

# RADICAL TEACHER

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



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

## Miscellany

# RADICAL TEACHER

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## Introduction: Radical Learning

by Michael Bennett and Sarah Chinn



IMAGE COURTESY OF STEPHANIE J. BEENE, LAURI M. GONZÁLEZ AND SUZANNE M. SCHADL, FROM THE EXHIBITION "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.

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 *13<sup>th</sup>*, 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 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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## Reflections on Teaching *The Wire*: Developing a Radical Pedagogy

by Lawrence Johnson



IMAGE COURTESY OF AUTHOR

"*The Wire*," declared my dissertation advisor, "is a documentary about my hometown!" The proud Baltimorean delighted in discussing how the show had brought attention to the city's economic devastation and social isolation. As a sociology doctoral student during the later years of the show's run from 2002 to 2008 on HBO, I soon realized how well regarded *The Wire* was in academia. Before, I simply enjoyed discussions among friends. We debated favorite characters, which season was most compelling, and how it represented certain dynamics of the cities we are from. I was influenced by the increasing use of the show in the classroom and the show's elevation as more than entertainment and as a bona fide companion to instruction in the social sciences and humanities.<sup>1</sup>

Since the series' run, the show has continued to gain in popularity and is widely considered one of the best television series ever made (Owens 2010). However, after much reflection on my attempts to use *The Wire* in two different courses, I find, for all the acclaim and progressive bona fides, *The Wire* may not be inherently subversive and so may be an inappropriate text for radical teachers. *The Wire* may break certain shopworn racial stereotypes and challenge some aspects of late capitalism (the failing "war on drugs" and the myth of individualism), but these virtues may be less compelling for students. The show leaves certain stereotypes fully intact, and in that failure risks reinforcing them because of the show's acclaimed truth-value and status as simultaneous beguiling entertainment and faithful documentation of life in the Baltimore ghetto. Without a critical perspective on the show's white racial framing, I contend, the show is not an effective teaching tool despite its appeal to those seeking vivid contemporary illustrations of fundamental concepts in sociology. Many fruitful lessons can be developed from *The Wire*, but instructors need to be wary of how the show perpetuates the naturalization of the ghetto and other interpretive frameworks rooted in liberalism. Consequently, this experience helped me rethink how to use course materials to aid students in deconstructing their implicit worldviews, especially to grasp the subtle mechanisms of systemic oppression.

## Students and the White Racial Frame

The general tension that I experienced with *The Wire* is the disparity between the show's popularity, particularly with people who think of themselves as progressive, and its suitability for radical pedagogy. Popular culture depictions of blackness receive wide acceptance in the mainstream as a matter of style, capitalist consumption, and symbols of inclusion and diversity, rather than as depictions of a system based on disparate life chances and white privilege (Gallagher 2003). A primary obstacle preventing an understanding of racism as a form of systemic oppression is the dominance of what Joe Feagin (2010) describes as the white racial frame (WRF). It is the

dominant racial frame that shapes our actions and thinking in everyday situations, ultimately rationalizing racial hierarchy within a framework of American exceptionalism and triumph. The WRF, from a pedagogical standpoint, alerts us to how students' viewpoints, emotions, interpretations of imagery, and ideologies are rooted in a history of racism that students are often unaware of but express consciously and unconsciously. Put another way, mainstream discussions of race and the tendency toward colorblindness in society among students (Bonilla Silva 2014), instructors (Pollock 2009), politicians (Logan 2011), and the media (Wingfield and Feagin 2013) function discursively to minimize the salience of racism and this presents an immediate challenge when teaching about race. Because the WRF has developed from pre-colonial times to the present, it is deeply embedded and malleable and requires a pedagogy that goes beyond the teaching of concepts to help students develop competing frames. The consistent features of the WRF can be summarized as follows: (1) assumptions about the moral authority of whiteness and European civilizations, (2) rationalizations of oppression contradicting liberal values, (3) justifications of racial capitalism and the unjust enrichment of whites, and (4) viewpoints that social reforms are adequate solutions for racial, economic, and gendered hierarchies. Particularly valuable in Feagin's development of the WRF

is the attention he gives to the radical counter-frames of African Americans that have historically challenged the dominant racial frame. This is where *The Wire* is most insufficient: A counter-frame does more than critique; it provides an alternative understanding of social reality.

The pervasiveness of the WRF, even at a school as diverse as Brooklyn College, is an achievement of neoliberalism, which has been effective in reducing the most significant social problems to a belief in the fulfillment of education in a capitalist framework. Students vary significantly in terms of citizenship status (Bank Munoz 2009), religion, family responsibilities, and parental status among other categories, such as class, age, and sexuality. The college is also tiered in that certain privileged programs might be predominantly white, while disproportionately non-white transfer students from the City University of New York (CUNY) two-year colleges populate less prestigious programs. Many students who are disadvantaged based on several interrelated measures (income, previous education, housing) are shunted aside as the student population is being whitened based on discriminatory admissions standards (Hancock and Kolodner 2015). Despite these dynamics, standard student values such as capitalism, individualism, merit, and opportunity, described by scholars (Brunsmas, Brown, and Placier 2012) as "the walls of whiteness," resemble those of students at predominantly white universities in some ways.



Students are generally cautious when navigating a topic they perceive as racially sensitive, and they often rely on using colorblind frames identified by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2014): naturalization (especially concerning segregation), culture (to explain differences in position based on behavior rather than structure), abstract liberalism (a dismissal of oppression based on normative values), and minimization (usually relegating discrimination to the past). The diversity in the classroom often leads to students not wanting to offend other students, but students easily distinguish between different racial and ethnic groups based on neighborhoods and stereotypes. Racial and ethnic diversity results in the expression of subframes that adhere to the dominant frame with certain levels of skepticism. Pervasive is the juxtaposition of virtuous whiteness (stable families, safety, and good neighborhoods) and deviant blackness (broken families, violence, bad neighborhoods, and sexual deviance). I view students constantly negotiating and internalizing what Feagin describes as a “strong and obsessive focus on black Americans as the dominant issue, menace, problem, and reference point in an array of institutional arenas of U.S. society” (2010:94). How students negotiate the dominant frame is related to their familiarity with counter-frames, radical interpretations of history, or lack thereof.

Students at Brooklyn College are distinct in that their daily lives often involve dealing with a variety of social problems. In the two courses that I describe below, I used *The Sociological Imagination* by C. Wright Mills as a framing text. Although my students’ experiences are quite different from Mills’s, they could relate to his statement that “Nowadays men often feel that their private lives are a series of traps” (Mills 1959:3). They experience higher tuition and increasing student loan debt like many students, but they also deal with the stress of living in New York City, where most of them juggle work and school while constantly exposed to life’s hardships. While explaining the historical context in which Mills wrote the book, I highlighted how students in the 1960s and 1970s eventually responded in protest. Attempting to be provocative, I insinuated that today’s students are more apathetic. One student responded, “We know they keep raising tuition; it’s not that we don’t care, but who has the time to protest, go to work, and read all these chapters for every class?” When Mills predicted that conformity and greater access to material comforts would lead to a society of “cheerful robots,” one student scoffed and characterized himself and his peers as “more like broken robots.”

***Students recognize the grinding mechanisms of neoliberalism and their lack of agency, perhaps less than previous generations, but neoliberalism is also their mode of interpretation and coping; students reflect the general trend of seeking individual market responses to broader social problems (Szasz 2007).***

Students recognize the grinding mechanisms of neoliberalism and their lack of agency, perhaps less than previous generations, but neoliberalism is also their mode of interpretation and coping; students reflect the general trend of seeking individual market responses to broader social problems (Szasz 2007). Students’ responses are based on a white racial frame that convinces them that their aspirations are a matter of individual achievement rather than social transformation. School is regarded as a means to an end, and most students are understandably defensive about their means to achieve the American Dream or at least some idea of a comfortable life. They understand that life is hard; what is less clear is that they experience a particular condition that people have resisted for centuries. Unaware, most students submit to a disposition of “this is just how it is.” This disposition is resistant to alternative explanations because it would require reconfiguring their understanding of reality. Yet their understanding of reality is often comprised of controlling images and symbols that lack historical substance, erasing radical figures and movements that provide alternative viewpoints and relevant modes of social change. In hindsight, *The Wire* was more likely to reinforce their current frame rather than provide a counter frame.

## Limitations of *The Wire*

My critique of *The Wire* as a productive text for radical pedagogy is twofold and interrelated: (1) Whatever the writers’ intentions were, students interpreted the show based on their thinking, and the critical aspects of the show were not as valuable to them as I had perceived they would be; (2) *The Wire* has problems in terms of representation that is conducive to the WRF, especially in terms of presenting the agency and resistance of black men and women subjected to the ghetto. The value of the show is that it makes social problems vivid, but these problems are presented only in their contemporary manifestation, in ways that do not expose the social processes that created the problems. Especially to viewers like my students who lack a firm sense of history, this limitation makes *The Wire* a spectacle of black poverty such that the residents become indistinguishable from the conditions of the ghetto.

I chose twelve episodes from season 3 in my courses because they depicted the connection of local politics in Baltimore to real estate development, as well as the escalation of violence between rival drug organizations amid the dysfunction of the police department ordered by city hall to produce statistics and illusions of progress rather than dealing with poverty. This season is perhaps the most dramatic in depicting street-level characters (drug dealers and officers) meeting tragic fates related to larger institutional dysfunction that makes for compelling storylines, likened to Greek tragedy by the show’s writer David Simon and scholars (Love 2010). Although we view the tragic inevitability of individuals meeting their demise in the face of larger social forces, film critic scholar Linda Williams (2014) argues that *The Wire* is best described as good serial melodrama. It depicts modern institutions to elicit moral outrage but ultimately relies on emotional

attachments to characters. This can be seen in the development of two of the most central characters: Omar Little (who is given substantial complexity to demonstrate that drug dealers are not necessarily the “bad guys”) and Jimmy McNulty (whose development shows that police officers are not necessarily always the “good guys”). In essence, *The Wire* is a tale of cops and robbers but more complex. Despite all of the show’s complexity, almost all of the women are depicted in very predictable ways, especially the black women who are usually just props for drug dealers and often depicted in stereotypical imagery (Jones 2008).<sup>2</sup>

However important the cast is, the ghetto itself is the main feature; problematically, *The Wire*’s value in depicting some of the ghetto’s inner workings does not reveal how it was constructed. Mitchell Duneier (2016), in his research into the invention and the idea of the ghetto, finds the term commonly used by politicians, media, and social scientists to refer to an autonomous site of behaviors and characteristics rather than a structural manifestation based on external politics, economics, and racism. The ghetto becomes a signifier of racism and a particular idea of black criminality dating back to the late 19th century (Muhammad 2011). *The Wire* must be understood within the context of Michael Bennett’s identification of anti-urbanism as related to the “visible effects of invisible forces” (1999:176). Thus, the spatialization of race for places like Baltimore’s ghettos is attached to a racialized mental schema. George Lipsitz describes this cultural reproduction: “The white spatial imaginary portrays the properly gendered prosperous suburban home as the privileged moral geography of the nation. Widespread, costly, and often counterproductive practices of surveillance, regulation, and incarceration become justified as forms of frontier defense against demonized people of color” (2010:13). Film and television presentations of these spatial imaginaries are likely maintained when adopted for classroom use.

*The Wire*’s popularity at elite universities like Harvard and Berkeley is troubling for some of the universities’ faculty. Professor Ishmael Reed, recognizing the show’s white racial frame, suggests that “HBO should tackle something new. How about depicting the family life of a suburban gun dealer who is sending illegal weapons into city neighborhoods?” (2010:3). Elijah Anderson criticized the show’s bleakness and how it elides the decent people in the black community with its emphasis on drug dealers (Parker 2010). Scholars (Daniels 2008) criticized him for suggesting that church-going and law-abiding citizens should be seen more instead of valuing the realism that is depicted. However, this contention must be tempered from the standpoint of what students will interpret and how political resistance by residents is largely absent. The issue is less a problem of respectability than of framing. As Feagin explains, the WRF is flexible enough to make exceptions based on individual cases to maintain its existence. A crooked white politician or racist police officer can exist as an exception, but the drug dealer, who we might sympathize with because of his moral and ethical dilemmas depicted in *The Wire*, does nothing to challenge the dominant frame.

This is not to suggest that the struggles of drug dealers cannot be depicted. How do they fit into a larger storyline that meets pedagogical goals to deconstruct and replace basic racist imagery? Here Lipsitz (2010) is most on target: “For all of their attentiveness to local circumstances in Baltimore, the producers of *The Wire* evidently did not notice that in the middle of the show’s run (in 2005) a federal judge presiding over the Thompson v. HUD case found the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development guilty of creating, promoting, and exacerbating racial segregation in Baltimore in violation of the 1968 Fair Housing Act” (105). This court decision was the outcome of decades of political mobilization by black women tenants in public housing, demanding equitable housing and government redress (Williams 2004). Based on my experience, a radical pedagogy is best served by material highlighting radical actors. I proceed to demonstrate how *The Wire* was counterproductive to that end.

***I designed the courses based on an application of the sociological imagination, conceptualized as a quality of mind that develops the ability to understand the interplay between the individual and society, while grasping one’s situation within its historical development (Mills 1959).***

## Contested Instruction

I taught *The Wire* in consecutive semesters, first in an honors elective and then in an introductory sociology course. I designed the courses based on an application of the sociological imagination, conceptualized as a quality of mind that develops the ability to understand the interplay between the individual and society, while grasping one’s situation within its historical development (Mills 1959). The sociological imagination requires students to distinguish between personal issues experienced by individuals and social problems in society. I emphasized reflexivity for students to understand their perspectives by attempting to see themselves from other standpoints (Stalker, Hardling, and Pridmore 2009) while emphasizing the big picture (Dandaneau 2001). The sociological imagination is a valuable approach, but its application requires understanding how history is utilized to displace social problems onto individuals. In my application, I found it extremely difficult to use this text to help students understand historical perspectives so that they could grasp important concepts like social structure. Although the courses differed in level and rigor of content, the goals were the same: (1) Identify social institutions and how they relate to social problems; (2) understand different factors that structure and organize society; and (3) critically assess one’s social location, personal values, and beliefs.

The honors course Exploring Urban Life and Inequality, in which I first used *The Wire*, was a special topics, junior-

level, interdisciplinary seminar with 19 students, mostly pre-med majors. Although the class was majority white, the general composition was diverse. The course was designed with *The Wire* in mind, but students engaged a variety of texts, including ethnographies, speeches, essays, and sociological studies relating to urban experiences of the 20th century. All of the readings were related to *The Wire*, which we mostly watched and discussed in class. The Introduction to Sociology course was mostly freshmen and sophomores with a variety of majors and no clear racial majority among the 35 students. To make use of *The Wire* productive for this class, I decided to limit the scope of the material to include excerpts from seminal sociological texts on issues such as class, gender, race, culture, deviance, and globalization, while creating lectures on topics that I felt were necessary for their viewing of *The Wire*. As this was a lower-level course, we watched less content during class time because I spent more time lecturing and showed clips where appropriate. I made my copy of the series available for students to watch on campus on certain days and times.

In terms of organization, the introductory course was more challenging because students watched most of the season on their own time. They did not benefit from being able to watch it together as a class. However, the most significant problem was not organization but content. I noticed how students interpreted *The Wire* through the WRF and how it conflicted with a structural analysis. The greatest difference between the two courses is that the honors students were generally more enthusiastic and prepared; however, because the introductory course was the following semester, I often modified assignments and instruction based on the previous semester. How the courses went can be best explained comparatively through how they dealt with similar assignments.

The first assignments in both classes required students to use library resources to examine the front page of the *New York Times* newspaper on the day of their birth. The assignment was based on the reading of an excerpt from *The Sociological Imagination*. I directed students to use the front page to demonstrate a basic understanding of social institutions and related social problems. They responded to three questions: (1) What are the reoccurring social institutions discussed in the front page stories? (2) What are the social problems discussed? (3) What are the roles of the social institutions in relation to the social problems? Prior to the assignment, I lectured about social institutions in both classes and how institutions are central to a sociological perspective. Few students struggled in the honors course and to offset the difference in skill I would emphasize insights in the following semester that were gleaned from the first semester. When I discussed the assignment in the introductory course, I used some of the previous semester's stories as examples. As a practice, I use the class in which I return assignments to discuss them in some detail. In neither course did I experience any real

difficulty with students analyzing the newspaper articles, and identifying institutions and social problems. The common experience was that they recognized multiple institutions and issues that made it difficult to determine the main social problem as they are often related to others.

