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RADICAL TEACHER

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

Introduction: Radical Learning

by Michael Bennett and Sarah Chinn

IMAGE COURTESY OF STEPHANIE J. BEENE, LAURI M. GONZÁLEZ AND SUZANNE M SCHADL, FROM THE EXIBITION "TOMES" (2018). THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO

With this issue of *Radical Teacher*, Sarah Chinn and I assume the title of Managing Co-Editors, and our old position (Manuscript Co-Editors) no longer exists. The elimination of the position of Manuscript Editor was motivated by a desire to streamline *RT*'s production process. The change in Managing Editors was necessitated by the illness of our beloved colleague Leonard Vogt, who served in that position for many years. In the weeks leading up to this issue, Leonard succumbed to his illness; he passed away on September 30. We are heartbroken at his loss. Leonard joined the *Radical Teacher* Board in 1981. It's impossible to express how much we will miss his humorous and helpful contributions at our board meetings; his incredibly hard work for the journal; and, above all, his active presence in a world that was better for having him in it. As his friend and *RT* colleague Bob Rosen put it, Leonard "seemed to enjoy life more than most people I've met and that joy was often contagious." This issue of *Radical Teacher* is dedicated to Leonard Vogt on behalf of those of us who loved him: his friends, colleagues, students, and, especially, his partner, Michael Rhoads.


IN LOVING MEMORY OF LEONARD VOGT

I also need to mention what a beloved teacher Leonard was at LaGuardia Community College, and at William Paterson College before that. After Leonard and I had both retired, we talked about how what we missed most about teaching was the opportunity to interact with students. Most teachers I know became teachers because they loved being students. This was definitely the main reason I became a college English professor: "Wait, someone will pay me to read books and talk about them? Sign me up!" Teachers love to learn, and they especially love it when their students learn something new along with them.

The more I learned, the more I noticed something: knowledge is often radicalizing. Ideas that were anathema when I first went to school have become almost self-evident to most of today's college students. This transformation did not happen overnight, and it's anything but complete; however, the enormous battles that progressive activists and educators had to fight have, over time, made deep inroads into changing our understanding of everything from slavery and women's rights to trans identities and climate change. In the twenty-first century, it's almost impossible for that nursing student not to perceive that healthcare in the U.S. becomes wealthcare, unless we recognize access to health as a human right. Can someone today become a decent sociologist without understanding structural racism? Surely the biologist will have to mention the sex-gender system that falsely assigns chromosomes immutable cultural characteristics. An attentive historian is bound to remark on the parallels between photos from the Civil Rights Movement of White racists verbally and physically abusing African Americans and similar images from Trump rallies: https://twitter.com/AdamParkhomenko/status/786472154661527552.

The images in this clip from Ava DuVernay's documentary *13th*, comparing racist acts at twentieth- and twenty-first-century political gatherings, are similar to images in Michael Moore's recently released *Fahrenheit 11/9*, which makes comparisons between the rise of Trump and the rise of Hitler. A woman who was next to me when exiting the theater after Moore's film said, "I have always resisted, and even ridiculed, comparisons to Nazis, but this film earned it, especially when some of these Trump supporters even call themselves Nazis." Whatever one thinks of this comparison, Moore's film also tells a very different story about the rise of leftism among the majority of Americans who did not vote for Trump. The film documents that this majority supports universal healthcare, gay marriage, a guaranteed wage, free college education, and a host of other radical policies that would have seemed unthinkable less than a generation ago.

Radical teachers who support these developments will be accused by those who don't of bias. But here's the thing: actual education, as opposed to indoctrination, is inherently radical. Education, unfettered by religious ideology or authoritarian discipline or teaching-to-the-test or for-profit credentialization, opens up a world of free inquiry and critical thinking. It challenges received pieties and unexamined traditions. For this reason, education makes a big difference at the ballot box, where nearly two-thirds of those with advanced degrees spurned Donald Trump ("Exit") while the least educated lionized him, prompting Trump to declare his love for "poorly educated" voters (Hafner). This is why conservatives, emboldened by Trump and his Secretary of (Anti-)Education Betsy DeVos, have done everything they can to assault and eviscerate education: defunding public schools, while channeling resources to the faux education provided by for-profit and private Christian schools (Berkshire; Blakely); attacking teacher unions, with the help of money from the Koch Brothers and DeVos family (Pilkington); miring teachers in the pointless administrative tasks of Learning Outcomes Assessment and other regimes of

testing and measurement (Bennett & Brady); and ideological policing of the professoriate (Flaherty; Jaschik) and student body (McClennen).

