "national prosperity" or "entrepreneurship" (as they emphasize in many of their materials) I would have been disheartened by the Center's presence, but I wouldn't have thought I could apply. The call for applications, however, asked for plans to "embed in a course being taught by the grant recipient a serious discussion about the impact of leadership and ethics in a free society."[5] And, of course, they defined this "free society"—as solidly neoliberal, "wherein individual acts are largely free from restrictions on trade and wealth creation"—even suggesting a focus on a "free market society (wherein the forces of supply and demand are free of governmental regulation)." Crucially, though, the call also disavowed its own politics in a way that is disturbing, but also offered me an opening:

> It is not the objective of this grant to advocate for or against any position, but to instead explore these ideas… In addition, the method by which these discussions are embedded and all other relevant issues are matters of Academic Freedom and are, therefore, to be solely determined by the course instructor.

Two elements of this striking disclaimer are worth discussing. First, the almost comical call for neutrality just after defining freedom as the unrestricted right to produce wealth. On one hand, we absolutely should resist this effort to treat neoliberal economics and their underpinning definition of freedom as politically neutral. In other words, we need not accept this creeping sense that capitalist visions of freedom are apolitical, while leftist alternatives are treated as partisan propaganda. On the other hand, though, the way ESU's Koch Center cloaks their political agenda as neutral—the uncritical, questionably ingenuous notion that free-market ideals aren't themselves a "position"—offers us a chance to present radical ideas that minimally reshape their language.

Second, the advertisement's appeal to academic freedom further strengthens our ability to redeploy their

faux-neutrality. In many cases, academic freedom appears as a necessary complement to the influence of right-wing donors on college campuses. *Citizens United* redefined the nature of political speech to include money; cynically co-opting academic freedom does something similar in higher education: no one can complain about the influx of these funds, because we already accept that individuals and institutions should enjoy academic freedom. Including language about academic freedom reinforces the apolitical nature of the Koch Center's agenda, yet simultaneously asserts the right of faculty, donors, departments, and entire universities to peddle neoliberal ideologies.[6] This insistence on academic freedom—their own and that of their grant recipients—provides strategic opportunities.

If campus programs and initiatives like ESU's Koch Center want to present themselves as politically neutral, intellectually dispassionate, fully invested in higher education's traditional values (like academic freedom), we can rightly be angered. At the same time, we can meet their disingenuousness with calculated efforts to contest their putatively apolitical values. That's what I chose to do: I would apply for one of these grants, taking advantage of the opening their call for proposals offered, and designing a class embedded with their desired topics—leadership and ethics—that interrogated the "freedom" central to their mission. I would propose a course dripping with their rhetoric, yet intended to treat freedom as a question, a site of contestation, rather than a trite, neoliberal given.

While my ultimate goal was to teach a course critical of neoliberal understandings of "freedom"—to foster a space in which students could explore not just leadership and ethics, but the classically liberal "free" space the Koch Center wants them to inhabit—my objectives when writing my proposal were more basic. I wanted their money. I wanted *their* money to fund radical pedagogy. I wanted to use right-wing funds to resist the rightward drift of American higher education (and, in the process, have my course funded instead of the litany of expected courses this grant program typically supports).[7] To that end, I proposed a revised version of my department's EG 241: Later American Literature—the survey of U.S. literature from the Civil War to the present. I set out to describe a survey that foregrounded the Koch Center's key concerns: it would be called American Literature, Freedom, and Leadership.

As I drafted the proposal, I found it easier than I expected to pitch my class to the Koch Center, because I actually do embrace the values they claim, just from a far different political perspective. I want my students to be ethical . . . by rejecting politics of hate and closely related neoliberal economic policies. I want my students to be leaders . . . who lead our world away from the austere libertarian fantasies of small government and Social Darwinism. I want my students to embrace freedom . . . as something more than the absence of restrictions—to seek the positive freedom of genuine opportunity for historically marginalized groups. I even want my students to make our world more prosperous . . . a shared prosperity that promotes equality instead of accumulation. For those reasons, it wasn't difficult to redeploy the Koch Center's language.