There were differences between the two classes in outcomes for the second assignment. When students had to analyze the actions of individuals in relation to structure, many students substituted analysis of structure with their opinions. In the honors course, I used a story from a 1994 article discussing the Clinton administration's plans for

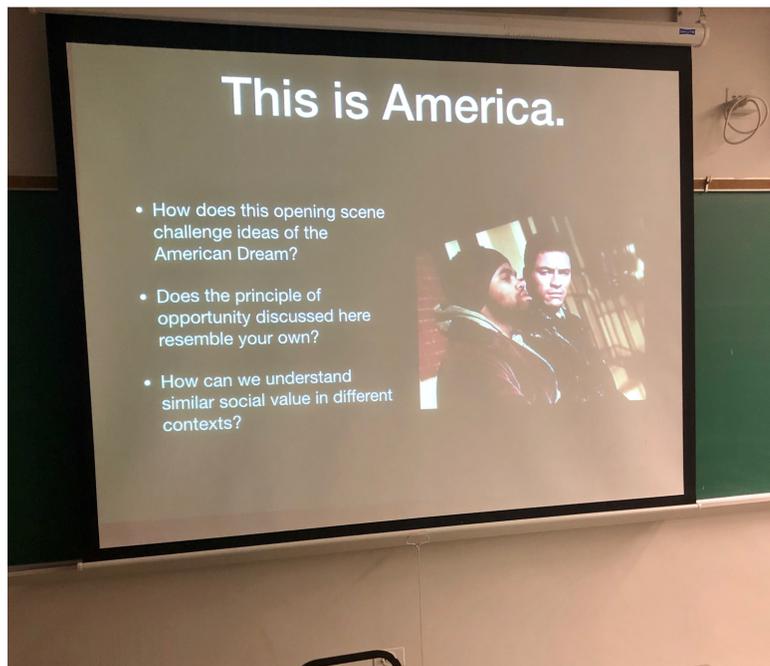


IMAGE COURTESY OF AUTHOR

welfare reform. To demonstrate Mills's idea of historical process, I related this story to the 1930s New Deal policies and how the passing of legislation was subject to the interests of different political actors to the exclusion of certain groups. I then demonstrated how ideas about welfare stigmatizing those very groups have been produced over time and how our understanding of welfare has been shaped by these different institutions and the discourses they produce. Using my example, I asked students to analyze the interplay of structure and individual agency based on their assigned text, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*. The author, Phillipe Bourgois, discusses the dominance of Finance, Investment, and Real Estate (FIRE) sectors and the employment prospects of Puerto Ricans in East Harlem. The two questions I asked of students they did fairly well with, and I did not have to comment much: (1) How do you understand the changes in the economic structure described in the reading? (2) Choose one of your stories from the *New York Times*; how is this story related to the economic structure discussed in the first question (making sure to identify the social institutions)? I did not anticipate that so much of the discussion would focus on the last question: (3) Based on your understanding of structure, how do you understand

the available choices confronted by Dennis “Cutty” Wise in the episodes of *The Wire* so far?

Cutty is a central character in season 3. We first see him in the season premier, interacting in prison with members of one of the drug organizations who offer him employment when he is released and returns to West Baltimore. After many years in prison, he is confronted with minimal options based on a lack of work experience, a criminal record, and little formal education. He chooses a manual labor position, but, by the fourth episode, it becomes increasingly clear that he will return to crime. I anticipated answers to my questions related to labor exploitation or the difficulty finding work based on obvious factors. However, about half of the answers focused on his character and his ability to make the “right” choices, even when acknowledging the difficulty of his situation. Some students asserted that his present options are a consequence of previous bad decisions. Very little is shown about Cutty’s background, except that he lives with his grandmother and that he turned himself in after a drug-related murder. However, students projected a background where he did not value school, he associated with the wrong people, and/or he was seeking an easier route.

As I prepared the lecture to address some of these answers in general, I recognized the tension in what I wanted them to understand and how *The Wire* was a poor example. I had explained that residents experiencing poverty and high rates of employment, among other factors, wrestle with tough decisions on a daily basis. I directed students to passages from *In Search of Respect* as examples, but in *The Wire* and the text, the primary focus was on criminals. I emphasized that a sociological analysis has to understand the broader social forces and that individual choices are made within contexts. A student objected, “But people still know what is illegal no matter the context.” The ensuing discussion divided the class, making me realize that more students were perceiving it from a different perspective. I took stock of most of the students’ comments in the debate so that I could distinguish opinions and beliefs from analysis of structure. I addressed the main contention, “individuals need to be held accountable,” by pointing to events where institutions are not held accountable. I used the Great Recession of 2008 as an example of the damage done to human lives and how a focus on individual borrowers misses the mark. When I attempted to engage the students in the effects of the recession, most of the students who were adamant about personal accountability seemed disengaged, based on body language and participation. This disengagement was mirrored the following semester.

The introductory course reading was based on an excerpt from *Corporate Nation* wherein Charles Derber explains how the government’s failure as a countervailing force against corporations leads to economic instability and anxiety for a large sector of the population. I used the welfare example from the previous semester, which was even more fitting for this reading. To make sure students understood the interplay between individual and structure, I explained the idea of the “anxious class” of workers subject to the vagaries of the market and asked how the broader structural changes might have affected some of

the decisions students have made. Students answered easily, stating that they chose Brooklyn College so they could live at home, they selected certain majors to make more money, they were working through school to have less debt, and one student’s idea of starting her own business resonated with others. I then played a video of David Simon explaining how the conditions faced by many of the characters in *The Wire* force them to ask existential questions related to poverty and drug addiction and how even a police officer’s decision to create a legal drug zone was an attempt to give his job meaning against the devastation of capitalism and the drug policy as an act of containment for the black poor. The first two questions were the same as above, but I modified the third question from the previous semester to make sure students did not individualize a particular character instead of analyzing structure. I asked, (3) How would you compare the different circumstances faced by those in the anxious class compared to people experiencing poverty depicted in *The Wire*? Most students articulated different structural positions, from seeking stability versus being desperate and hopeless. What was common, however, was a sense of optimism from students; examples were usually of the nature “things are difficult, but we just have to keep making progress” or “things are bad but not like they were in the past.” These answers certainly fit Bonilla-Silva’s minimization frame, but they also reveal an attachment to the idea of progress.

***Instead of preparing a lecture, I chose to have an open conversation to see if we could give a definition to the idea of progress that could be useful going forward. I asked students, “By a show of hands, how many of you think that the country is making progress?”***

When I returned the papers, it became very clear in the discussion that the progress that students were talking about was a belief in racial progress. This started a conversation that eventually became painful for the students, and I felt like I was scolding. Instead of preparing a lecture, I chose to have an open conversation to see if we could give a definition to the idea of progress that could be useful going forward. I asked students, “By a show of hands, how many of you think that the country is making progress?” They were hesitant at first, as if they thought I might be asking a trick question. I urged, if you do not raise your hand, I will assume you do not believe we are making progress, and I will want to hear from you. In the classroom, all but four students raised their hands. I asked them, what did they mean by progress? From the reactions, most of the students were incredulous of the question. Earlier in the semester, I had critiqued the symbolism of a Barack Obama presidency, and a white woman asserted, “I feel like you want us to say Obama.” A Dominican woman who did not raise her hand tried to alleviate the faltering conversation: “We have a black president and professor!” A few students laughed, and I

wrote diversity on the chalkboard. I then asked for more examples. Students were hesitant to speak, but a male Pakistani student said, "Most of my professors are women." I pointed to diversity on the board and asked whether this captured what they meant by progress, racial and gender inclusion. In classes when there is an open discussion, students are usually more forthcoming in giving their opinions, and students are less inclined to discuss when they feel the need to be defensive.

I attempted to redirect the conversation based on the reading. "What does diversity or progress mean based on *Corporate Nation*?" Silence. I asked them to consider this question based on the reading: "If most people are working longer hours under the threat that they will be easily replaced, more people are working contract jobs with no benefits, it is difficult for people in the middle class to save money, the unemployment rate is twice as high for black people, and that does not count the people who have given up looking, can we say any of that represents progress?" As in the previous course, students who felt their commonsense idea was being challenged had already disengaged. When I asked one of the students who did not raise a hand, a black man, he stated, "People aren't really getting lynched anymore, but we still have places like Baltimore and parts of Brooklyn, and then there's Rikers or upstate. It's hard to say." I asked what people thought about his statement. No one wanted to speak. I asked, "Who can say they have never thought much about it?" The same Dominican woman asked, "So you're saying we haven't made any progress?" I answered, "Maybe in some ways; people generally live longer in the US, but I do not think we value life more. Can anyone remember a time when the US was not in some type of war?" A Jewish woman who was quiet throughout the conversation became exasperated and said, "You want everything to be perfect!" I sensed that she did not actually want to engage, but I wanted to give some idea of what progress might look like. Therefore, I responded, "Not perfect, but if we made sure everyone had food and safe housing, wouldn't that be progress?" I gauged the non-verbal reactions from most of the students as a sign to move on, but I said that is something that we can measure periodically to see how we are doing as a nation.

In the first semester, I realized there was a conflict trying to use *The Wire* in a critical way, but the conflict was disguised by other readings that students found more substantive, which they expressed. The following semester, because the course was a lower-level class, I did not choose readings that students found as immersive. I also realized that learning particular concepts is less important than introducing students to radical frames that would help them recognize certain assumptions and become less defensive. Although the sociological imagination emphasizes history, I underestimated how important critical understanding of history is for students who have little to no concept of the past. It is not enough for me to cover history condensed in a lecture to arrive at a point of understanding. I need to guide them through their reading of radical historical narratives that help them understand how seemingly race-neutral processes are steeped in histories of oppression that people continuously fight

against. This would at least make students aware of continued resistance. Just as any introduction to historical events would give students a critical perspective, I realize that the narratives of individuals appeal to students in a way that can also deliver a radical perspective, if the figure has a compelling story that models social change.

Even when students demonstrated achieved learning goals based on *The Wire*, the students were generally espousing neoliberalism with the WRF frame still intact. Of course, part of the solution is to set different goals, but that would also necessitate appropriate content as well. Take, for example, a student's answer to the question that asked students to distinguish between different social positions in relation to criminality. This was based on a scene in *The Wire* when white collar crime (by developers) is discussed as more consequential than drug dealers (the character Stringer Bell). A student stated:

*I try not to judge anyone because everyone is different. I had it easier than some but worse than a lot of people who assume things about me because I went to one of the best high schools. People don't know I have a brother who was an addict who served prison time. He went to a school and associated with that crowd. He made the same choices that a lot of black people made who went to that school. It was a joke. My parents made sure to send me to better schools.*

This answer is from a white man who expressed his enjoyment of the course. His answer recognizes the advantages that come from his education, and he could differentiate the structural disadvantages that his brother and black people experienced. However, the student, without being prompted, focused on not wanting to judge and on school as a solution that prevents bad choices. I did not have the time to unpack most statements, but the reason certain answers often felt uncomfortable was because I knew there were underlying rationales of an adequate answer. Most students believe that school is the answer to the social problems depicted in *The Wire*. This answer does not indicate a change in thinking, but the ability to place what he saw in *The Wire* into his existing frame. This example is remarkably different from how students engaged recent texts that were more conducive to an application of the sociological imagination.

## Alternatives to Teaching *The Wire*

I have improved my pedagogy in recent semesters by implementing texts that are more appropriate to the development of the sociological imagination, in precisely the ways that *The Wire* was inadequate. The use of radical biographies and histories provides the necessary counter-frames that allow me to facilitate student understanding through reading assignments and discussions. I explain that the course is an attempt to understand what is going on in the world, what has led them to this place as students in the current time, and as the professor I strive to communicate why the sociological imagination is vital. I explain the role of the history and biography texts as

critical factors to understand how they relate to social structures.

Where many students understand education as primarily a means for employment, I reiterate throughout the course that much of what we want to accomplish is to figure out how most of them have come to view education that way. For instance, in a redesigned introductory course, I assigned the autobiography of Assata Shakur (1987). I explained to them that we are reading about her not to determine her guilt but to understand the position of a revolutionary fugitive in exile and what makes her similar and different from any of us. I assured students that they would be assessed based on analyzing how her experiences related to the students' own and being able to analyze both experiences sociologically. The impulses of many students were to make personal judgments and they often felt very strongly about statements Assata made throughout the text. However, it was easy to challenge students by asking, "How does she explain why she thinks that way?" or "Does that make you right and her wrong?" Instead of engaging in defensive arguments, they had to turn in short assignments in which they analyzed the statements they found most provocative and applied reasoning based on data that I often provided in class. An example of such interaction can be described when a white female student responded to Assata's statement: "For the most part, we receive fragments of unrelated knowledge, and our education follows no logical format or pattern. It is exactly the kind of education that produces people who don't have the ability to think for themselves and who are easily manipulated" (Shakur 1987:35). The white female student's response is a good example of her working through her dissonance about education and Assata connecting it to imperialism: "She makes me mad, and I [want] to dislike her, but there are times when she says stuff that I have thought about at one point...age and race are important for sure, but the real difference is that she is definitely braver." This statement is typical in its conflicting message. The most resistant students commented on perceived character flaws but they would also recognize her honesty and other characteristics they deemed positive. During a discussion, one student referred to her as "crazy," commenting on her decision to have a child while in prison, but he described being "crazy" as a necessary characteristic of people who make social change. Student resistance was dramatically different; they did not immediately eschew normative values. On the contrary, they demonstrated their ability to personalize Assata Shakur and in commenting on how she described her experiences they were able to engage her framing of imperialism, education, and many other issues with less defense while also articulating their own positions.

The incorporation of historical texts provided more flexible conversations, and most texts can be used in a variety of courses. I have begun using radical histories to frame my courses for the first month of the semester, which allows for more meaningful conversations throughout the semester and gives students a shared understanding. I have used Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's *An Indigenous People's History of the United States* in classes ranging from Introduction to Sociology and Classical

Theory to even the Sociology of Sports. In a course like Classical Theory students can appreciate Dunbar-Ortiz's (2015) colonial frame to analyze Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Émile Durkheim and the Eurocentric assumptions that connect their theories of modern society. Less anticipated would be how well students learned to adapt the colonial frame in their understanding of the critical issues when it comes to sports.

Previously when I taught Sociology of Sports, a freshman level general education course, student interests revolved around casual conversations about sports and they were less inclined to engage the issues with any sociological substance. When I assigned readings and discussed social contemporary issues in the sports world they often relied on opinions and less on how the issues were sociologically framed. When I taught the course using an *Indigenous People's History of the United States*, I grounded the first month of the semester in a radical understanding of history. Before we focused on any sports content, they had to complete assignments that applied their understanding of the colonial frame discussed in the reading in contrast to common ideas about U.S. history. This approach produced substantially different conversations early in the semester compared to what was achieved during the previous semesters. For example, in previous semesters when we discussed the use of American Indian mascots students often centered their opinions on moral considerations of right and wrong, and were often inclined to argue that NFL franchises, like the Washington Redskins, were too invested in merchandising and tradition to change racist names. After a discussion of historical framing, students offered more analysis based on the text and were able to identify obvious racial slurs like the Redskins but also less controversial names that are still associated with genocide, like the San Francisco 49ers and New York Rangers. Moreover, rather than rationalizing the economic status quo, students grasped the significance of American Indian land claims and the concept of restitution. Students demonstrated the sociological imagination realizing that a focus on stolen land would require a restructuring of society and would force them to consider their position as workers, students, and people struggling to pay rent. Most importantly, the WRF that was reinforced in *The Wire* became an object of critique rather than a reinforcement.

## Conclusion

David Simon's attempt to depict "the other America," left behind by late capitalism, is powerful television in ways intended and unintended. For many people like myself who came to enjoy *The Wire*, I appreciated its ability to combine multi-dimensional characters in a depiction of the consequences of poverty and the struggle of Baltimore residents to survive. It involves intricate plots and storylines that primarily revolve around police officers and drug dealers. I became more sensitive to one of the unintended consequences of *The Wire*, the perpetuation of the WRF that became painstakingly obvious when I attempted to implement it as part of radical pedagogy. Although scholars may continue to debate the merits and

the value of the show, in my attempt to transform student's thinking about the social structures in their lives and the ideas they perpetuate, *The Wire* was more likely to reinforce normative ideas of individual achievement against a backdrop of black criminality, violence, and licentiousness. The Baltimore ghetto, in *The Wire's* depiction, is far from radical; it is a prop that confirms the viewers existing racial logics and motifs, which students regularly demonstrated.