Despite this conservative assault, teachers and students continue to become radicalized through a life-long education of following ideas where they lead regardless of obstacles placed in the way. As editors, Sarah and I are most delighted when we encounter submissions to *Radical Teacher* that lead us to new ideas or offer novel perspectives on what we thought we already knew. In this issue of *Radical Teacher*, I learned something from every article, and each introduced me to a new theoretical lens for understanding education and culture.

One of the more surprising lessons I learned was that sometimes paths I thought were heading in useful directions can actually lead to dead ends. In the Teaching Notes section of *Radical Teacher*, we often publish suggestions for written and visual texts that are conducive for radical pedagogy. For instance, in the last miscellany that Sarah and I edited (*RT* 110), two Teaching Notes focused on such useful texts: one Note was on using *The Book of Unknown Americans* by Cristina Henriquez to spark critical inquiry about immigration, and one was on repurposing Ovid's *Philomela* to discuss the #MeToo Movement. Rarely, if ever, have we published Teaching Notes or articles on what texts *not* to teach. In fact, if you'd asked me, I probably would have said that there are no texts you can't teach; it's all about how you teach them.

Perhaps I was wrong, even about a text I admire: *The Wire*. Lawrence Johnson's "Reflections on Teaching *The Wire*: Developing a Radical Pedagogy" argues that David Simon's critically acclaimed crime drama is not a serviceable text for radical pedagogy. Johnson draws on Joe Feagin's concept of the "white racial frame" to explain how he believes that teaching *The Wire* ends up reinforcing, rather than questioning, students' racial, gender, and class biases. Johnson's essay argues that because students can only see the "visible effects of invisible forces" (Bennett 176) that have shaped inner-city Baltimore, they end up focusing on the supposed moral failings of the inner-city's inhabitants rather than the racist policies of redlining, residential segregation, and criminalization that manufacture the ghetto. By default, the white spatial imaginary undermines the critical nature of the show because it only depicts the ghetto, while the critical task is to explain the structures that created the modern American ghetto.

Sometimes resistance to an argument is an indication that we need to think things through more clearly. There is more than one meaningful radical response to a text, even responses that contradict each other.

I'm fairly sure that some readers of *Radical Teacher* will disagree with Johnson's analysis, and I'm not even sure that I am wholly convinced, but this is an important part of radical pedagogy: challenging our students and ourselves to break free of preconceptions. Sometimes resistance to an argument is an indication that we need to think things through more clearly. There is more than one meaningful radical response to a text, even responses that contradict each other. Implicitly, Johnson's article shows us that far from marching in lockstep, radical teachers can come to the same material with very different analyses.

Johnson's article is hardly the first in *Radical Teacher* to focus on issues of racism. But none that I'm aware of used the concept of "racecraft," a term that was coined by Barbara Jean Fields and Karen Fields to describe the magical ability of U.S. society to simultaneously act as if race doesn't matter (culturally) and as if it is an immutable characteristic (biologically), when in fact it is the other way around. Race and racism have a long and significant cultural history, but absolutely no scientific basis, as biologically there is only one human race. Fields and Fields's concept of racecraft invokes the notion that race is undergirded by occult practices that cloak race and racism in mystifications and superstitions, which must be exorcized.

Abena Ampofoa Asare's "Exorcising 'Racecraft': Toward the RaceSyllabus" employs this concept of race as a type of magical thinking—a man-made ideology that is neither biologically relevant nor divinely inspired—to construct a RaceSyllabus that she used with some success when teaching Africana Studies. Asare says that the RaceSyllabus encourages students to: 1) understand that racial identities in the USA are historically specific and 2) learn that racial identities are geographically specific. These two simple insights help students to break the spell cast by forces devoted to a willed misunderstanding of the nature and function of race and racism.

In "The Writing Program Administrator as Interstitial Radical," Frank Farmer reminds us how our pedagogy does not exist in an ideological vacuum, but can be compromised by specific circumstances. Drawing on Eric Olin Wright's work, Farmer discusses three kinds of transformative work: ruptural, symbiotic, and interstitial. When we use the word "radical," we usually think of ruptural transformation— which makes a dramatic break with what has come before—or symbiotic transformation—working within the system to transform the system. But Farmer reminds us that radical teachers sometimes operate within very narrow constraints that limit their transformative work to "the nooks and crannies, the breaks and cracks of the dominant order." Such is the case, Farmer maintains, for most Writing Program Administrators, who have many constituencies to please and who function as both teachers and administrators. Farmer draws on Wright's belief that interstitial radicalism can foster "new forms of social relations that embody emancipatory ideals and that are created primarily through direct action" (324) in a curriculum built around the semiotic reappropriation and DIY aesthetics and politics of zines, which his students read and construct.