I thus framed my revised survey as a thematic approach to American literary history, describing the course's subject matter as "a body of texts that circulate around and reflect upon freedom." The course would proceed with four major objectives:

1. Expose students to a range of texts that construct various conceptions of American freedom and leadership.
2. Encourage students to discuss ethics, leadership, and freedom as they appear in literature.
3. Ask students to explore through writing the changing and multiple forms of ethics and leadership revealed by analysis of American literature and its focus on freedom.
4. Invite students to consider how their educations—including work in the humanities, English, and literature—relate to their own goals as future ethical leaders.

These goals demonstrate fully the trap of the Koch Center's own language. I include a clear and direct embrace of their central mission: a consideration of how students—now and once they graduate—will navigate a "free society." But, as anyone reading these objectives in an issue of *Radical Teacher* will recognize, I locate freedom as the site of exploration. It's not a given background or universal ideal; it's a shifting, unresolved question. I thus redeployed their rhetoric in the hope they would either be so enamored with their own conceptions of freedom (and ethics, and leadership) that my efforts to interrogate them wouldn't even register; or feel the dissonance of their own imagined apolitical position when confronted with an (admittedly understated) alternative, forcing—consciously or not—an admission that if my reimagining of their ideals constitutes a "position," then so do their ideals. I likely will never know exactly why the proposal succeeded, but in December 2014, I was awarded a Koch Center Faculty Grant. The following semester, I would teach a class that asked students to interrogate neoliberal visions of freedom.

Teaching Freedom and Equality

In most respects, the course I designed was a standard American literature survey. It proceeded chronologically through major authors and literary movements (with a particular focus on women writers and writers of color); it relied on a mixture of lecture and class discussion; and it included a series of writing assignments focused on literary analysis. The most meaningful change I made from previous instantiations of this survey was the addition of a thematic focus: freedom and equality. I set out to foster an environment in which students would read texts, complete assignments, and have thoughtful discussions about the exact nature of values in which they likely believed, at some level. The goal, then, was to get

them to think more critically about "freedom" and "equality." Thus, the course would address directly competing visions of freedom: both the neoliberal vision of negative freedom—a classically liberal insistence on individual sovereignty, Lockean natural rights, and minimal government/ restriction—and the alternate vision of positive freedom, with its recognition that extant conditions bely the fiction of equal opportunity at the core of negative freedom. In other words, the class would seek to elucidate the space Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor describes between neoliberal and radical understandings of freedom: "the gap between formal equality before the law and the self-determination and self-possession inherent in actual freedom—the right to be free from oppression, the right to make determinations about your life free from duress, coercion or threat of harm."[8] By adding "equality" as a complicating value—one that certainly isn't coextensive with freedom and that may at times be irreconcilable with it—I hoped to invite students to engage directly with the Koch Center's mission, so they might think critically about the problematic aspects of freedom (its relationship to systemic racism, income inequality, sexism, anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric, etc.) and, ultimately, recognize that "freedom in the United States has been elusive, contingent, and fraught with contradictions and unattainable promises—for almost everyone."[9]

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Foregrounding questions of freedom and equality—especially in ways that lead students away from trite and reactionary notions of each—is not without risks when teaching in Kansas. And those risks don't exist only outside the classroom. Many students have been inculcated into the state's widespread right-leaning atmosphere. A fair number come from rural, predominantly white school districts, or Johnson County—a hotbed of suburban conservatism, just west of Kansas City, that holds over 20% of the state's population and thus wields an outsized influence on state politics—spaces that often justify Kansas's reputation as a definitively red state. So, as I prepared to teach this course, I worried that students would either actively resist radical approaches to "freedom" or, perhaps more likely, simply remain in a state of obstinate inertia—that they would find alternate, more complicated understandings of freedom almost literally unthinkable. In the remainder of this essay, then, I want to discuss my students: their responses to the course's themes; the ways in which they challenged me and their peers when engaging with these themes; the evolution I saw in some students over the course of the semester; and, ultimately, their final essays, where I hoped to see a more nuanced approach to freedom by semester's end.