The fundamental problem in *The Wire* is the lack of historical framing that further obscures the ghetto, along with the show's conduciveness for students to individualize the social problems it depicts. The examples I have given of radical histories fill the voids in students' understandings of the past and helps them interpret contemporary events in ways that transform their thinking. Furthermore, the use of autobiographies that use individual narratives in a radical framing of reality is both relatable and challenging. In both cases, students became more aware of not just the issues discussed in class, but the significance of the issues as they continue to manifest in societal conflicts. Students who were earnest in their reading of Assata Shakur's autobiography showed concern about the New Jersey governor's recent increase in the bounty for her capture and whether the United States' diplomatic thaw with Cuba will threaten Shakur's asylum. One student said she now follows the Hands Off Assata Campaign on Facebook so that she can be more aware. A sense of history gave students a greater interest in issues beyond their immediate experiences. They are more likely to engage in current events, such as the Dakota Access Pipeline protest, and, more importantly, they have a critical interpretation beyond how the media frames it.

When determining if I will use any content in my courses, especially television and videos, there are specific guidelines that I consider: is it conducive to a radical historical narrative; does it have a deliberate counter-frame; and how well does it relate to current events? History cannot be taken for granted as it forms a foundation for student understanding and how they engage normative ideas that I require them to critique. A radical counter-frame will challenge students' understandings about race, class, gender, and sexuality in the ways that *The Wire* failed to accomplish, and an appropriate autobiography is especially effective. Lastly, I have to determine as best as I can that the material I use will help students think differently about the events that they interpret in their daily lives, things that are both explicit and implicit. If students can recognize the WRF and develop a counter frame, they will have grasped the sociological imagination enough to make sense of their reality, which may potentially constitute a social transformation in thought.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Chaddha, Anmol and William J. Wilson. 2010. "Why We're Teaching 'The Wire' at Harvard." *The Washington Post*, September 12. (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2010/09/10/AR2010091002676.html>). This work is certainly the most influential declaration of the value and merits of *The Wire* for sociology. Dillon, Karen and Naomi Crummey. 2015. *The Wire in the Classroom: Pedagogical Approaches in the Humanities*. Jefferson: McFarland. This work is an example of the broader use of *The Wire* in academia.

<sup>2</sup>Stereotypes of black women in *The Wire* are exemplified by one character in particular, Squeak. She is present in five episodes in season 3. She is the girlfriend of a low-level drug dealer and her hostile and sexual behaviors serve as distractions to her boyfriend, leading to the arrest of the characters in one drug organization. After her second appearance on screen, every time she would appear, several students in my honors course would gesture to indicate that they anticipated some type of clichéd behavior.



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# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Exorcising "Racecraft": Toward the RaceSyllabus

by Abena Ampofoa Asare



## RACECRAFT

*The Soul of Inequality  
in American Life*

KAREN E. FIELDS AND BARBARA J. FIELDS

RACECRAFT: THE SOUL OF INEQUALITY IN AMERICAN LIFE BY KAREN FIELDS, BARBARA J. FIELDS. (2012). VERSO.

Teaching effectively about race and racism in the American university is imperative; it is also notoriously difficult.<sup>1</sup> The rise of crowdsourced and curated reading lists (#FergusonSyllabus, #CharlottesvilleSyllabus, #NoDAPLSyllabus) represents a public realization that those who hope to understand the manifestations of race and racism in twenty-first-century America must study; they must arm themselves with data and analysis extending beyond personal experience and anecdote. This new phenomenon is fundamentally optimistic; it stands on the hope that a collection of texts gathered together might make the United States' peculiar romance with race intelligible and thus penetrable. However, before students can *get woke* through these often interdisciplinary and rigorous reading lists, they must first understand what race is and what it is not.

This essay, based on my experiences teaching Africana Studies at a public university in the northeastern United States, argues the importance of a RaceSyllabus through which students grasp the artificiality of race as a man-made ideology that is neither biologically relevant nor divinely inspired. This term, RaceSyllabus, is inspired by the phenomenon of crowdsourced and publicly accessible reading lists that valorize continual self-study as personally and politically necessary.<sup>2</sup> Made for these strange times, when "a professed desire to be colorblind bumps up against the ubiquity of race consciousness,"<sup>3</sup> the RaceSyllabus is a curated series of readings designed to provide students with a critical analysis of race opposed to the common sense understanding of race as a reflection of an individual's biological makeup.

In *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (2012), Barbara Jean Fields and Karen Fields coin the term *racecraft* to illuminate American society's continued attachment to a biological conception of racial difference despite the prodigious evidence that there is only one human race.<sup>4</sup> Fields and Fields's language of *racecraft* harkens deliberately to witchcraft as a way of apprehending the subterranean, occult practices by which our national misconception of race is maintained. Race in America, they claim, is a folk religion; its home truths are located in a "middle ground between science and superstition...a half-lit zone in the mind's eye" that evades rationality and logic.<sup>5</sup> Genetic diversity and similarity do not align with the social categories that we call race and yet we continue to structure our national life around this "taxonomy of ascriptive difference" by which we "construct populations as groups" and then "sort them into hierarchies of capacity, civic worth and desert."<sup>6</sup> Perpetuating race requires an intermixture of practices and beliefs, ways of "acting and imagining [that] are collective and individual, day to day, yet historical, and consequential even though nested in mundane routine."<sup>7</sup> Caught as we are in this twilight zone of racialism, Americans are particularly ill-equipped to struggle against racial injustice in ways that do not further enshrine the hegemony of race as a legitimate organizing principle.<sup>8</sup> Undoing the prison of race as a social hierarchy requires battling *racecraft*'s pervasive and occult knowledge; it involves illuminating that which is spoken and unutterable, challenging "truths" both visible and hidden. In short, it requires an exorcism.

In my teaching, I have developed a syllabus which propels students into a novel mental terrain where the racial categories we inherit and inhabit are neither inevitable nor natural, but instead are created and re-created by our national economic, political, social, and cultural choices. The RaceSyllabus supports two interrelated learning objectives that, together, encourage students to see outside our society's race-tinted lenses: 1) Students learn that that racial identities in the USA are historically specific; they encounter race as categories of identity that are created, policed, and re-created throughout our national history, and 2) Students learn that racial identities are geographically specific; they encounter different national frameworks where race is imagined and lived differently. These two simple insights, presented together, are remarkably effective in shaking diverse students free from the tentacles of a national racial myth whose power lies in its "vexing tendency to reproduce itself as history."<sup>9</sup>

The RaceSyllabus is not a complete pedagogical tool. The texts I describe below could well be substituted with others which do the same work. Moreover, I am acutely aware that the success or failure of the RaceSyllabus is tied to the pedagogical strategies and assignments surrounding these texts. The reading list is only one factor in creating a classroom where, as Paulo Freire describes, "men and women develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves."<sup>10</sup> Navigating the psychological, emotional, and political landmines of race and racism in a classroom requires a challenging admixture of authenticity, comfortability and confrontation, voice and silence, revelation and interrogation.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, a herculean pedagogy of emotional, physical, and spiritual engagement—a classroom where "students and teachers talk, laugh, cry, hold hands, sing, clap, role-play, and organize rallies and teach-ins" may be required.<sup>12</sup> And yet, this paper does not dwell on my own pedagogical praxis; I do not describe the shifting strategies I employ to create a classroom marked by student engagement, accountability, and leadership.<sup>13</sup> Nor do I explore the way that my perceived identities (West African/American, woman, cisgender, stammering) may affect student experiences.<sup>14</sup> I have excluded these factors not because I do not think them important. On the contrary, my focus on the RaceSyllabus is a deliberate attempt to invite diverse educators, using varied pedagogical strategies, to consider how a basic aspect of their course—the reading list—may aid (or impede) students' ability to grasp the artificiality of race categories.

The northeastern public university where I developed the RaceSyllabus ranks far above the national average for an ethnically diverse student body. More than half of the students identify as Asian, Hispanic/Latino, Black/African American, or foreign nationals. In addition, more than one-third of the students are eligible for Pell Grants and many of the students that take my classes are the first in their family to attend college. Partnership with these particular students honed the RaceSyllabus and convinced me of its significance. My classroom on any given day may include a young woman born in Brooklyn and raised in Guyana by

her grandmother, a religious Pakistani-American student attending a mosque staffed by an African American imam, the grandchild of an African American woman from Savannah, Georgia who moved to New York as part of the Great Migration, a Japanese student living in Saudi Arabia, the granddaughter of an Italian immigrant who came to Ellis Island in the early twentieth century, the daughter of a undocumented Salvadoran small business owner, and the grandchildren of Russian Holocaust survivors. Even among these students—exceedingly diverse in almost every way including citizenship status, ethnicity, class, nationality, color, and creed—the consequences of our national romance with a biological notion of race are evident.

Over the past seven years of teaching, I have observed that racialism persists even among twenty-first-century students. Born almost fifteen years after the passage of the US Civil Rights Act and the Fair Housing Act (1968), Millennials grow up in a context where racial integration, however limited, is a social ideal. Steeped in images of racial tokenism and living in times where “racist” is a slur denoting ethical failure or anachronistic belief, Millennials are more socially open than previous generations and are, supposedly, the answer to the USA’s racial nightmare. However, this hope that interracial friendships and diverse music collections will ensure national political and sociological transformation reflects a profound misunderstanding of how racism is reproduced in twenty-first-century America.

Although modern science tells us that inherent differences between people classified as racially separate do not exist, our society has made race a proxy and determinant of myriad social, economic, and physical outcomes. Alternatively, although genetics tells us of biological similarities and relationships between people who share genetic material, these genetic pools do not neatly align with our racial classification categories. Our national context blurs the above distinctions. As a result, students cannot help but believe there is some truth to the myth of racial difference, even if they believe it impolite to mention such.

Most Millennial youth (like their parents) remain constrained by racecraft, even as they resist the idea that it is acceptable to treat individuals poorly because of racial identity. Their visions of future justice are rooted in the assumption that there are probably essential distinctions between people who are grouped as Black, White, Asian and Latino, although they hesitate to delineate particularly what these are. We should not be surprised by this; most of the instruction about race and racism that most students encounter before (and during) university is filtered through a diversity framework which has been roundly excoriated as “devoid of historicity” and able to do very little to transform “essentialist readings” of racial identity.<sup>15</sup> The persistence of racecraft in the twenty-first-century USA—even among diverse Millennial youth—inspired my efforts to create a course highlighting the construction of race categories across time and space.

The RaceSyllabus works to collectively undermine the notion of race as self-evident in our bodies, thus disorienting students who subscribe to the common-sense

belief that racial identity is an objective or neutral identity marker. In this paper, after mapping the contours of twenty-first century racecraft and describing the content and objectives of the RaceSyllabus, I reflect on the impact of these readings on a population whose experiences in undergraduate courses on race is often overlooked and taken for granted: Black and/or African-American students.

## The Persistence of Racecraft

Teaching that race is a social construction with limited biological utility is a mantra within social science classrooms.<sup>16</sup> However, for many students, the social construction model seems to conflict with everything they have previously known. Their science textbooks have, most likely, connected race with biology in both “tight and loose linkages” which ultimately “preserve the cultural authority of the race concept.”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, students are influenced by our current “genomic turn,” where the dribs and drabs of genetic theory filtering into the public sphere coyly suggest that racial identities may indeed be located in our DNA.<sup>18</sup> If race-as-biology seems to be getting a new lease on life today this is because the public consensus against this framework was never particularly solid. In a classroom of true believers who insist that race is a social construct --anthropologists, sociologists, historians and the like— many students may struggle to grasp this idea, even as they parrot back the phrase.<sup>19</sup> It is no coincidence that Barbara Jean Fields and Karen Fields, respectively an historian and a sociologist, write *Racecraft* self-consciously as educators. The analytical limitations created by racecraft are most evident in those spaces where critical thought is supposed to reign—in U.S. classrooms.

An interdisciplinary community of scholars continues to wrestle with the challenge of rooting out race’s biological pretensions in their teaching. Historian Linda Gordon laments her attempts to deconstruct race among predominantly European American undergraduates who saw her attempts as a perverse “denial of observable physical differences.”<sup>20</sup> Similarly, anthropologist Katya Gibel Mevorach describes prohibiting her students from using the word *race* as a noun. If students always use race as a verb (i.e. communities and individuals do not possess a racial identity, they *are raced*) they may train their tongues and consequently their minds into perceiving the social labor that is always a part of racial identification.<sup>21</sup> When students assimilate this teaching of race as social construct as yet another of academe’s curious mores -- perhaps intellectually astute, but with little to no practical relevance— what, then, is to be done?

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The tenacity of biological notions of race has compelled educators to develop particular classroom activities to combat the status quo. Sorting exercises, where students are presented with visual images of human beings of diverse phenotype and asked to sort them into races, are supposed to distance students from a common-sense understanding of race.<sup>22</sup> By struggling to sort the pictures of “racially ambiguous” persons (i.e. Adam Clayton Powell, Walter White, and Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson), students are supposed to recognize the limitations of our racial categories. However, these sorting exercises actually do very little to challenge the logic of racial categorization. They may further entrench the power of race-thinking by confirming to students that there are “right” and “wrong” ways to sort people, notwithstanding the few individuals whose ambiguous bodies supposedly place them on the margins of this classification system and make their “correct” racial identity difficult to ascertain. Persons of supposedly mixed heritage become the exception that proves the rule. These sorting exercises rarely lead a European American student to ask, “if Adam Clayton Powell is Black, might I not then also be Black?” Neither do sorting exercises prompt a Bangladeshi-American student to ponder the irrationality of the Asian box’s blithe insistence that there is an inherent connection between herself and her colleagues from Tonga, Korea, and Northern China.

Although some forms of racism have become taboo, race ideology— which bestows on an illogical, unstable, and irrational system of human categorization the mantle of truth— has not been supplanted.<sup>23</sup> Two recent examples are useful for considering the way race-thinking shades the vision of even those who passionately desire to combat the scourge of racism.

1. A middle-school teacher came to me to criticize her colleagues, European American women like herself, for seeking to hold a classroom of predominantly African American and Latinx students to what she called “White middle-class norms.” “They have to understand that these Black and Latinx families don’t share these norms, nor should they be made to,” she insisted with much exasperation. For my colleague, completing nightly homework, investing in music lessons, and attending parent-teacher conferences were “White middle-class” norms. Across a presumed racial divide she assumed her Black and Latinx students held other norms. Precisely what these “other” racial norms regarding education actually were (tardiness? non-investment in extra-curricular enrichment?) was never articulated. This educator believed herself to be working against racist exclusion in the classroom. However, her insistence on assigning particular behaviors a racial identity, and then reading the bodies of her students as a cipher for their behavior, is the essence of racecraft.

2. In March 2017, Moises Velazquez-Manoff published an opinion article in *The New York Times* entitled “What Biracial People Know.” This article asserts the inevitability of U.S. racial progress based on a demographic argument about the expanding biracial/multiracial population; supposedly, “mixed-race” people are more likely to “construct a worldview that transcends the tribal.”<sup>24</sup> This

prediction that sexual relationships and multiracial families will be the coffin for racial injustice is popular among undergraduates every semester— it is also a particularly nefarious expression of racecraft. The argument about “what biracial people know” is a simple update of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century trope of the tragic mulatto. Instead of “mixed blood” producing an unsettled mind and doomed destiny, here, mixed blood is the harbinger of a more advanced consciousness. At core, this argument is based on a pseudoscientific superstition that by possessing racially-ambiguous bodies, multiracial persons are somehow the bearers of an alternative consciousness. In reality U.S. history is replete with “multiracial” persons, both past and present, who have not been advocates of racial equality and who, based on their socialization, have been conduits of racist exploitation. In 2018 as in 1898, the idea that “racial mixing” (a term that in and of itself assumes the biological reality of racial categories) produces any particular type of human being is rooted in the superstitions surrounding race.

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our racial categories.***

I have chosen both of the above examples to show the wiliness of racecraft; even well-meaning persons who would hope to be among the architects of a more equal society may find themselves espousing a biological concept of race and suggesting that there are fundamentally different types of human beings who can be known and sorted according to miscellanea of phenotypical features including skin color, hair texture, nose shape, skull size, and genitalia. Even those who abhor racism may take for granted the solidity of our racial categories. I do not use the word exorcism lightly but specifically, to communicate the difficulty of casting out race ideology from among us.