We are always pleased to engage in dialogue with and publish essays from K-12 teachers. These days, most of the conversations I have with primary and secondary

school teachers about their problems at work are focused on what I have elsewhere referred to as the Assessment Industrial Complex (Bennett and Brady 152). Though ample research has shown that assessment tests measure social class rather than student potential, thus reinforcing inequality (Lemann, Sacks), conservatives and neoliberals push for more testing and tracking. The resulting policies undermine the potential of education to level the playing the field, at least in part, serving instead to reinforce pre-existing hierarchies.

In her essay "Failed Educational Reform in the New York City School System," Andrea Dupre examines the role such policies played in the near destruction of Murry Bergtraum High School for Business Careers in New York City. Dupre draws on Diane Ravitch's analysis of how testing and "school choice" undermine education in the name of supposed meritocracy. The once thriving multicultural Bergtraum High School was carved up into various small schools that fast-tracked privileged students and side-lined everyone else. What Dupre describes as "a woefully imperfect neoliberal social experiment" was carried out by Mayor Michael Bloomberg's administration with the help of $100 million from the Gates Foundation. The school was restructured on the premise that comprehensive American high schools were obsolete and needed to give way to boutique schools that, not surprisingly, became the province of the class that usually inhabits boutiques, marginalizing and abandoning the largely poor and minority students who had been a majority of the student population.

Radical Teacher has published many essays about teaching in non-traditional spaces: prisons, union halls, archives, social movements, …. We have even devoted whole issues to the subject, such as "Toward Public Pedagogies: Teaching Outside Traditional Classrooms" (2017). However, I'm fairly sure that we've never published an essay on implicit bias training for police or on a museum exhibition about book arts.

The former is the topic of Jessi Lee Jackson's essay "The Non-Performativity of Implicit Bias Training," which looks at how these police trainings utilize a range of strategies that undermine the stated purpose of the trainings. Jackson draws on Sara Ahmed's concept of non-performative speech acts, in which "the failure of the speech act to do what it says is not a failure of intent or even circumstance, *but is actually what the speech act is doing*" (117). From this angle, Jackson analyzes how the trainings non-perform anti-racism by simultaneously stating a commitment to anti-racism and reinforcing racism. Jackson ends by suggesting that implicit biases may be more effectively confronted by finding ways to place communities subject to bias in positions of power over police. She hopes that such a structural change could accomplish what brief trainings cannot by incentivizing engagement with other perspectives.

Another unusual teaching environment is explored in "Tomes! Enhancing Community and Embracing Diversity Through Book Arts." Stephanie J. Beene, Suzanne M. Schadl, and Lauri M. González describe and analyze the process that resulted in an exhibit called "Tomes (toh-Mez) + Tomes (tohmz) = Tomes," which brought together two projects that highlight Mexican artists' books as documents brought to life in communities through performance. Drawing on several of the essays published in the groundbreaking collection *Exhibiting Cultures* (Karp and Lavine), these authors participate in the movement to expand beyond traditionally constructed exhibitions to create multisensory exhibits (including taste, smell, and touch) that involve the community in meaning-making. These authors share the challenges and rewards of working to integrate community as well as multisensory and phenomenological components by employing student- and community-engaged research in their design. They ask, "How can we, as educators, incorporate a multiplicity of voices into our exhibit designs, doing justice to the ways objects' meanings change depending on the cultural experiences of those viewing and interacting with them?" I should point out that this essay also has other qualities we value at *Radical Teacher*: elegant writing (beginning with a beautiful description of paper-making in Mexico) and arresting visuals (which I encourage you to explore).

Just as Sarah and I learned something new from each of these essays, we hope that you will have a similar experience with this Miscellany issue. We were pleased to be introduced or reintroduced to various forms of radical theory, from thinking about the white racial frame and racecraft to witnessing examples of non-performativity and interstitial transformative work. And we were, as always, impressed by the dedication and innovation of radical teachers putting these theories into practice. We know that Leonard Vogt would have loved to edit this issue, learning about different forms of radical pedagogy as he guided the authors' revisions on the basis of his own extensive experience as a radical teacher and never-to-be-forgotten part of the *Radical Teacher* collective.

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