First Impressions

Early in the semester, I assigned the first of four sets of discussion questions. For each set, students were asked to craft two questions that would "invite your peers to analyze the [day's assigned] text in order to reveal its themes, especially the way in which it constructs or critiques 'freedom' and/or 'equality.'" Each student then would write a brief response to one of their own questions. This particular set of discussion questions was to address "The Passing of Grandison," a late-nineteenth-century short story by Charles Chesnutt set in the 1850s (in the wake of the Fugitive Slave Act). The story recounts the tale of Grandison, a slave owned by the Owens family. Dick Owens, the son of a plantation owner, hopes to win the hand of Charity Lomax by freeing Grandison—a self-serving act of generosity and bravery. Dick takes Grandison north and, in a series of increasingly absurd attempts, gives Grandison the opportunity to flee. Grandison refuses each opening. Eventually, Dick has Grandison kidnapped and taken to Canada. Dick returns to the plantation only to have Grandison turn up after a few weeks (seemingly the ever-faithful slave). Shortly thereafter, Grandison disappears with his entire family. Asking students to discuss "freedom" and "equality" in a text about slavery, I hoped would offer some insight into their extant ideas about these themes. By this point in the semester, I saw I probably wouldn't get anything overtly racist, but Chesnutt's story complicates freedom with its depiction of Dick's facile understanding of it and Grandison's agential pursuit of only a certain type of freedom, and it explores equality with a slave eventually outwitting his bumbling master. In short, I was curious to see how attuned my students were to a racially-conscious take on freedom far detached from the oversimplified neoliberal notion—so prevalent in their home state—that freedom is coextensive with government non-intervention.

Student submissions to this early assignment were eye-opening, with two main, interrelated trends immediately obvious. First, I noticed that more students focused their attention on Dick Owens than on Grandison. Granted, they weren't praising Dick—or focusing on *his* freedom—but they centered their analysis on what he did to Grandison, rather than what Grandison did for himself (and his family). For instance, one student offered an extended reading of Dick's actions, finding in them "a statement on the hypocrisy and ignorance of justifications for slavery." Another claimed "Owens lacks the sincerity, and the understanding of Grandison's position, to make a true difference in Grandison's life." To many students, Dick is feckless and clearly wrong, but he remains the center of the story's commentary on freedom, because he—as a slave owner—impedes it. Focalizing Dick suggests to me a privileging of negative liberty. Writing on a story about slavery, students, perhaps unsurprisingly, echoed common

right-wing refrains: realizing freedom requires only removing he who restricts it, because freedom itself is merely an absence of these restrisctions. Put bluntly, many students implied that simply removing Dick Owens would—with no subsequent steps—make Grandison free.

Second, I saw in the students who did attend more directly to Grandison, a tendency to embrace one pervasive apologia for neoliberal understandings of freedom: the personal responsibility to exercise one's liberty, even in states of obvious non-freedom. In fact, one student boldly declared "Grandison can have a sort of freedom while being enslaved, but is incapable with the lack of equality to exercise it; which is why in the end of the story he escapes with his loved ones." Obviously, this statement demonstrates a limited awareness of slavery's horrors. It also, though, transposes contemporary notions onto an antebellum narrative. The student first suggests that slavery, as such, does not unilaterally foreclose on freedom: Grandison "can have a sort of freedom." What stands in the way of Grandison's freedom is inequality. How then can a slave remove this obstacle? Escape. Once again, I see the impulse to cast freedom—and now equality—as mere acts of negation: removing the direct source of Grandison's oppression will inexorably produce his freedom.