The troubling persistence of racism has spurred new efforts to apprehend (and mourn) our socialization into the harmful practices by which racial inequality is maintained and preserved. The burgeoning research on “implicit biases” trumpets what the families of Amadou Diallo, Mike Brown, Philando Castile, and countless others have long known: the occult power of racecraft in our minds and institutions is not innocuous. Thinking race, for many of us, equals thinking and doing harm. Our subconscious minds, whose “processes of social perception, impression formation, and judgment” we do not always control, have almost certainly been corrupted by violent race ideologies.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, this implicit bias research has led many to conclude that the violence of our minds-hooked-on-race is unavoidable.<sup>26</sup> What are we to do with the “unhappy ordinariness” of implicit bias and the resulting discriminatory behaviors and institutions?<sup>27</sup> Supposedly, new policies and procedures will limit the damage done by our covert beliefs about race. And so preschool teachers are instructed to speak with empathy when disciplining Black students; health care professionals are invited to “double-check” themselves when listening to Black women in their care; and legal experts seek to

challenge the idea that intention and animus must be central to discrimination cases.<sup>28</sup> With all due respect to these pragmatic efforts to limit the harm caused by negative judgments, perceptions, and associations, attempting to change our practices without changing our minds will not free us from our racist national history. Constant education and re-education about the history and sociology of race in America and beyond is fundamental to anti-racism.

## The RaceSyllabus

The first part of the RaceSyllabus explores how race categories in United States history have been defined and redefined over time, and according to particular imperatives. These texts expose the historical processes through which different groups of people -- African American, European American, Native American, and Asian American—have been assigned a racial identity at different moments in the American past. Using primary and secondary sources, students begin to perceive that identity is far from obvious, biologically apparent, or inevitable; and instead has been established, policed, and reinforced by individuals and institutions according to economic and political directives.

The course begins by challenging the imagination of Blackness as an essential and eternal category through Barbara Fields's "Slavery and Race Ideology," and the introduction to Yaba Blay's *One Drop: Shifting the Lens on Race*.<sup>29</sup> By tracing the laws and practices used to determine who was defined as Black and why, these authors explore the violence through which enslaved Africans and their descendants were made into a caste apart. Faced with these texts, my students wrestle with the economic incentives that shaped how Blackness was defined and redefined in American history. Students hear, often for the first time, that the racist laws that created slavery and Jim Crow were not natural reactions to skin color differences, but instead were contingent, chosen policies to consolidate and create economic and political power. Both those students who view racism as a personality disorder akin to bullying, and the others who believe in anti-Black racism as eternal and inevitable, are challenged by this discussion of the particular construction of Blackness. After all, if racism has been constructed through law, land ownership, employment, and wealth creation, it may also be deconstructed.

As Blackness has been constructed, so has Whiteness; subsequent texts explore the invention and re-invention of Whiteness as an exclusive marker of full citizenship. One of the innovations of Whiteness Studies has been to show that a status with pretensions of permanence and inherence is anything but. Many undergraduate courses teach about "white privilege" a la Peggy McIntosh's famous "invisible knapsack" of psychosocial, economic, and political benefits, but few delve into the ways disparate groups of American have attained Whiteness. I have observed undergraduate students contemplate shifting definitions of Black identity without batting an eye, and then gape and sputter in disbelief when confronting the idea that Whiteness, *their Whiteness*, may have been

questioned at some other time in US history. The essays from Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno's *Are Italians White: How Race is Made in America* and excerpts from Matthew Frye Jacobsen's *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*, are necessarily and powerfully disorienting for European American students who declare—sometimes with regret, other times with pride— their Whiteness as an incontrovertible fact.

The third episode of the PBS documentary *Race: The Power of an Illusion* reveals the U.S. Supreme Court as a site in which Whiteness was constructed and policed. Two court cases, *Ozawa v. United States* (1922) and *U.S. v. Bhagat Singh Thind* (1923), reveal the machinations of legal racecraft. Both Takao Ozawa, a Japanese American, and Bhagat Singh Thind, an Indian American, were denied U.S. citizenship because the Supreme Court declared them ineligible for naturalization under the 1906 law that made race a factor in citizenship. The Court used the scientific racism of the day to argue that Takao Ozawa was not Caucasian and thus not White, but balked when Bhagat Singh Thind sought to use scientific racism to argue that he, too, was White. Thind presented evidence connecting "Indo-Aryan" languages and cultures of South Asia to Europe and claimed, with the support of scientific authorities, that he was of "pure Aryan blood." The US Supreme Court quickly abandoned the logic of scientific racism when it seemed it could be used to pry open the boundaries of Whiteness; Thind might very well be Aryan, the Court concluded, but he could never be White because the "common White man" would never recognize him as such. The PBS film is particularly useful because it carries the discussion of Whiteness up to the present day by showing how housing and geographical segregation in the post-World War II era continue to transfer and allocate benefits along racial lines, and thus consolidate White identities.

The next set of readings explores the racialization of Native American identity in US history. M. Annette Jaimes's *Sand Creek: The Morning After* describes the genocidal consequences of settler colonialism and manifest destiny; Eva Garrouette's *Real Indians* considers the history of the blood quantum standard and the role of the US federal government in delimiting the substance and boundaries of American Indian identity. Exposing the perverse logic of a federal government that embraced the one-drop rule for African American populations and the opposite logic of blood quantum to Native American communities leads to a fruitful conversation about why, in the words of indigenous scholar Jack Forbes, modern Americans are "always finding 'blacks' even if they look rather un-African, and are always losing 'Indians.'"<sup>30</sup> Confronting settler colonialism and the economic value of the narrative of Native American disappearance propels students beyond the Black-White dyad and leads them to confront the breadth of racial injustice in the American story by connecting, not only comparing, different histories of racialization.

Considering Asian Americans as a racialized group is particularly important for Millennials who have been fed a steady diet of Asian exceptionalism suggesting that the

diverse immigrant communities from Asia and their descendants have no place in the hue and cry of US racial history. Stacey J. Lee's research interrogates how the model minority stereotype obscures histories and experiences of difference within the expansive community racialized as "Asian" in America.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, Natsu Taylor Saito's "Model Minority, Yellow Peril: Functions of Foreignness in the Construction of Asian American Legal Identity" highlights a history of legal and social exclusion against Asian immigrant communities, and the economic, cultural, and social anxieties entangled in contemporary stereotypes of Asian Americans.<sup>32</sup> Featuring the movie *Yuri Kochiyama: Passion for Justice*, this section invites students into a discussion about anti-racist solidarity, respectability politics, and the hidden heroes of the civil rights era. For my diverse students, analyzing the life and politics of an Asian American woman activist is a new experience, one that may lead them to confront their own assumptions and stereotypes.

The second section of the RaceSyllabus explores how race ideology shifts across geographical space. Considering how race is understood and defined differently across national borders is perhaps the most effective way for students to perceive the limitation of racial frameworks hitherto perceived as inevitable or universal. A unit on the racialization and displacement of Australia's aboriginal communities explores the racial legacy of settler colonialism beyond the USA. The history of indigenous people, racialized as barbarous "blackfellas" is an important point of comparison to US history. Rolf De Heer's 2002 film *The Tracker*, coupled with teaching about the Australian Freedom Rides, the Wave Hill Walk Off, and the *Bring Them Home Report*, invite students to consider that although settler colonialism, racialization, and resistance are global phenomenon, the consequences have been different in various locales.<sup>33</sup>

Next, readings about the Dominican Republic (DR) introduce students to the complexity of national racial regimes forged in the interstices of local and global histories. The DR, with its intricate and complicated system of classification based on phenotype, wealth, and status, is only intelligible within a longer history of Spanish imperialism, in relation to neighboring Haiti's unparalleled history of slave revolution, and with an understanding of both dictator Rafael Trujillo's political violence and the lopsided regional economy that gave rise to the Washington Consensus. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s film *Race in Latin America*, coupled with Ernesto Sagas's "A Case of Mistaken Identity: Antihaitianismo in the D.R.," introduces students both to the difference created by Dominican nineteenth- and twentieth-century history and more recent political events shaping how race is used for nation-building among Dominicans both at home and abroad.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, selections from Mohammed Adhikari's seminal text, *Burdened By Race: Coloured Identities in Southern Africa*, explores the centrality and modalities of racialization in South African apartheid, particularly the political, economic, social, and psychological consequences of the creation of a "Coloured" class. Together these texts reveal the global proportions of the race dilemma and its rootedness in particular national and regional histories. The

inclusion of a few readings illuminating the transnational production of racialized consciousness, such as Evelyn Yakano-Glenn's "Yearning for Lightness," about the global market for skin lightening agents, and L. Ayu Saraswati's "Malu," about the impact of migration, colonialism, and globalization on colorism in Indonesia, allow students to consider the ways national racial regimes are often influenced by and constitutive of a broader globalized modernity which holds and transmits particular values about racial difference.<sup>35</sup>

When I teach the RaceSyllabus I pair the readings above with a culminating oral history project that urges students to take their critical lens on race and race-making from the realm of text and apply it in the world. In this project, students seek to understand the multiple factors (historical, geographic, familial, etc.) that have shaped a single individual's understanding of racial difference and racial identity. By choosing an elder over the age of 55—developing a set of questions designed to uncover how a person's consciousness about the nature, boundaries, and experience of race has been formed and transformed, asking the questions and listening for the answers, and finally, analyzing the stories, silences, stereotypes, convictions, fears, advice, and assumptions that arise in the space between the interviewee and interviewer—students begin to utilize, parse, challenge, and test the analytical value of the RaceSyllabus's expanding understanding of race in their own community. In considering the local, national, and international events, familial dynamics, sociological scripts, and cultural frameworks that have shaped the racial consciousness of diverse individuals, students step firmly outside the common-sense understanding of race as skin color and biology.

## Disorientation and Exorcism

In this section, I offer some preliminary thoughts about the RaceSyllabus's impact on undergraduate students of African descent (African American, Afro-Latinx, Caribbean American, and first generation African students). These are students of diverse backgrounds racialized as Black within the US political, social, and economic order. There is abundant research and discussion on the benefits accrued by White students who attend classes that challenge the status quo's centering of Whiteness as universal.<sup>36</sup> However, what do classes on race offer "those [students] most marginalized by structures of race, gender, sexuality, and capitalism"?<sup>37</sup> The scholarly inattention to Black-identified students' experience of race pedagogy is part of a deeper silence on the intellectual trajectories of students of color (apart from graduation rates, grade point averages, etc.) within American universities.<sup>38</sup> Emerging from my experiences as a college instructor and previously as an undergraduate and graduate student, the observations below are a step toward closing this gap.

Undergraduate courses about race in predominantly White institutions are often geared to an assumed European American audience that needs to be cajoled, persuaded, and educated about the reality of racial

discrimination and urged toward greater inclusion.<sup>39</sup> In these courses Black students are expected to function as expert and authentic voices that bring to life and affirm the insights of the instructor. The “good Black student” offers anecdotes that confirm the presence of racism and assist the instructor in bringing the good news to her classmates. There are many problems with this model, the first being that many students of color harbor, believe, and repeat the Eurocentric dictums that are pervasive in our collective national culture.<sup>40</sup> Expecting Black students to act as surrogate experts by dint of their assumed experience often does not result in significant analytical growth for the students placed in the spotlight nor the class as a whole. This is also a problem because Black students are, essentially, paying for a class where their bodies and lives are being used as supplementary texts. They are often not given the privilege of acting as students in these classes and instead are required and/or burdened to keep the class in check by sharing their stories, displaying their anger and/or tears, or by being calming presences at the appropriate time.<sup>41</sup> In these classes, Black students’ labor goes unrecognized and is often misunderstood as leadership. Moreover, they are given neither a curriculum nor the intellectual space to grow in their understanding of racial injustice. Black students’ educational needs may be “rendered invisible” in classes supposedly focused on race and injustice.<sup>42</sup>

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The RaceSyllabus veers away from this model where Black students are expected to function as the resident experts. The syllabus is intellectually destabilizing, by design, for all students. Including sociological, literary, historical texts about the African American, Native American, European American, and Asian American experiences *in the same course* disrupts the dynamic where Black students are expected/allowed to “know it all” and to lead White students toward greater understanding. The average undergraduate student, of any background, does not enter the class understanding the nuances of how race has been constituted and reconstituted; they have not yet contemplated the importance of the New Orleans exception to the rule of hypodescent or the importance of the Sand Creek Massacre and its relation to the blood quantum racialization of American Indian communities. They have not yet been taught about the relationship between Takao Ozawa’s Supreme Court case and the Japanese-American Internment, or the relationship between the model minority myth and the obstacles to anti-racist solidarity. This breadth is not a matter of including different voices; it is a necessary part of tracing the complexity of how race functions as a national ideology in the USA. This intellectual disorientation is often

necessary when inviting students into a posture of learning.

For some Black students it may initially be disconcerting to participate in a race class where they are not expected to serve as co-teachers. For others, denaturalizing the racial identities that are second skin for all of us in the USA carries with it psychic risk. This teaching that Blackness, too, has been artificially constructed may seem to trivialize what many of us know—that Black identity and community has been as a balm in Gilead, a way to survive and thrive despite atrocity. The admixture of struggle, genius, joy, and strength that Black communities have called heritage is a sacred patrimony that we, living in hostile climates, would be foolish to deconstruct away.<sup>43</sup> We must not overlook the possibility that racecraft, like witchcraft, has different purposes; that which kills may also cure.

Black identity has, historically, existed in excess of the violence that it justified. Forming a *race*, a community out of the linguistically, culturally, religiously disparate peoples in the hold of a schooner traversing the Atlantic Ocean’s Middle Passage was a means to preserve culture, assert humanity, and survive a hostile and violent New World.<sup>44</sup> While European American slave society was busy creating Blackness as the epitome of inferiority through laws and practices of terror, enslaved persons were also forging Blackness as a way to pursue that which had been lost: the home place. Blackness is simultaneously a “concept [that] originated from without,” and a concept that racialized communities transform in ways that threatened the very foundations of the host society.<sup>45</sup> The mantra of race-as-social-construction rarely takes into account the way that Blackness has been co-created, differently, by those who would oppress and those who would be free. When Black students are asked to deconstruct the framework of race, it may appear to them as a rejection of the solidity of Black identity and Black community.

However, the exorcism initiated by the RaceSyllabus—this process of holding our national categories at arm’s length and worrying the painful patchwork of how and why communities have been racialized-- does not require that we valorize a future that is disconnected from the past. Discarding the biological myth of race need not be a step toward the regressive popular ideology known as colorblindness. The colorblind ideal champions a baffling notion that ignoring a history of racial violence and its many legacies will somehow make racism disappear. On the contrary, exorcising racecraft requires that we plunge deeper into our history in order to understand exactly how, when, and why race has been marshaled for various political, economic, and social ends. Yes, realizing that these identities are not biological or divine is disorienting; it is also an opportunity to consider how and why race remains so powerful today, both as a site of discrimination and a source of resistance. What, pray tell, is the genetic relationship between the descendants of Khoi-San peoples in South Africa, Nigerian immigrants living in Houston, and an African American man who traces his roots to Florida’s indigenous and enslaved populations? All are Black in America and will be treated as such by their health care providers, teachers, and police officers. This is how the

RaceSyllabus finds its footing with Black students. As students become disoriented from a common-sense identification with Blackness, they have the chance to articulate that which they have always known: that there are clear limits to the vision of community rooted in this thing called race. In classrooms like mine which often represent the breadth of the African diaspora, the idea of singular Black culture dissolves under the lightest pressure. Considering what remains of racial identity once the biological myth is discarded, students begin to consider Blackness as an identity that is chosen by society and individuals in the past and present, for disparate ends. Moving from the framework of race as inevitable towards the realization of race as historically created allows students to perceive how race is still being made and remade in their own lives.

I have observed the value of this reassessment among Black students who enter the class burdened under an avalanche of statistics about Black failure (overrepresentation in prisons, the “achievement gap,” the “wealth gap,” HIV/AIDS rates, etc.) that are presented without any concurrent discussion about racism.<sup>46</sup> For Black youth, the impact of this barrage of disparity statistics may be a sneaking suspicion that there is something fundamentally lacking or broken about their families, their communities, or themselves. Ibram X. Kendi has recently traced the longevity and persistence of ideas claiming that racial inequality is based on Black pathology and the diverse, multiracial, and multicultural interlocutors who continue to espouse “cunning, close-minded and captivating” ideas of racial inferiority.<sup>47</sup> Illuminating racecraft by shining a light on the social, economic, and physical violence which has previously been misconstrued as nature and biology is crucial for all students, but it may be particularly empowering for those Black students who often suffer the psychic costs of our national mythology of racial difference.

## Conclusion

This essay is based on the premise that undermining the American myth of race as biology and destiny remains necessary labor. I have described the contents of a RaceSyllabus that explores first the instrumentality of race in US history and, second, the difference in how race is understood in various nations and communities. These two teaching points, taken together, are remarkably effective in dislodging the common-sense understanding of race as an inherent category of human difference. The RaceSyllabus reveals the pervasiveness of racecraft; it is geared toward diverse students who believe that the prevailing racial categories, the boxes we check on federal forms, are something other than the artifacts and evidence of a national history of racial genocide, violence, and exclusion.

Following Fields and Fields’s delineation of racecraft as the practices and beliefs used to produce and reproduce this myth of race as biology and destiny, I describe the work of the syllabus as an exorcism. Humans may have invented race but it is an ideology which now seems to possess *us*, making of our minds a prison and a mockery of our best intentions. Carrying with it a judgment about the

malignancy of the unexamined race framework, the language of exorcism speaks to the harm associated with the race framework, and also of the need to battle this affliction in multiple realms.

After all, ours is a country which assigns wildly disparate opportunities and challenges to infants of different racialized communities and then spends endless resources and time wringing our hands, seeking to locate pathology in the communities which are negatively racialized, and stubbornly averting our eyes from our institutions (criminal justice, education, land access, media, housing, etc.) that ensure that groups racialized as inferior have violent experiences of citizenship. The lack of public outcry about accelerating school resegregation, about the prison industrial complex, or about charter schools that suggest that poor Black and Brown students may access quality education as a matter of lottery, is perhaps the clearest evidence of our prevailing belief that different communities deserve different life trajectories.

Exorcizing racecraft is a dis-possession; casting out racial essentialism requires casting *off* particular ways of seeing, understanding, and moving through the world. There is a loss for those who seek to think and live apart from the folk religion of race; “either you must pay the epistemic price of failing to encode certain sorts of base-rate or background information about cultural categories, or you must expend epistemic energy regulating the inevitable associations to which that information... gives rise.”<sup>48</sup> Rejecting racecraft requires that we live in a state of non-alignment with our national political and social order; there are costs to seeing and living outside the race-tinted lenses of our national collective vision. And yet, every spring semester, I vigorously teach the RaceSyllabus because I believe that this exorcism and the accompanying disorientation and non-alignment are emancipatory for diverse students. Those who would dream of a world beyond racial violence must first be able to see through race.

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# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## The Writing Program Administrator as Interstitial Radical

by Frank Farmer



ASSORTED ZINES, IMAGE COURTESY OF AUTHOR

From the summer of 2013 through the summer of 2016, I served as our English Department's Writing Program Administrator (WPA), a position that bears the local title Director of First and Second Year English (FSE). This title is an inheritance of sorts, since historically our department has had a three-course writing requirement—English 101 and 102 for first-year students, plus one of several literary genre course options for students at the second-year level. Until recently, this model has been remarkably stable, changing very little over the last three decades. But in the aftermath of the economic collapse of 2008-2009, and the university's decision to revise curricular requirements ("The KU Core"), our program was fundamentally restructured. Moreover, the lengthening shadow of curtailed state funding for public education, along with decreasing enrollments in English and the Humanities, as well as the concerted push for students to enter the STEM disciplines—in the context of all these factors, and more, I began my tenure as WPA at the University of Kansas.

To be clear, I do not claim that my predicament was in any way unique or unusual. Many of my colleagues at other institutions were working within the same dire circumstances and were also faced with the task of designing and administering their own writing programs in the midst of less than fortuitous conditions. But I do want to share how, in an admittedly prosaic way, I tried to oppose what I saw as the increasing corporatization of the academy, and the fostering of values in students that were meant to serve the interests of neoliberal orthodoxies. Though my efforts were hardly earth shattering, I offer here a curricular tactic by which I hoped to acquaint students with the sorts of writing that may have little to do with their future careers, but, in my view, a great deal to do with their participation in a fuller democratic life. To be precise, I sought to introduce them to what was, for most, an unfamiliar discourse—an unofficial, extracurricular, discourse—that stood (and stands) foursquare against the commonplace politics and norms of our times, but which, I believe, offers a needed perspective on how some writing can dispute routinized, settled points of view. In a word, I introduced them to the outsider discourse of *zines*.

I will explain my reasons for doing so a bit later. But for now, I wish to acknowledge an obvious reality faced by WPAs as we perform our duties—namely, that trying to get outside of, or beyond, the institutional demands of WPA work so as to obtain a larger perspective on what we do is a daunting aspiration at best. Nonetheless, I want to suggest that it is both possible and necessary to achieve this larger perspective, especially if we hope to foster the values of critical citizenship and social justice for our students, even as such virtues are increasingly discredited by our institutions and the culture at large. One of the ways we can do so is by adopting certain extracurricular genres into our standard curricula—specifically, and by design, genres that offer alternative perspectives and values, "slants on the world," that question the reigning orthodoxies of our day, the most disturbing of which, in my view, is the, systemic privatization of higher education. To oppose the inexorable trend of what has been called neoliberal "creep" seems quixotic at best and hopeless at

worst. As the collective authors of the recent *Indianapolis Resolution* observed, while "faculty have long lamented the effects of neoliberal ideology," we have "offered little more than handwringing as we witness its direct effects" (Cox, Dougherty, et al., 41). Therefore, to stand opposed to the neoliberal "drift of things," we will likely find ourselves having to cultivate democratic opposition in unexpected, innocuous, and often unnoticed ways.<sup>1</sup>

## The Quietly Resistant Among Us

Those who direct or administer writing programs know all too well that their decisions, their policies, their initiatives, as well as the everyday, routine duties they perform must, of necessity, occur within the context of institutional values already decided by a campus office or committee, a department or college, a dean or provost, an existing policy or directive, and, most intimidating perhaps, a body of institutional traditions. Into this mix of competing values, many WPAs must try to locate their own agency, aware that the values that best express their social commitments, as well as their personal and professional judgments, will likely chafe with the values that were firmly in place before the individual WPA arrived. And implied by that challenge is the related but far more profound question of whose values shall prevail.

In her much noted organizational study, *Tempered Radicals: How Everyday Leaders Inspire Change at Work*, Debra Myerson investigates how workplace employees oppose "top down" values occurring within institutional structures that are not particularly hospitable to alternate or "bottom up" points of view. Those employees who challenge "top down" values do so at some risk, and the more radically inclined, in fact, may find themselves having to temper their activities, silence their voices. Elaborating upon the work of Myerson, three educational researchers—Adrianna Kezar, Tricia Bertram Gallant, and Jaime Lester conducted a recent study of how faculty and staff at "five typical institutions of higher education" initiated grassroots changes at their schools (135). Like Myerson, the researchers conducted structured interviews with faculty and staff to determine, among other things, the "tactics and strategies for creating change," as well as how participants enacted strategies for "navigating power and internal conflicts" (136). What the authors found was that while administrators and other "top-down leaders tend to focus on revenue generation, accountability, and prestige seeking," those who work from the bottom up tend to "focus more on pedagogical changes, access, and student support." Those who work at the grassroots level usually "act as the conscience of the organization," lending needed balance to the "corporate, revenue/prestige seeking model of top-down leadership" (131). The authors make a distinction, however, between "grassroots leaders" and "tempered radicals," claiming that tempered radicals have a wider range of options available to them, options that "fall on a continuum from [individuals] resisting quietly . . . to organizing collective action" (134). Regardless, it should come as no surprise that the *most* "tempered" radicals are those whose actions are the *least* visible, and intentionally

so, because they fear “backlash” and the possible loss of their jobs.

What remains unaddressed in this discussion is the ambiguous position of certain lower echelon administrators—i.e., the many writing program administrators occupying managerial positions, who not only administer writing programs, but also train and supervise new teachers, teach their own classes, and, in most cases, are expected to turn out publishable research and scholarship. The scholars mentioned above—Myerson, Kezar, et al—make a fairly strict division between rank and file faculty and administration, but where WPAs are concerned, that division may not be so well defined. Indeed, the liminal situation of most writing program administrators raises the question of whether WPAs could legitimately qualify as tempered radicals too.

Casey Fedukovich believes they can. Taking as her starting point Henry Giroux’s 2013 Conference on College Composition and Communication (4Cs) address, Fedukovich thinks that WPAs can, in some measure, answer Giroux’s call to oppose the “neoliberal takeover of higher education” and the Academy’s unabashed promotion of such capitalist values as “efficiency, bottom line profit, and top-down decision making,” all of which have a determinative effect on the issue of central importance to Fedukovich, the hiring and working conditions of contingent faculty. On this issue especially, “WPAs are often caught in a middle managerial double bind. Charged as resource managers and responsive to top-down demands,” Fedukovich argues, “they are both powerless against and definitionally complicit in unethical hiring practices” (112-13). In light of such a double bind, how could WPAs possibly exercise the kind of resistance that Giroux and others have called for? How could they possibly be “tempered radicals” given their institutional placement and the demands of their job duties?

Fedukovich’s answer to this dilemma is to find a model for “programmatic resistance” in the actions of Occupy Wall Street. What she finds most hopeful in the Occupy movement is that its participants embodied “prefigurative practices” (113), practices which, in the words of David Graeber, aspired to “build a new society in the shell of the old” (qtd. in Fedukovich, 113). After reviewing our discipline’s historical efforts to remedy the exploitive labor practices upon which composition instruction has depended, she concludes, “WPAs should approach prefiguration cautiously” (123). Among other things, she argues for a rejection of the “culture of oversight (shared syllabi, common texts, and occluded or top-down review and appeals processes)” for a model that favors an emphasis on scholarly production—this, as but one way to model the kind of inclusive professionalism that might encourage others to see non-tenure track faculty as actual colleagues in the same profession, rather than mere staff (128). The author ends with one final suggestion, namely, that WPAs ought to encourage networks of peer mentors, even if those networks are organized outside the university or operate as an underground affiliation within it. Even though she concedes, “WPAs cannot change national trends in contingent labor,” she does maintain that they can still effect piecemeal changes that anticipate (or

prefigure) more just arrangements within our programs, our departments, our universities (129). The WPA as tempered radical is a figure who, despite formidable limits and restraints, can make modest but important changes in the “business as usual” routines of writing program administration.

I look upon my WPA experience as one where I performed quietly resistant work, where, in a variety of benign and mostly unnoticed ways, I challenged the tacitly endorsed orthodoxies of the neoliberal academy. In other words, following Fedukovich, I thought of myself as a tempered radical. But that title seems, in some ways, incomplete. I therefore wish to extend Fedukovich by suggesting that WPAs ought to be regarded not merely as tempered radicals, but as *interstitial radicals* as well. Fedukovich’s term names a condition WPAs face resulting from the constraints upon the nature of the work they are required to do. My elaboration of her term identifies, in a general way, the potential spaces where tempered radicals might best perform acts of resistance. What, then, does it mean to do work in the interstices?

## Ruptural, Symbiotic, Interstitial: Three Models for Institutional Change

In his comprehensive study of present-day capitalism, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, Erik Olin Wright advances three frameworks for understanding social change—or more exactly, three models for transforming currently oppressive conditions into something better than what we now have. The first is what he calls *ruptural transformation*. This might also be called the “clean break” model, a tactic that argues for a complete structural overhaul of the way things presently are. For obvious reasons, this model is closely aligned with traditions of revolutionary change (Marxist or not), and its method is usually one of direct confrontation, though it can accommodate more surreptitious forms of actions as well. For academics to choose this model is to imagine, and to work for, a fundamentally different university than the one we now have—and by implication, a fundamentally different conception of writing programs than the ones presently available. The most glaring drawback of this model is its utter improbability. Just as it is hard to imagine a widespread socialist uprising against the neoliberal policies that currently define American democracy, it is likewise hard to imagine a completely new academy (or writing program) realized through collective action. Or perhaps I should qualify my claim by adding that such a possibility is far easier to imagine than to realize.

But a second model is proffered as well. Wright calls this framework one of *symbiotic transformation*. This is the “working within the system” strategy, and it is a familiar one because it best aligns with the give and take of liberal democracies. Needless to say, such a model would reject as completely unrealistic the wholesale revamping of the neoliberal university and instead would seek to alter the neoliberal university by advocating for incremental gains and piecemeal reforms when and where possible. It embraces an unabashedly gradualist model, and it is one that most WPAs are familiar with, since the practices and

circumstances of our duties require that we work within this model, that is to say, that we “work within the system.” No doubt, some of us are quite comfortable performing our tasks within a symbiotic framework, since many of us are already used to doing so. But for many others, subscribing to this model is deeply troubling and unsatisfying since it renders us complicit in exploitive practices and, more generally, implies an endorsement of the neoliberal practices that guide the present-day university.

In a larger sense, the symbiotic model is certainly vulnerable to other criticisms. There are no assurances, for example, that progressive victories once achieved will last. The neoliberal rollback of social “safety net” programs, here and elsewhere, is a reminder of the effacing power of global capitalism, what David Harvey refers to as “accumulation by dispossession” (159-65). A second criticism is that negotiated, “marginal victories” do little to “fundamentally challenge elite domination,” and thus end up perpetuating systemic inequities, even while altering this or that injustice in piecemeal fashion (Mattern 4). Finally, to work within a symbiotic model of change may come at a very high price. Even a casual observer of our current political scene is aware that seldom do good arguments win the day, seldom are enlightened policies the result of rational debate and deliberation. Rather, as Mark Mattern points out, efficacy within our liberal democratic system more typically requires “negative campaigning, dissimulation, lies, half-truths, and pandering . . . resulting in widespread cynicism, distrust and enmity against public leaders, and deep, often hostile fractures separating members of the public from each other” (4). Mattern’s observation may be overstated, but it would be hard to deny that these features are not only characteristic of American politics, but, to some extent, are discernible in university politics too.

What then can be done? Are there any other options available by which to resist what seems to be the overwhelming hegemony of neoliberal orthodoxies that presently shape political and institutional life?

***Interstitial work can thus easily go unnoticed because interstitial tactics frequently (though not always) happen in “out of the way” spaces and moments, any of which might sow the seeds for emancipatory change in the future.***

Wright mentions a third model of change, what he names *interstitial transformation*. This “tactical” model occurs in the nooks and crannies, the breaks and cracks of the dominant order, since, as Wright maintains, every dominant order, every regime, will have its existing gaps, as well as its opportunities to create new ones. It is within such openings, whether found or made, that the interstitial activist seeks to discover new forms of relations, new possibilities distinct from the ones imposed on society and its institutions by neoliberalism. Interstitial work can

thus easily go unnoticed because interstitial tactics frequently (though not always) happen in “out of the way” spaces and moments, any of which might sow the seeds for emancipatory change in the future. In its more visible manifestations, Wright lists worker and consumer co-ops, battered women’s shelters, intentional communities, communes, civic environmental councils, and so on as illustrations of interstitial alternatives. (324). And while Wright does not discuss less public interstitial work, he does seem to allow that interstitial work could assume various forms and modes of expression. As Mattern points out, interstitial work might include DIY Punk music, poetry slams, graffiti and street art, and flash mobs. (To such forms, of course, it would be easy to add other modes of semiotic reappropriation, modes such as *dérive*, culture jamming, hacking, guerilla art, etc.) Ultimately, though, what all forms of interstitial activity have in common, according to Wright, is the “idea of building alternative institutions and deliberately fostering new forms of social relations that embody emancipatory ideals and that are created primarily through direct action . . . rather than through the state” (324). Such is why the politics of interstitial activity is, as noted above, typically referred to as *prefigurative*—idealistic, rooted in social hope, anticipating a future when interstitial activities would not be needed in the first place.