I don't wish to suggest here that my students' work demonstrates some underlying embrace of racism and/or slavery (even if they sometimes minimize their significance). Instead, I see in their work the insidious traces of neoliberal conceptions of "freedom." These traces became a bit more obvious during an extended class discussion about the differences between negative and positive liberty, and the relationship of these potentially irreconcilable definitions to "equality."[10] To exemplify the differences between these competing definitions of freedom, I used two simple examples. The first asked students to consider if they are free to go to Hawaii tomorrow. Their initial reaction was predominantly "of course." They recognized there might be consequences (e.g., their grades would suffer if they missed classes), but they clearly—and rightly—recognized their own negative liberty: no one—and certainly not the government—was directly prohibiting them from flying to Hawaii. Some of the more practical students, however, quickly pointed out that they couldn't afford a plane ticket and the like. That is, they saw that no matter the absence of concrete restriction, they might be unable to travel to Hawaii tomorrow. One student, though—let's call him Tom—vociferously denounced these trivialities. For him, their lack of money (or a private plane) had nothing to do with their freedom: they are free to get that money, so they are free to travel to Hawaii.

We then transitioned to the next example: the ubiquitous American belief that children can be anything they want to be. Did they see themselves as free in this sense? This example challenges my students, because I find most of them (in this class and others) to be realistic, nearly to the point of fatalism. They are students at a small state school in Kansas; most in this course plan to be public school teachers; and they're tragically aware that the millennial generation has inherited a dearth of opportunities. Though it pains me to say it, I've found ESU students see all too clearly the mythical nature of the "American Dream"—by their late teens, many have already rejected the empty rhetoric that they can be whatever they want to be. So, while they readily expressed their own negative liberty—since they couldn't locate any direct and immediate "they" who was restricting them the way Dick Owens restricted Grandison—they were hesitant to call this "freedom." But not Tom. Tom insisted that he and everyone else in the class could be whatever they wanted to be. If they did not reach their goals, that had nothing to do with freedom. During the semester, Tom spoke in class enough that I know he's no Randian, no staunch advocate for the austerity Kansas experiment. If anything, I found him a mostly reasonable, heavily cynical student. Thus, I don't interpret his in-class defense of negative liberty as a firmly held right-wing politics. Rather, he voiced a viewpoint I should have expected: he simply could not think of "freedom" as a relevant concern. Personal responsibility, on the other hand—that he understood. As this class session unfolded (and in other conversations throughout the semester), I saw in him an internalization of neoliberal notions of freedom. And, I noticed his expression of this idea *that he didn't even recognize as an idea* resonate with other students. They weren't quite so vocal, but at times the class atmosphere took on a sort of inertia: they found rejecting certain established beliefs almost literally unthinkable.

As the semester progressed, then, I saw how my teaching choices invited binary thinking (slave/free) that resonated uncomfortably with homologous contemporary notions of freedom (in which freedom means only the absence of direct and purposeful restriction).

One student—I'll call her Sharon—responded to the Chesnutt story with more nuance than many of her peers. Her primary argument was that Grandison "destroys the structure of the autonomy he had as a slave, while building up a new autonomy as a free man." In some respects, her analysis was exactly what I'd hoped for: a thoughtful take on a story that narrates a slave's escape. Sharon's argument and close reading were *good*, yet she wasn't immune to an oversimplified notion of freedom: if one is no longer a slave, one is free. As the semester progressed, then, I saw how my teaching choices invited binary thinking (slave/free) that resonated uncomfortably with homologous contemporary notions of freedom (in which freedom means only the absence of direct and purposeful restriction). For one, the course's chronological structure suggested a linear progression: from slavery to freedom, *then* equality. This trajectory, of course—the myth of

progress that claims the Civil War gave freedom, the Civil Rights Movement produced equality, and now race (gender, etc.) no longer matter—is precisely the story of "freedom" the course was designed to challenge. Thus, Sharon's success on this early assignment certainly doesn't mean the class was succeeding. Put bluntly, having my students recognize that slaves aren't free isn't exactly a win.