As with ruptural and symbiotic models, the interstitial transformation is vulnerable to criticism as well. Traditional Marxist critics see it as a retreat or abdication of sorts, posing “no serious challenge to existing relations of power and domination (326).” Rather, Marxist critics would argue, it tends to “siphon” off radical “discontent,” converting otherwise revolutionary energies into niches, lifestyles, and alternative communities (326). Wright notes that this Marxist argument would be compelling were it not for the fact that “capitalism is sufficiently secure and flexible in its structures that there is no strategy possible that immediately threatens it” (327). It cannot provide a satisfactory answer to the question, “What can be done here and now?”—a question I often asked myself as a new WPA.<sup>2</sup>

In the section to follow, I will describe my efforts as a tempered, interstitial radical to acquaint several hundred incoming students with an avowedly oppositional discourse—the self-published, contentious, quirky, unprofessional, and provocative genre of the *zine*, and the DIY politics that finds expression in zine texts. To be sure, not all zines are explicitly political in their themes and content, though some are socialist in outlook, and many more promote an anarchist ethos that is reflective of their DIY inheritance. Other zines deal with issues related to gender, mental illness, transgender identity, economic justice, Black Lives Matter, while still others are highly personal, artistic, or simply whimsical. But is important to understand that zine politics can never be reduced to the content of any particular zine. Because zines emerged out of underground or alternative subcultures, they express a certain politics even when they seem not to. And the politics they express is one decidedly at odds with officialdom and its institutions, including the university.

## Local WPA Goes DIY

What happens when a writing program administrator decides to incorporate a unit on zine making in a common syllabus for new teachers? Where are the challenges to be overcome if such a unit is to be successful? Where does the WPA go to provide resources for new teachers, as well as resources for those teachers' students? In the following pages, I want to address the problems encountered when, as a new WPA, I designed a common syllabus for a class of new teachers at the University of Kansas, a public institution, like many others, struggling to weather the realities of decreased state funding and decreased



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enrollments, especially in the Humanities. The syllabus I designed was composed of four units. The first unit asked our English 101 students to make their own zines, and then to provide an accompanying rationale for the choices that went into their zines; the second unit asked students to perform a rhetorical analysis of a visual text; a third unit asked students to compose a multimodal project of their choice—a podcast, video, poster, brochure, in-class performance, public service announcement, etc.; and a final unit asked them to revise what they produced in one of the three previous units.

But an obvious question immediately presents itself: How is it that I would need to design a common syllabus in the first place? A little background might be instructive at this point.

When I assumed the leadership of our department's composition program, I was charged with a number of varied responsibilities, foremost among which was the training and preparation of new graduate teaching assistants. While some of our new teaching assistants bring with them Writing Center experience, and while some arrive having had coursework in composition theory and research, very few have any actual experience in the teaching of writing. Thus, to prepare new teachers to teach, we require them to attend a four-day orientation session occurring in the week immediately prior to the beginning of the semester, after which they are required to attend a once-weekly practicum wherein they discuss shared challenges, problems, occasional crises, successes, and "teachable moments" as the semester proceeds. Moreover, new teachers who have no prior familiarity with composition studies are required to take our English 801 course, a broad introduction to the field and its best instructional practices.

Our program requires a common syllabus, then, because we want to insure that course goals are reflected in what actually occurs in our classrooms. But on a more practical level, we want to relieve new teachers of the burden of having to author their own syllabus—a reasonable accommodation, we think, especially when so few have had previous experience in composing *any* syllabus. If I may hazard a broad observation, it is usually the case that our new teachers are extremely grateful that someone else is providing them with a common syllabus from which to teach. As the semester proceeds, though, they become less enamored of the common syllabus, and often express the wish to design their own class. This, we think, is as it should be, and in subsequent semesters, they do indeed write their own syllabi.

How was it, then, that I decided to include an opening unit on zines? The answer to that question should not really be all that surprising. Because zines originate in subcultural milieus, and because alternative communities form around zines, it seemed obvious to me zines embodied a critical literacy of a particular sort—to be sure, a literacy that is not always acknowledged or esteemed by others as a literacy, but a critical literacy nonetheless. Additionally, since my own scholarship had taken a public turn, I became very interested in looking upon zine cultures and communities as a kind of public—to be exact, an exemplary *counterpublic*, at least in the ways that term gets defined by Nancy Fraser and later redefined by Michael Warner. Not that this was an original insight. Michelle Comstock and a few other scholars had previously alluded to zines as a counterpublic, but none had spent much time developing that idea. Nonetheless, at the time I became the WPA for our program, I had already been immersed in zine writing and zine culture. I read zines and zine scholarship; I became friends with local and regional zinesters; I attended zine festivals; I gave a talk at the christening of our local "zinemobile," and I made my own zine. And since I take seriously the venerable injunction that our research should inform our teaching, I took this directive one step further, and extended it to say that not only should our research inform our teaching, but it should also inform the ways we administer our writing programs.



grades? For my teachers, and for myself, these issues remained unresolved.

And how, then, did those 800 or so first-year students react to this assignment? Without a direct survey of student opinion on this specific unit, I only have two ways of answering this question—first, by what teachers anecdotally tell me and each other, and second, by what their students tell us in their end of semester course evaluations. As to the first, our teachers reported some resistance to this unit. Generally speaking, teachers believed that this resistance arose because the zine unit undercut expectations of a university writing course, and thus it was the source of considerable anxiety for some students. This resistance was often expressed by direct questions put to the teacher: “Why are you making us do these things?” “How will making a zine help my writing in my other classes?” “Couldn’t you ask us to do something more relevant to my generation?” Occasionally, students were more dismissive: “I did this in junior high; why am I doing it in college?” A few students seemed to be insulted by the assignment, but most, according to new teachers, did their best to do the assignment and to do it well. Predictably, some students did better work on their zines than their accompanying rationales, and vice versa. But a surprising number of students turned in projects where both their zines and rationales worked together effectively, in the ways that we had hoped for in our practicum. Among popular topics were the following: guides to the student’s hometown, favorite personal hobbies, profiles of best friends, “shitty roommates,” and assorted pet peeves. Some were issue oriented, some were identity oriented, and some were even a little snarky, with a healthy dose of attitude about something that mattered to the student. I liked those the best, though I can’t say our new teachers would say the same.

While the early anecdotal reports about the zine unit were not always encouraging, a somewhat different picture emerges when I looked at all end of term instructor evaluations from those who taught our 101, especially the written comments sections. Generally, as it turns out, students said they liked the zine unit and appreciated the opportunity to write in a different genre, one that asked them to take into account things they did not believe they would have to consider in their 101 course—layout and design, presentational effects, cut and paste aesthetics, multiple vocabularies within the same assignment, and so on. One reason for the more positive judgments about the zine unit, I think, is that because, at the end of the semester, students had the benefit of retrospection. Looking back on the entire course, they eventually realized how a beginning unit on zines fit well in a multimodal writing course, one that made ample use of digital texts as well as traditional ones. I like to think that anyway.

What, then, were the results of three years of teaching zines and zine making as part of a standard writing curriculum?

First, we emphasized to students that it is possible and, indeed, timely, to think of writing as making, a change in perspective appropriate not only to zines, but also to the sorts of digital texts we now routinely ask

students to make in multimodal writing courses. Because zines must be constructed, because they draw upon a variety of communicative modes, because zines force students to consider design, format, and layout as *writerly* concerns, zines hold the potential to help all of our students to see writing, at least in some aspects, as making. As writing teachers, we also discussed the scholarly relevance of zines, as evidenced by the fact that DIY is presently being reconceived through digital technologies, as evidenced by recent inquiries that explore various forms of making—craftivism, maktivism, remix, assemblage, bricolage, tinkering, and coding, in addition to widespread interest in the Maker Movement, both inside and outside of composition.

***Making, in other words, is valuable to composition instruction because it complements the recent interest in multimodal pedagogies, in writing that blends verbal, visual, sonic, tactile, gestural, sculptural, and performative expressions in any combination of two or more.***

Making, in other words, is valuable to composition instruction because it complements the recent interest in multimodal pedagogies, in writing that blends verbal, visual, sonic, tactile, gestural, sculptural, and performative expressions in any combination of two or more. Making is valuable to composition because it calls attention to writerly features that are often overlooked in traditional classrooms, especially craft, design, and format. Making is valuable to composition because it requires students to reflect upon the myriad decisions they made in composing their multimodal projects. And making is important, too, because it allows us to ask *what else gets made* when we make something? In the case of zines, we can answer that question by suggesting the obvious: that an identity gets made, a community gets made, a public (or counterpublic) gets made, and a culture (or subculture) gets made. And if those social formations don’t exactly get made from scratch, they are certainly sustained by the ongoing efforts of zine makers, students or not.

Second, by using zines in our writing classrooms, we created opportunities to raise questions about materiality, about how and in what ways materiality matters in the texts we ask our students to write. Of course, we can raise these questions without zines, but zines make such questions hard to avoid, especially when students ask such questions as, “You mean people really make these things?” As a form of semiotic remediation, the durability of zines has a great deal to do with their materiality and, in fact, some argue that the resurgence of interest in zines is a paradoxical effect of the ubiquity of digital media.

Among zine scholars, Alison Piepmeier, in particular, has written most compellingly on why zine materiality matters. Piepmeier observes that unlike blogs and other digital genres of self-publication, zines “instigate intimate, affectionate connections between their creators and

readers." Zines evoke "not just communities but *embodied* communities that are made possible by the materiality of the zine medium" (214). They willfully cultivate "vulnerability, affection, and pleasure" as desirable human qualities and thus "leverage their materiality into a kind of surrogate physical interaction" (215). One of the ways they do this is by rejecting the "slickness of the commercial mass media." On the whole, zine makers refuse to position their readers as mere "consumers, as a marketplace," opting instead to invoke them as "friends, equals, members of an embodied community . . . part of a conversation with the zine maker" (227). Such is why zines inspire what Piepmeier calls a "reciprocal materiality" (230). Readers of zines frequently (hand)write letters and notes of appreciation to their favorite zine authors, sometimes sharing their own zines with the authors they admire.

Finally, I have alluded to zines as a radical discourse, and that claim may need to be further explained. To be sure, there are plenty of zines whose pages express an anarchist, or socialist, or revolutionary point of view. Still other zines address the injustices experienced by those who inhabit racial, sexual, class, and intersectional identities. And still others, thematize the everyday and the prosaic—hometowns, favorite billboards, recipes, permaculture, musical enthusiasms, etc. The point here is that the significance of zines *cannot be reduced to the content of their pages*. All of the zines I allude to here are political. Why? Because whether any particular zine is about organized resistance, or making your own paper, or bicycle repair, or ukulele tuning, or drying your socks, it is reasonable to assert that pretty much "everything about these publications stands in material and symbolic opposition to corporate media's ownership of ideas, information and informational resources" (Farmer 49). This is why zine authors want readers, of course, but they also want readers who will, in turn, become writers, self-publishers of their own work. As zine scholar Stephen Duncombe observes, making a zine "is at once a critique of the dominant mode of passive consumer culture and something far more important: the active creation of an alternative culture" (117). While I did not ask our new teachers or their students to embrace the vernacular radicalism of zine culture as such, I did want to acquaint them with the fact that such a culture exists, and that there may be a different way of looking at the world than they ordinarily do, that there may be educational goals that surpass career training. I think it safe to say that zines offer a worldview dramatically at odds with the one cultivated and reinforced by institutions of higher education. I hoped to demonstrate that it is within the interstices of such institutions that a different kind of radicalism may be found.

## The WPA as Interstitial Radical

What conclusions might be drawn from this example? Readers would be mistaken if my example were interpreted primarily as an argument to include zines in the first year curriculum. I obviously value zines in our classrooms because they allow writing teachers to raise the kinds of

interesting questions noted above, and they encourage students to experiment with different styles, visual and textual, and allow students to write in non-academic registers that frequently reject Standard Edited English, not to mention polite word choices.

But my real purpose here is to encourage other WPAs, as well as writing scholars and teachers, to look for, and possibly create, their own nooks and crannies, their own interstices where they can oppose, however cautiously, the relentless insinuations (but unnoticed effects) of neoliberal "creep" or "drift," as universities try to grapple with the many changes foisted upon them by neoliberal ideology. A catalogue of such changes would, no doubt, include the shift from public to private funding of universities (and the tuition increases that result from legislative retrenchment); the ongoing exploitation of contingent labor; the student debt crisis; the technological "outsourcing" of the curriculum; a rapacious testing industry (and the textbook publishers that profit from it); the increasing enthusiasm for competency-based education (Gallagher); and, in the midst of our austerity, the swelling of administrative ranks even as we curtail the employment of adjunct faculty, what Benjamin Ginsberg calls the "administrative blight" of the university (2).

Who, then, could dispute the fact that insofar as WPA work goes, "neoliberal values encroach upon writing instruction." As Sheri Stenberg observes, "once we endorse a "view of education as job training, writing becomes a masterable, commodified skill whose purpose is deployment in the workplace" (8). To be sure, it would be hard to fault students, parents, and our institutions for wanting to help our students find "good jobs" or "satisfying careers" once they graduate. But we can (and I obviously think we must) oppose the view that this is the *sole* (and only legitimate) reason for acquiring an education. For in endorsing that view, we do a terrible disservice to our students. We abdicate what we know to be true, namely that writing can (and must) change the world. By limiting our understanding of what we do, or what we are expected to do, we do not acquaint our students with all of those "other purposes for writing—civic engagement, personal inquiry, exploration of other perspectives," to name just a few (8).

The zine unit I describe above tries to encompass some of these "other purposes." To be clear, I did not desire all first year students to become zinesters, or to join DIY communities, or to subscribe to radical views about politics, economics, art, education, and so on. But I did want them to ask questions about the kinds of communities that embrace an oppositional identity, that resist conventional versions of what defines "success" or "the good life," and that make zines to express a worldview not typically found in university curricula.

Thus, by introducing students to such zines as Alex Wreck's classic, *Stolen Sharpie Revolution*, students receive a comprehensive overview of zine culture, zine politics, and zine making. By introducing them to Ayun Halliday's *East Village Inky*, students witness how the "scrappy messiness" of zine design complements the "wandering, digressive narrative" of Halliday's trademark

style (Piepmeier 222). By introducing them to Cindy Crabb's, *Doris*, students glimpse how the intimate, the personal can be melded with an issue-oriented politics of gender roles, sexuality, anarchism, and mental health. By asking students to make their own zines, then, I hoped I might provide an occasion for students to come to know a kind of writing very different than the formal, academic writing they would do later in this course and, quite likely, in all of their other courses.<sup>4</sup>

But was this curricular innovation a revolutionary act? No—or rather at best, only incipiently so. I did not urge others to organize or take collective action as either a precondition or desired effect of my zine unit. Moreover, I did not seek a confrontational politics, nor did I assume one would be needed to teach this unit. I simply wanted to introduce a large number of first year students to a culture, a worldview, a politics, as well as an ensemble of perspectives that they would not encounter otherwise. It was (and remains) important to me that students be exposed to values that run counter to the ubiquitous, institutionally endorsed values that routinely go unchallenged. It was (and remains) important to me to heed Henry Giroux's call to oppose, wherever and whenever we might, the "neoliberal takeover of higher education," even if doing so means working in the cracks and fissures, in the interstices of the writing programs whose leadership we assume.

## Roots and Rhizomes: A Concluding Suggestion

If I have characterized zines an example of interstitial radicalism, it is fair to ask what sort of radicalism is this? How could "interstitial radicalism" be anything more than an oxymoron? After all, what, to be precise, is so radical about actions performed in the cracks and fissures, in the gaps and breaks of a dominant order?

In discussions that aim to define radicalism, it is often the case that the etymology of the word *radical* is set forth, referencing the origins of that word from the medieval Latin meaning "having roots" or "going to the origin."<sup>5</sup> The root metaphor suggests a number of resonances that complement our present understanding of radicalism. The root metaphor, for example, points to an origin that "lies beneath," and thus suggests that to find the authentic source of something (or anything, or everything), we must always "dig deeper." We must turn the ground to reveal the unseen so that we may apprehend something more fundamental than that which is immediately apparent before us. When we do this, we will see how roots and their outgrowths—trees, vegetation, flora, etc.—make up a highly complex system, only a portion of which is visible to us at any given time or in any given place. By elaborating this metaphor, it becomes apparent why the root metaphor is a congenial and useful one to invoke when describing political radicalism.