I realized then (and much more strongly now) that I had been naïve. Sure, I knew there was a decent chance I'd have some libertarian or self-consciously "conservative" student who would actively challenge any interrogation of neoliberal "freedom." I didn't find that student, though. What I did find were students who had already unwittingly learned this version of freedom. They had trouble conceptualizing freedom as anything else. My goals, then, met not active resistance, but uncritical stasis. Students could recite a definition of "positive freedom," yet they clearly stopped short of thinking that's what "freedom" really means. Consequently, my efforts to use "equality" as a competing, complicating value fell flat: as with Grandison, all that my students—and the marginalized people about which we read all semester—needed to be equal, was to be free in this limited sense.

Tentative Hope

This internalized, passive embrace of neoliberal freedom became especially noticeable when we reached the Harlem Renaissance. In retrospect, this moment in the semester marks a point of division, not a neat separation between students who "got it" and those who didn't, but a sliver of space that suggests my class was accomplishing something, just not for all students. In the class's Harlem Renaissance unit, I contextualized the literature with material on Jim Crow, lynching, the Red Summer of 1919, etc. This context would, one might hope, inherently complicate the idea that Grandison's freedom required only Dick Owens's absence. Obviously, the end of slavery—the removal of all the Dick Owenses—didn't achieve full freedom or equality for Black Americans. Surely students see that, right?

During this unit, I assigned another set of discussion questions, which were to focus on one of a handful of black modernist poems. Two students' responses are indicative. First, there was a student I will call Claire. She was a quiet student, typically only speaking in class if I directly called on her, and her work up to this point had largely sidestepped questions of freedom. So, I didn't have much of a sense of her views. For this assignment, however, she—to her credit—approached freedom directly, constructing a question about Langston Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers": "Does the speaker in this poem experience negative liberty or positive liberty?" On its surface, this query had a great deal of potential to get at some of the key issues in the interstices of our course's themes and the treatment of Black Americans in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Claire's answer to her own question, though, focused entirely on negative liberty. She attributed to the speaker a sort of freedom tied to knowledge: "the speaker has negative liberty by knowing all of these rivers." She granted that this knowledge was in some ways forced upon them—"they wouldn't have had to know these places and experience these places if it wasn't for the way these African Americans were treated at the time"—yet she ultimately

LANGSTON HUGHES BY CARL VAN VECHTEN 1936

concluded that possessing knowledge of "these rivers [that] are history to . . . African Americans" demonstrates the speaker's freedom (negative liberty). In short, she ignored the focus on positive liberty in her own question and thus suggested that the speaker of this Jim-Crow-era poem enjoyed freedom through the knowledge gained from historical oppression. As with students' responses to "The Passing of Grandison," Claire's reading of Hughes's poem did not signal willful dismissal of alternate definitions of freedom (ones invested in equality). Rather, as she tried to grapple with post-Civil-War, pre-Civil Rights African American poetry, she—seemingly unconsciously—fell back on notions of freedom that circulate so widely in conservative political spaces: her question implied she *wanted* to complicate her understanding of freedom, but at a time after "Abraham Lincoln [freed] the slaves" (her response's gesture toward historical context), she simply couldn't shake the more simplistic view. For Claire, and a fair number of other students who wrote about freedom in Harlem Renaissance poetry, if these poets/speakers/characters aren't slaves, they must be free. Many responses, then, read as efforts to reconcile uncritically internalized conceptions of neoliberal freedom with analysis of poems that challenge them.

Perhaps the most striking thing about this set of discussion questions is the very small number of students who even mentioned "equality." Despite being given an assignment prompt that stressed equally the course's focus on "freedom" and on "equality," and despite my efforts to foreground inequality under Jim Crow, a majority of students again focused on "freedom." Nevertheless, some students did evince a more fruitful struggle with these issues, for instance, Sharon, who provides an example of the growth I saw and the concomitant hope I have for teaching these themes. Sharon also chose to write about "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," and she too focused her questions on freedom: "How does the journey through the various rivers mentioned by Hughes describe a journey (to or away from) freedom?" Her response echoed some of the pervasive binary thinking as it argued that when the speaker "travels down the various rivers, his sense . . . of freedom is slowly being demolished, as [he] journeys away from a true freedom." Sharon here read the poem's move from the Congo and the Nile to the Mississippi as a narration of the journey from Africa to the Americas—a move from freedom into slavery. Had she stopped there, I'd see her work much as I saw her response to "Grandison": a well-written analysis that reiterated the linear narrative of African American experience and thus subtly reinforced the notion that if one is not a slave, one is free. But, in her conclusion, Sharon noted that "although the speaker of the poem eventually journeys 'back' to freedom, the freedom after the Civil War is not comparable to the freedom felt bathing in the Euphrates or building a hut by the Congo; the freedom is never regained." This claim—and a handful of similarly insightful comments from other students—suggests to me a large measure of hope. Sharon saw that the end of slavery alone did not produce freedom; she recognized in a Harlem Renaissance poem a commentary on incomplete freedom; and, though she doesn't use the word, "equality" haunted her response as she gestured toward the post-Civil-War inequality that necessarily foreclosed on black "freedom." These moves collectively offer me hope that attention to historical questions of freedom and equality might unsettle the reductive, neoliberal conceptions of freedom that saturate my students' environment. As I moved toward the semester's end, then, I waited to see what the students imagined themselves *doing*—in their communities—to exercise "leadership" and "ethics" as they connected to the course's themes.

The Stakes of Teaching Freedom

As the course's culminating project, I assigned a "Literature, Leadership, and Ethics Essay" that directly echoed the Koch Center's language. This assignment asked each student to explore how the "course's content . . . and skills . . . can help you impact your world." It invited them to "brainstorm the impact you'd like to make," going beyond their careers to consider "how you will make a mark—how you will make the world a better place." And, crucially, the essay should "pay especial attention to the course's themes of 'freedom' and 'equality' and to the broad concepts of 'leadership' and 'ethics': how might the content and skills help you be a leader in your community? how might they help you behave ethically? how might they help you actively define and pursue 'freedom' and 'equality?'" As I've noted throughout this essay, I approached this class with a specific set of goals. I hoped not just to see growth in knowledge about post-1865 American literature, analytical skills, and writing ability (the course's basic objectives). In addition, I wanted to inspire students to go into their worlds with a more critical perspective on the ubiquitous American value of "freedom"; to treat freedom as a contested term, rather than a trite given; and, ultimately, to act in such a way that they further our world's pursuit of equality, even when that objective appears at odds with common understandings of freedom. The final essay, then, was my chance to see what I'd done with Koch money. The results were tentatively encouraging, but more pressingly, they demonstrate the necessity of combating these right-wing voices.

A majority of students in my surveys are education majors destined to be teachers. I thus received a number of essays focused on what they could do in the classroom. Claire imagined "assigning literary works that shine a light on inequality and injustices present in our society"; another felt the responsibility to "make our youth realize that racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice are still an issue today [or] we will never be able to move forward"; a third sought to fight the "casual sexism and racism present in the education system [and] the continued erasure of works by female and minority authors." These future teachers embraced the call to use literature as a means for elucidating inequality and, consequently—even though I'm not sure they fully recognized it—for challenging simplistic notions of "freedom."

Several students also focused on political action, whether small or large scale. One lamented her "family members . . . thoughtless and inconsiderate" political Facebook posts and committed herself to engaging with the "older generation of [her] family," because "one comment can start a thought process which could lead to an even greater change." Another mentioned "voting for candidates that reflect the kind of person I want to be," which she described as one who will "fight the good fight for those who are defenseless." And one proposed "actively participating in movements" dedicated to redressing social problems like "injustice, racism, immigration, women's rights, [and] poverty." This commitment to local and broader political involvement—from the highly personal individual persuasion, to the expected emphasis on voting, to activist participation—would warm the heart of any radical teacher.