But all metaphors have limits and possibilities, and this one is no exception. In some recent critical theory—most

famously, Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*—the root metaphor is disputed by a rhizomatic one. The authors argue that so much of received thought, especially Western thought, ensues from assumptions discovered in what they call "arborescent culture" (15), with the tree as its central and dominant symbol. Distinct from rhizomatic growth, with its tubers and bulbs, its lateral offshoots and unpredictable new starts, its emergent "stems and filaments" (15), the tree remains the dominant emblem of hierarchy, stability, continuity, and the eschewal of multiplicities. Not surprisingly, Deleuze and Guattari discuss the social and political meanings of tree culture. "It is odd," the authors observe, "how the tree has dominated Western reality and all of Western thought, from botany to biology and anatomy, but also gnosiology, theology, ontology, all of philosophy . . ." (18). In keeping with this claim, I want to suggest that the tree metaphor has had a determinative effect on radical theory as well, especially in radical theory's ritual invocation of an etymology derived from the root metaphor. Radical thought is, and has been, thoroughly implicated in the workings of arborescent culture.

What would happen, though, if radical theory were rethought from a rhizomatic point of view? Would it not resemble the interstitial radicalism that I have argued for here? Would it not appear sometimes fortuitously,



spontaneously, in all directions and out of the way places, in the cracks and fissures, much like grasses sprouting through a broken sidewalk? To be clear, I am not saying that a rhizomatic perspective ought to *replace* an arborescent one. Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari reject this binary, pointing out that "there are knots of arborescence in rhizomes and rhizomatic offshoots in roots" (20). We need both and more. If organic metaphors are to remain useful in describing political and economic radicalism, they should be more inclusive, not less, and for this reason, they ought not to be limited to arborescent thought. In other words, there ought to be room for a rhizomatic, interstitial radicalism too, one that compliments, and lends force to, our traditional understandings of radicalism.

I do not have space to undertake that project here. I can only suggest what I believe to be its promise and its possibilities. But I want to suggest that such a radicalism may already be occurring— here, in the interstices of our political economy, in institutions of higher learning, and in writing classrooms too. Interstitial work, though, may be hard to find because it is not especially conspicuous or public. Such is why, in his study of interstitial acts, *Crack Capitalism*, John Holloway emphasizes the everyday quality, the ordinariness of radical change. Interstitial resistance, according to Holloway, “is the story of many, many people”:

It is the story of the composer in London who expresses his anger and his dream of a better society through the music he composes . . . . Of the university professor in Athens who creates a seminar outside the university framework for the promotion of critical thought . . . . Of the old man living on the outskirts of Beirut who cultivates plants on his windowsill as a revolt against the concrete that surrounds him . . . . Of the peasant in Huejotzingo who refuses to allow his small orchard to be annexed to a massive park of unsold cars . . . . Of the group of homeless friends in Rome who occupy a vacant house and refuse to pay rent . . . . (4-5).

I want to suggest that it may also be possible for WPAs, writing program administrators, as well as compositionists and all other teachers and scholars, to contribute to Holloway’s catalogue, and I would like to urge my colleagues to seek, imagine, and create such openings in the programs they direct or administer. For it is within these overlooked spaces that alternative points of view might be found, modest transformations might be wrought, and new awarenesses might be cultivated. In the words of cultural historian George McKay, here, in the interstices, is where “small wonders have grand repercussions” (101). And while those “grand repercussions” are hardly guaranteed, it may still be possible to chip away at the monument to neoliberal capitalism that the university has become.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Neoliberalism has proven itself to be an exceptionally slippery and challenging term to define, but the conception put forth here owes much to two works in particular: David Harvey’s *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* and Henry Giroux’s *Neoliberalism’s War on Higher Education*. Unlike classical liberal economic theory (à la Adam Smith), neoliberalism does not assume that the state ought to remain separate from the free market, but rather ought to be thoroughly committed to promoting market ideology in all democratic institutions, including universities, and in all global contexts as well. While it is tempting, for example, to look upon the Koch brothers’ insinuations into university hiring practices and curriculum as a privilege of extraordinary wealth, it should also be noted that these insinuations are an effect of a neoliberal ideology which authorizes such colonizing intrusions into public institutions, educational or otherwise, in the first place. The withdrawal of public funding for universities obviously creates opportunities for those, like

the Koch brothers, who wish to privatize such institutions for personal gain, but it also guarantees the furtherance of a neoliberal worldview that sees the university as subsumed, in all its aspects, to the imperatives of neoliberalism.

<sup>2</sup> It might be argued that the symbiotic and interstitial models are similar in at least one respect: both posit an incremental vision of social change. While on the surface that observation might be true, it ignores one key difference. The symbiotic model seems to assume that rational debate is the sole source of (negotiated) social change. The interstitial model, on the other hand, assumes that social change can be initiated in less visible, unnoticed, out of the way places—sites and moments that offer the opportunity for tactical activity and resistance. Because the interstitial model is oriented toward systemic change, it agrees with the revolutionary goals of the ruptural model, but differs in approach. In contrast, and generally speaking, the symbiotic model regards itself as opposed to the ruptural model, that is, understands itself to be the sensible option to revolutionary change.

<sup>3</sup> In the past decade or so, a number of mainstream newspapers, and other media outlets, have published feature articles on the resurgent interest in zines and zine making. Most notably, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Huffington Post*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and lesser known media have all reported on the phenomena of zines. In addition, zine festivals have sprung up in most major U. S. cities—Chicago being perhaps the most famous, but Los Angeles, Boston, New York, Portland, Olympia, Kansas City, and others also hosting these events where zinesters trade, sell, purchase, and read from their work. Finally, a number of major research libraries are currently archiving zines, including special collections now housed at Duke University, Barnard College, Yale, Harvard, and the Universities of Iowa and Kansas, to name just a few.

But why this renascent interest in zines? It was generally believed that with the arrival of the internet, the traditional zine would be replaced by blogs and other expressions of digital self-publishing, or that we would witness the emergence of e-zines. And yes, to some extent, blogs, e-zines, and other internet genres have established an undeniable presence for those who wish to voice an unconventional viewpoint, or to critique mainstream culture. What was not anticipated, however, was that the internet could actually provoke a return to the traditional paper zine. While the reasons for this return are multiple and complex, zinesters often point to the materiality of the paper zine, and what might be called the aesthetics of the tactile, that is, of being able to make something that can actually be held in one’s hand. Others point to the freedom that comes with being able to control every facet of production, “from design to distribution.” Jenna Wortham, writing in *The New York Times*, notes that people who make zines do so, in some measure, to escape the necessity of having to meet the requirements, implicit or otherwise, of social media platforms. Wortham also notes what many others have as well—namely, the sheer toxicity of much internet discourse, a toxicity that zines largely evade because of the manner in which they circulate, as

well as the intimate, embodied communities that form around them.

<sup>4</sup> For a fuller description of these zines (and many others), please see [zinewiki.com](http://zinewiki.com).

<sup>5</sup> Please consult the entry for "radical" at *The Online Etymological Dictionary*, available at <https://www.etymonline.com/word/radical>.

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# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Failed Educational Reform in the New York City School System

by Andrea Dupre



MURRY BERGTRAUM HIGH SCHOOL

We in the United States are never satisfied with our school system. And perhaps that is admirable. From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present, the country and its leaders have looked critically at the effectiveness of its public schools. Up until the 1940s, we feared public education was not providing American students with sufficient life skills. During the Cold War of the 1950s, the Soviet Union's advances in space added fuel to this anxiety. The 1960s Civil Rights era mobilized attempts to enrich the curriculum with the culture and history of African Americans and other people of color. The counterculture in the 1970s, in turn, gave rise to an ill-fated holistic pedagogy that dwarfed today's focus on "student-centered" learning. The backlash that followed these more progressive philosophies brought into play a spate of conservative reforms embraced by the presidency of Ronald Reagan. In the 1980s, his administration's report, *A Nation at Risk*, warned again that America's schools were falling behind the rest of the world; it was time to commit our schools to programs of excellence in order to outperform our rivals. The report encouraged - but notably did not mandate - more structured and challenging curriculums in all academic subjects. The 1990s continued this emphasis on the need for our students to compete, together with a new and emphatic call to hold schools "accountable." The Bush administration aggressively pushed forward, with No Child Left Behind, a federal law mandating that schools throughout the nation demonstrate progress. Instead of quantifying the effectiveness of any particular pedagogical approach or best practices for a child's intellectual development, annual standardized tests would measure reading and math achievement. Punishment for not evidencing success would come in the form of warnings, grading a school and its students as "failing," withholding federal funding, and, ultimately, closure. Barack Obama's Race to the Top continued this take-no-prisoners policy, but it heightened the stakes by awarding millions of federal dollars only to the states that were able to meet, within a limited period of time, stringent criteria that included opening their public school districts to charter schools.

With neoliberal and conservative policymakers in Washington, D. C. dominating the last twenty years of the American educational reform movement, public school districts around the country are now coming to resemble mini-corporations. Administrators are trained to play the role of managers, competition for performance bonuses or fear of losing reputations or jobs drive their behavior, and data-packed spreadsheets monitor and measure student progress. A myriad of satellite businesses orbit these school districts and provide consultants, curriculum designers, testing experts, data gatherers, and technology sales personnel and advisors. The members of local school boards sit on the sidelines, shell-shocked or skeptical, but unable to resist the money that pours into their districts, together with the promises of these consultants, salespeople, and occasional hucksters that their new model for improving the schools will put every student on the yellow brick road to success.

In New York City, one of the wizards behind these business approaches, and their most eloquent voice, was

billionaire businessman Michael Bloomberg. Elected mayor in 2002, he and his first chancellor, lawyer Joel Klein, imposed sweeping reforms and vowed to transform troubled school districts into efficient machines that would improve outcomes for all students. As any CEO might do upon taking charge of a failing business, Bloomberg swiftly centralized control of the largest school system in the country. His "Children First" program included shutting down dozens of underperforming high schools, instituting a business-style hierarchical managerial structure throughout the system, consolidating power with himself and his chancellor on top, eliminating hundreds of community districts, and placing those whom they judged to be the best and most qualified personnel in positions of power. He implemented these changes rapidly and with little consultation with the school communities and the parents involved - an approach, I would add, that stands in sharp contrast to the kind of community-wide collaboration achieved by educational programs like the highly successful Harlem Children's Project. This "creative destruction" was a corporate-inspired strategy meant to shake up the status quo in order to effect change. Not unlike the Bush administration's "shock and awe" military offensives in the Middle East, the method deliberately destabilizes an organization and lets damaged chips fall where they may, so only the fittest survive. Over Bloomberg's three-term tenure, his dramatic steps and the questionably successful statistical results he presented dominated national headlines. Missing in headlines, however, were the inconvenient side effects that festered beneath the surface, side effects that reflected the more complicated needs of living, breathing students. These complexities escaped headings on data sheet columns. Instead, test scores and individual school grades (A through F) summarized all that reformers like Bloomberg and Klein felt the city - and the nation - needed to know. As an English teacher in New York City from 2003 through 2014, I witnessed this less publicized side of reform in one school where a few thousand poor and minority high school students' personal and academic lives suffered cruelly in the crusade for corporate efficiency, first as victims of the massive school closures and, second, as victims of a top-down management structure that distanced itself from and lost sight of the very subjects it was supposed to benefit.

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Murry Bergtraum High School for Business Careers - with over 2000 students - was never one of the large high schools targeted for closure by Bloomberg. Perhaps it was because in 1999, *U.S. News and World Reports* ranked Murry Bergtraum, located in Lower Manhattan on Pearl Street, among America's "Outstanding High Schools." Built in 1976 and named in honor of a former New York City school superintendent, the modern brick fortress-like edifice still nestles against the towering white Verizon building at the base of the Brooklyn Bridge, adjacent to One Police Plaza and only blocks away from City Hall and the Department of Education (DOE) headquarters on Chambers Street. Visible from the Brooklyn Heights Promenade on the other side of the East River, Murry Bergtraum is a prominent part of the Manhattan skyline.

Perhaps the mayor chose to keep Bergtraum open because the school was the first in New York State to offer computer programming, years before the 1983 *Nation at Risk* report recommended such courses for all the country's high school students. Up until about the year 2002, Bergtraum offered a wide array of academic and business courses. Students could study Latin, French, Italian, or Spanish. There were Advanced Placement classes, music and art courses. There was a literary magazine, a yearbook, a school newspaper, a band, a debate club, language clubs, and sports teams. Perhaps the mayor, a businessman himself, recognized that Bergtraum, not a neighborhood high school but rather a specifically business-oriented educational community, could provide a unique environment for students from around the city interested in pursuing a business career. Since 1986, the Financial Women's Association's Mentoring Program, one of the largest of its kind in New York City public schools, supported a number of talented Bergtraum students every year. Bergtraum graduates included New York City council woman Vanessa Gibson and the actors John Leguizamo and Damon Wayans. Many parents who graduated from the school in the 1980s hoped to send their own children there twenty years later.

But by 2014, at the end of Bloomberg's twelve years as mayor, the high school's graduation rates had plummeted, its student population had become disaffected, and its experienced teachers were rushing to seek transfers, to retire, or to quit the profession altogether. The conditions at the school were reported by *The New York Post* in numerous, often front page articles: "Just Steps Away from City Hall, New York City's Murry Bergtraum HS Abandoned to Failure"; "Halls of Hell at NYC's Worst High School" (Callahan); "Battleground Bergtraum"; and "Why This NYC High School has Become a Disaster."

***The reality is that Bergtraum suffered the consequences of Bloomberg's methods of reorganization, which, indeed, may work to turn around a corporation but can prove disastrous when applied to communities of vulnerable children and young people.***

Bloomberg's and Klein's efforts dominated national headlines, making a wealthy businessman and a lawyer the poster boys for hardline educational reform policies. Yet the voices and needs of the subjects of these experiments – students and their families – were lost in the rush to demonstrate statistical results that would rationalize the money and political capital invested in the policies. As an example of numerous other schools in New York City, Bergtraum serves as a microcosm for the failures of an American educational reform movement whose strategy has been based on principles of reorganization and privatization rather than on cooperation and collaboration. The reality is that Bergtraum suffered the consequences of Bloomberg's methods of reorganization, which, indeed, may work to turn

around a corporation but can prove disastrous when applied to communities of vulnerable children and young people. The fate of the school was largely determined by two aspects of Bloomberg's program of reform: the breakdown of large schools into smaller units, which inadvertently created a large pool of displaced students; and the centralization of power into the hands of the mayor, his chancellor, and a small army of school principals who lost sight of the needs of the diverse cohort of students, teachers, and support personnel at the bottom of the new chain of command.

In New York City, during the early 2000s, Mayor Bloomberg designated a number of large schools "ineffective" and broke them up into smaller schools within the same building or "campus." He embraced Bill Gates's argument that American high schools were obsolete. The Gates Foundation, along with other reformers, claimed that comprehensive high schools were an obstacle to student progress. They argued that students in urban districts especially were deprived in these traditional large schools of challenging courses and close relationships with their teachers and other students. Gates provided about \$2 billion to districts around the country to experiment with smaller high schools and New York City received \$100 million (Ravitch 209).

But in practice, the Gates approach left large numbers of students adrift and out of sight. The success stories of these model smaller schools usually omitted the opaque process by which they picked their students. Many of the schools used lotteries. Hundreds of students would apply, but only a few would be chosen. While a newly formed small school would publicly establish broad entrance requirements – a child's interest in the core "theme" of the school, a minimum grade average, a record of good attendance – the rationale for eliminating the majority of applicants was never made clear. This lack of transparency allowed each new small school plenty of discretion in choosing its students, and the rejected often suffered troubling consequences.

Murry Bergtraum High School for Business Careers remained immune to the mayor's downsizing, but not to the unacknowledged side effects of this swiftly implemented re-shuffling of the city's high school student population. The troublesome question of what to do with students left standing when the music stopped and the seats in new smaller high schools were filled was solved though schools like Murry Bergtraum. Hundreds of these young people left over were directed by the DOE to other large schools around the city, and one of them was Bergtraum. The displaced students – many troubled, mostly poor, and usually underperforming – would have mucked up the quick statistical improvements reformers hoped to report a few years after this expansive and expensive maneuver was executed. Diane Ravitch noted at the time that,

"Since dozens of them [small schools] have been established simultaneously, with inadequate planning, the remaining large high schools are bursting at the seams, as students are reassigned to them to make room for the mini schools. Some large high schools are

now operating at 200% of capacity" ("Where the Mayor Went Wrong").