If, though, the goal of the class was to encourage students to think critically about definitions of "freedom" that saturate their state and their university—to tackle head-on the Koch Centers of the world—then two essays are simultaneously the most encouraging and the most challenging as a I continue teaching the course. On one hand, there is a student I'll call Jared. He was one of the

class's most vocal students and, in many of his comments, he seemed to embrace the course's interrogation of "freedom." He wrote:

> When I was told that the class themes would be "freedom" and "equality" I thought to myself "duh, that's what America is all about." What I was missing was the fact that, yes those are what America is about, but they are not what America is doing. And how could I [not] see that? Since day one we are all force fed this idea of "America, home of the brave, and land of the free. The land of opportunity and the American dream!" and it made sense. My family immigrated and we made it alright.

On the other hand, there is a student I'll call Maria. I don't recall her speaking more than a handful of times the entire semester and her written work approached the course's themes with an opaquely neutral voice. So when I started to read her essay, I knew almost nothing about her. She wrote:

> I have many things in life going against me as an undocumented Hispanic female in a same-sex relationship. Using what I have learned in . . . this course I can define and pursue "freedom" and "equality." Freedom to me, personally, is being able to travel anywhere I want without the fear of being deported to a place I've never known… Freedom is being able to show the world that women are equal to men in every aspect. Freedom is being able to go out in public and hold hands with my girlfriend without the snarky remarks and rude looks from those who disagree with my choices.

Together, Jared and Maria prompt me to conclude this essay not with an evaluation of my course's "success," but an affirmation of its necessity. Because ultimately, no matter the extent to which we can inspire one class-full of students to think about political involvement, their communities' incomplete freedom and equality, and the very nature of these disputed terms, we'll still be fighting a tide that at times feels unstoppable.

Teaching Radically in a Koch World

In our current political context, this course seems a small thing. It will not stop the influx of funds from right-wing, free-market ideologues. It will not reverse the cuts in public funding that make ideologically-freighted money appealing to many colleges and universities. And, it will not quiet the shrill voices who claim conservatives are the *real* oppressed people on our campuses. If anything, it will do the opposite, because the course stands as an unapologetically political exercise objecting to the conflation of "freedom" with unrestricted economic activity, the treatment of equality as a simple byproduct of eliminating government intervention, and the disturbing, increasingly visible Trump-era links between this neoliberal rhetoric and reinvigorated ethno-nationalist xenophobia. By teaching this course and writing this essay, I provide one more piece of ammunition for critics of radical pedagogy. But in the face of insistent attacks on the purportedly leftist professoriate and concomitant calls for even more right-wing influence on college campuses, we must act.

We must act because of Jared and Maria. They are the reasons I taught this class. Jared is the student I want to unsettle; Maria is why I want him to be unsettled. I'm pleased to read in Jared's essay his claim that the course revealed the incompleteness of American freedom and a suggestion that trite, neoliberal pursuits of that "freedom" have produced inequality. Maria, though, reminds me that there will always be students entering our colleges with the views Jared held at the semester's beginning; there will always be the Claires who unconsciously accept the neoliberal notion that if one is not a slave, one is free; and there will always be Marias, silently feeling the weight of those views. That's why we must fight the Koch Center's influence, their falsely neutral political values that insist Maria is already free and that Jared should take America's claims of freedom at face value.

Yes, we must continue to organize; to resist the ongoing public divestment from higher education; to combat the influx of right-wing funds with their unsubtle call for colleges and universities to teach their circumscribed notions of "freedom"; to fight for the soul of higher education.

This single course, limited as its effects might be, offers one model for action. Yes, we must continue to organize; to resist the ongoing public divestment from higher education; to combat the influx of right-wing funds with their unsubtle call for colleges and universities to teach their circumscribed notions of "freedom"; to fight for the soul of higher education. At the same time, we must also continue our small-scale efforts. Even when this rightward trend appears inexorable, we must remember that, every semester, *we shape students*. I propose we use our classrooms—where we teach students to think critically about things like reductive, self-serving, harmful definitions of freedom—to meet the Koch Centers of our world head on. Ultimately, my grant proposal and the literature survey it funded were driven by a refusal grounded in the belief that we fight for our students. I will not cede the right to define "freedom" to these calloused champions of the free-market; I will not accept that "freedom" is more important than equality; I will not let our nation's history and literature of inequality and oppression be ignored; and I absolutely refuse to abandon the Jareds or the Marias to the Koch Center and its increasing power on my campus. As teachers, we must fight for the very words others want to claim. We must tell our students—those saturated by neoliberal ideology and those who suffer from its effects—that freedom is not what they say it is. Freedom is not simple. Freedom is intimately tied to race, class, and gender. True freedom is a radical ideal.

Notes

[1] This language comes from ESU's press release announcing the Koch Center's opening (http://www.emporia.edu /news/06/18/2014/koch-center-for-leadership-and-ethics-named-at-emporia-state-university/).

[2] Right-wing efforts to influence college campuses often pitch their actions as responses to the scourge of leftists in academe, which they imagine to be both a large majority of professors and to be stifling any dissent. The justification for increased right-wing influence is closely linked to efforts to expose/demonize purportedly radical—and "anti-American"—faculty members, like the "Professor Watchlist" (http://www.professorwatchlist.org), which has been much in the news recently.

[3] The number of instructors in this position is growing by the month. Koch-related sources have poured funds into literally hundreds of colleges and universities. *Polluter Watch* maintains a database of these institutions (http://polluterwatch.org/charles-koch-university-funding-database). In addition, the intrusive actions accompanying these funds are being exposed at an increasing rate. For instance, *UnKochMyCampus* (http://www.unkochmycampus.org)—which is an excellent resource for those interested in the influence of Koch funds on college campuses—recently released a report on events at Florida State University (http://www.unkochmycampus.org/progress-coalition-2017/). Obviously, the various Koch foundations represent only some of the right-wing efforts to purchase influence. There are many others. See, for example, Donors Trust—a sort of clearinghouse for right-wing donations—which offers advice for donating to colleges and universities (http://www.donorstrust.org/strategic-giving/donating-to-colleges-and-universities-a-few-guidelines/).

[4] References to the Koch Center's mission, guiding questions, and objectives in this section come from their website (https://www.emporia.edu/business/kochcenter).

[5] I quote here, and in the remainder of this section, from the call-for-proposals distributed by the Koch Center and circulated widely via campus email lists.

[6] Proponents of traditional academic freedom will note how this definition shifts away from efforts—like those by the American Association of University Professors—to protect faculty's rights to pursue politically unpopular topics (in their teaching and their research). It expands "academic freedom" to include freedom for outside donors—not subject to the disciplinary vetting of tenure and the like—to influence academic endeavors.

[7] As one might expect, the majority of funded projects come from ESU's School of Business. As I draft this article, the Koch Center's website includes the projects funded from Fall 2014 through Fall 2015—three semesters. In the program's first three semesters, the Center funded 26 grant projects: three from Management, two from Finance, four from Marketing, four from Information Systems, one from Business Education, and one from Business (all departments in the School of Business); three from Mathematics and Economics; two from the hard sciences; and five from education. My project remains to my knowledge the only humanities course funded by the Koch Center. The list of grant recipients and their projects can be found on the Koch Center's website.

[8] Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor. *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*. Chicago: Haymarket, 2016. 192.

[9] Taylor, 192.

[10] I drew basic definitions of negative and positive liberty from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* as a starting point. Negative liberty: "On the one hand, one can think of liberty as the absence of obstacles external to the agent. You are free if no one is stopping you from doing whatever you might want to do." Positive liberty: "On the other hand, one can think of liberty as the presence of control on the part of the agent. To be free, you must be self-determined, which is to say that you must be able to control your own destiny in your own interests." (https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/liberty-positive-negative).