By directing these students from the scaled down large schools into schools like Bergtraum, the Bloomberg administration exacerbated what is another rarely publicized issue within the New York City system – its segregation. By 2010 and continuing through 2014, between 73% and 81% of Bergtraum students were at the official poverty level. Twenty-five per cent of its population – many from recently immigrated families – consisted of English Language Learners and Students with Disabilities ("Demographic Snapshot"). These percentages can be compared to those of schools in higher economic neighborhoods such as Townsend Harris in Queens, with a poverty rate of around 50% with virtually no ELL students, or Central Park East in upper Manhattan, with a 35% poverty rate and an ELL population at a miniscule 1%-2%. The students assigned to Bergtraum had little voice in the matter of school choice. Indeed, many of them or their families had no idea how to begin to assert themselves within the complex bureaucracy. In "Changing Contexts and the Challenge of High School Reform in New York City," Leslie Santee Siskin explains what Bergtraum faculty and staff learned slowly and painfully: that when students attend schools of their choice, their progress can be marked, whereas "the contrast with *unchosen* schools and classrooms, in which students did not want to be and might not stay, can be stark" (195). Like pieces on the mayor's and chancellor's giant chessboard, ultimately they fell through the cracks. And so by 2011, New York State had identified Murry Bergtraum High School for Business Careers as a School in Need of Improvement (SINI) and its New York City School Report Card grade fell to a "D." In essence, the mayor in his zeal for reform had created yet another school both separate and unequal. He and the DOE did nothing either to help or guide the new Bergtraum, now isolated in its struggle to integrate students with exceptional needs who were suddenly forced to travel long distances from their neighborhoods to a strange school. Too many of the students unwittingly assigned to this specialty school had neither the motivation nor the fundamental skills to successfully master the rigorous academic and business curriculum. The Assistant Principal (AP) of the English department created and put into place a new program of reading and writing in order to adapt to the surge of 9<sup>th</sup> grade students arriving with challenged reading skills. The school's Attendance Coordinator, a role assigned to a full-time faculty member, became overwhelmed with monitoring dozens of new students whose erratic attendance reflected their difficult and demanding home lives. Fewer students signed up for the advanced business courses. The school's identity and sense of common social and educational goals deteriorated.

One morning at about 8:30 in 2012, as a fight broke out in the hallway outside my classroom door, my Advanced Placement English students were unable to resist and got up from their desks to watch the drama. When I scolded them for jumping out of their seats, one exclaimed, "Oh Miss. If this were Stuyvesant, stuff like this would never happen. Since it's Bergtraum and we're here, we might as well enjoy the show."

As the success stories of the new small schools scattered across the city made headlines, Murry Bergtraum's reputation devolved from a star in the city's school system to that of an unofficial "dumping ground." Students grew accustomed to the new moniker and over the course of a few years, the loss of a sense of shared unity grew to disinterest and for many, a sense of disenfranchisement. Bergtraum students figured out that the system was not on their side. And while the majority came into the building each day with the goal of acquiring an education and graduating despite the chronic upheavals, minor instances of misbehaviors gave way to major violence. Aimless students roamed the hallways during class time, popped into busy classrooms to disturb lessons, and then dashed out. One afternoon, with no warning, a female student strode in from the hallway to the back of my classroom and promptly began to pummel another female student with whom she had a grudge. Desks, chairs and books crashed to the floor as students jumped and scattered away from the fistfight. Bullying, marijuana smoking in hidden corners of top floors, and stampedes of dozens of students down hallways to record brawls on their cellphones escaped most of the public's notice. School security personnel grew cynical and indifferent. Though they struggled daily to plug holes in a dike that continually threatened to cave from the weight of disaffected troubled students who felt they had nothing to lose, these women and men lacked support from the Discipline Office, which strove to underplay the incidents that plagued classrooms and hallways. And when video clips or photos of violent altercations inside the school were posted on the internet or in other media, the DOE refused comment.

***The students assigned to Bergtraum had little voice in the matter of school choice. Indeed, many of them or their families had no idea how to begin to assert themselves within the complex bureaucracy.***

In 2015, an audit by New York State Comptroller Thomas P. DiNapoli found that the New York City DOE underreported school violence incidents during the Bloomberg periods of 2011- 2012 and 2012 - 2013 (Taylor). The complaints made by teachers at Bergtraum who during that same time filed union grievances and notices to various officials about these and other violations of students' rights had little consequence. Elizabeth Aron, the DOE's human resource director claimed that she had no idea why certified teachers in good standing were leaving the school system in droves (Winerip). The United Federation of Teachers (UFT) sent a few representatives to Murry Bergtraum to listen to faculty concerns. Teachers were told by one representative that if they weren't happy with the way things were at Bergtraum, they should just "transfer to another school." A district superintendent came to the building once, heard the teachers' complaints, and left with no follow up. In March 2012, then Chancellor Dennis Wolcott arrived in the

Bergtraum building at 9 AM and remained less than an hour. Skirting students and teachers, he met only with the principal. He never visited again.

This wall of silence in the face of deteriorating conditions in a school of almost 2000 students – ironically located only one block from the mayor’s office at City Hall and the DOE’s new headquarters in the Tweed Building on Chambers Street – was stunning to Bergtraum’s faculty and concerned students. The violence in the overcrowded and under-supported building led some students to share their fears on social media. Many who continued to focus on their education, became jaded and cynical. With a lack of response from both the DOE and their own union, teachers saw themselves as the only advocates left for dedicated students trying to survive in a deteriorating environment. They reached out to *The New York Post*, to neighborhood newspapers, and to the *New York City Public School Parents* as well as the UFT’s own websites. But despite these calls for help – or perhaps in stubborn defiance of them – the DOE, the chancellors, and the mayor remained silent. Demoralized, the Bergtraum community absorbed the sickening message: they were isolated in what had become hellish conditions for which no one in authority would be held accountable.

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The strategy of breaking down comprehensive high schools into smaller schools created a significant number of unaffiliated young people who, assigned no spots in the smaller more competitive schools, were left to fend for themselves in overcrowded schools for the unwanted. Schools like Murry Bergtraum High School became the DOE’s educational dumping grounds. But another radical move – centralizing control of a school district under one manager – also exhibited critical flaws that continue in educational institutions like Bergtraum to this day. Though the practice was not new (some cities throughout the country have experimented with the idea since the 1970s), Mayor Bloomberg’s overhaul of New York City’s community-board run system was quick and destabilizing. While the school system was undoubtedly ripe for some type of overhaul, Bloomberg’s methods steered clear of collaboration or incremental reorganization. Within two years, he replaced the Board of Education with a Panel for Education Policy, appointing its seven members himself under a new Department of Education. He held the power to fire and replace these Panel members at his discretion and did so in 2004 when two appointees objected to his proposal to stop social promotions in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade (Williams). He eliminated all community districts and condensed them into larger “regions,” each headed by an appointed regional superintendent who oversaw local superintendents. In 2006 and 2007, just as parents and teachers were coming to grips with the many new titles and offices in the Bloomberg system, he revised the organization two more times. His regional superintendents were now allowed to visit their schools only when directed by the chancellor. Schools, he concluded, needed to be monitored through a single lens – their yearly test scores. He and Klein rarely met with those whom his actions impacted. As a result, parents and teachers were further distanced from whomever was in

charge, leading to confusion and frustration when they attempted to navigate the labyrinth of titles, offices, and phone numbers. But the managers at the top, together with their reform minded supporters, failed to anticipate the effects this distance of an all too remote authority would have on the young people they were supposed to serve.

The principle of central control or top-down management defined the structure of the school system as a whole and each school unit within the system as well. Bloomberg and his team would also decide on the best school principals. His plan was meant, according to Abby Goodnough of the *New York Times*, “to infuse the ranks of New York’s principals with new blood, put the most experienced administrators where they are most needed, and weed out those who preside over schools plagued by low test scores, poor discipline and other problems.”

In 2010, citing Bergtraum’s declining performance, Bloomberg and Klein decided Bergtraum’s problems could be remedied with new blood. They forced out the school’s popular principal of ten years. They used the financial incentive of a \$25,000 per year bonus to entice a new “executive principal” to sign a three-year contract. The teachers and APs of the school understood only that this new leader’s goal was to magically transform or turn around their school. Perhaps, under the reformist agenda Bloomberg and Klein were implementing, their designated representative would succeed in rehabilitating a school whose downward spiral had originated in that very agenda.

The executive principal held her first faculty meeting as school leader in September 2010. Her message was stark: Bergtraum was failing, the school was destined for closure in a few years, and teachers and the previous administration were responsible. She informed teachers that they would, from now on, be fighting for their survival. If Bergtraum didn’t improve its Report Card grade, Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein would shut down Bergtraum and they would all have to look for jobs elsewhere. Her vision for the future inspired fear and anxiety among the faculty and eventually permeated the fabric of the entire Bergtraum community, including the students.

Utilizing what could only be explained as disruption, the executive principal demanded immediate compliance with her policies. Taking her cues from the increased power of the charter school movement and its emphasis on zero-tolerance discipline, she ordered all Bergtraum students to wear uniforms. After months of ineffective efforts at establishing and then trying to enforce the rule through mandates, she abandoned the policy. In 2011, her second year, she made a brief unexpected announcement one morning over the school’s PA system that bathroom passes would no longer be provided during class time. This attempt at strict discipline without the tacit acceptance of student leaders failed spectacularly. Within hours, the students revolted. A large group rioted in the building, an incident that required the assistance of the New York City police department and received coverage in the local media.

Following the recent argument throughout the country that all students should be encouraged to take Advanced Placement courses, she insisted in only her second month as

Bergtraum's leader that a large group of at-risk seniors must take an Advanced Placement English class. Many of these students were over age 18 and struggling to get through their final year's classes. Most of them were academically unprepared for such a rigorous course and their chances of graduating on time were now jeopardized. Understandably, they rebelled. After a month, she was forced to back-pedal, disrupting their class schedules for a second time in only a few weeks. That November, she insisted the English department begin the massive task of revising the department's curriculum and finalize it in time for spring semester in February. In mid-April, she threw out the curriculum and instead distributed an experimental 120-page poetry unit recently created by paid consultants hired by the DOE. In May, regardless of where they were in the poetry unit, she demanded all 11<sup>th</sup> grade English teachers stop what they were doing and begin a unit on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. When teachers protested that it was impossible to effectively teach a Shakespeare play in fifteen days, she sent her response: "Just make it happen."

The executive principal's approach to transforming Bergtraum failed. The carrot of a \$25,000 yearly bonus in her contract didn't work. In fact, she voluntarily quit after only two years. As the leader solely responsible for a quick turnaround, the principal saw no reason to elicit input from her teachers or students. And Murry Bergtraum was left with no communal vision for inspiration or hope -- only the anxiety of failure. While faculty and staff struggled to keep from drowning in waves of new policies rolling out from behind her office door, students lost confidence that their manager knew what she was doing. Fights continued, with larger brawls erupting numerous times during the school years. In December 2011, a group of students used texting to organize an eerily silent, intimidating march through the school's hallways, rattling the nerves of teachers and students who poked their heads out of classroom doors. In April 2012 a melee broke out in which security guards and a police officer were assaulted. A female student threatened a social studies teacher with a fake gun, resulting in a temporary shutdown of the building and half a dozen police officers gathered outside the 4<sup>th</sup> floor classroom. Another student set fire to a waste basket in a basement classroom during his English class. Feces were deposited in a corner of a stairwell. Urine filled empty blue plastic book bins in another classroom. Disruptive students played cards and ate in the library, damaging furniture and leaving books strewn on the floors.

***To turn around struggling schools, children, teachers, principals, and their districts were subject to reward or shame or punishment based on their test score data.***

Rather than funnel time and dollars into addressing the complexities of poor and immigrant students' social and academic lives, reformers claimed that schools could be transformed, or turned around, if the right approaches were

used. Those approaches included a conservative pedagogy shared by the private charter school movement that emphasized individual accountability, discipline, and skills honed to prepare students for the workforce. To turn around struggling schools, children, teachers, principals, and their districts were subject to reward or shame or punishment based on their test score data. This approach included motivation spurred by competition for government dollars (Race to the Top) and fear of closure or job loss. Schools were forced to perform like companies whose employees were expected to understand that human worth accrues only to the survivors. In addition, the national reform agenda placed time limits on struggling schools to transform themselves into success stories. Within Murry Bergtraum High School, the disruption and destruction of the academic careers of a few thousand students are a testament to the flaws inherent in imposing ill-suited managers armed with mandated educational reform methods upon a community of young people whose divergent needs defy speedy, cookie-cutter solutions.

The DOE under Bloomberg seemed not to understand this. Under the next interim principal assigned to Murry Bergtraum in September 2012, the same top-down, high handed, and disruptive policies continued, ignoring the disunity that tore at what may have been left at the school's psychic center. Violations of students' rights during standardized and national tests became a matter of course. During the January 2014 New York State Regents Exams, a student who had been present for an exam was marked "absent" because the administration sent him to the wrong rooms three times before he could finally sit for the test. Since he ended up in a room where his name was not listed and marked absent from the room where he was supposed to be, his final score was in jeopardy of not being recorded. A Spanish-speaking ESL student, legally entitled to take the Living Environment Regents exam in his native language, struggled to explain this to an administrator outside the testing room. She argued with him (in English) and he implied that the student was lying in an attempt to take advantage of the system. Under pressure from me, the administrator finally agreed to search the building for a Spanish language copy of the exam. As the minutes ticked by, the boy slumped, head buried in his arms on his desk, while other students around him progressed far ahead into the exam. After an hour and a half, he chose not to wait any longer. He got up, stretched, and left the building for home. The administrator appeared with a copy of the exam in Spanish after he left. The student was officially marked "absent" from the exam on his school records.

Legal violations spread through the school's Special Education Department as well. Inclusion classes -- those made up of both special education students and regular students -- were frequently out of the compliance ratio established by New York State -- meaning there were too many of these students within a class to properly facilitate their instruction. In addition, instead of providing certified special education teachers to co-teach with the regular classroom teacher in these classes, the interim principal provided a revolving door of unqualified substitute teachers who knew nothing about the individual needs of each of their

charges. As a result, many of these students in this vulnerable group stopped coming to their classes.

The annual administration of the PSATs took place on October 16, 2013. All 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade high school students in New York City were required to take the test, which is made up of language arts and math sections. Since it serves to prepare students for the SAT exams many will take during their senior year and since attaining a certain score on the PSAT exam can help boost a student's academic reputation, many students are anxious to do their best. But this day, Bergtraum students were deprived of their right to school-provided calculators for the exam's math sections.

"No calculators available," the Assistant Principal in charge of Operations carelessly shouted into his walkie-talkie, broadcasting the information to other administrators who were facing similar requests from teachers proctoring the test throughout the building.

"They should've brought their own. We don't supply calculators." He turned the corner of the hallway outside my classroom and slipped out of sight.

An hour or so later, a tall, hoody-clad male student from another room, Tyrone D., angry and frustrated, traipsed through the hallway complaining helplessly to no one,

"You're supposed to supply us with calculators! I want my damn calculator!"

His voice echoed in the empty hallway.

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Bergtraum's internal functions further collapsed. The interim principal fired staff and administrators and took weeks to replace them, leaving gaps in critical support areas. Bergtraum's College Office no longer had a full-time, experienced advisor to guide juniors and seniors through the stressful college application process; the Program Office mismanaged student and teacher schedules for her entire tenure; she weakened the security staff, and student fights turned classrooms and hallways into war-zones shattering the building's learning environments; the library, without a trained, full-time librarian, became a hang-out for rambunctious kids; she denied teachers their contract-authorized pay for extra duties. Committees of faculty lead by Bergtraum's UFT chapter leader met often with the principal to discuss the chaotic conditions. She dismissed their concerns. Her message was that responsibility for the school's failings did not lie with her but with the previous administration, with the teachers who were unable to engage their students, with the program office, or with the APs of the various subject departments.

The leadership style of both principals Bloomberg dropped at the feet of Bergtraum reflected the national mandate established in Washington, D.C.: top-down decision making, disruption, and prioritizing the ends over the means. Neither succeeded in rehabilitating, transforming, or turning around Murry Bergtraum High School because neither reached out to establish a relationship with the students, parents, or faculty; neither allowed herself to be held accountable to those young lives

in her charge; neither established and promoted a coherent vision of success supported by clear means to reach that success. Both principals' messages to the school focused instead on a vision of imminent disaster reinforced by threats, a strategy unsuited to a population of economically challenged young people who needed no reminders of how tough the world can be.

Murry Bergtraum High School for Business Careers was a victim of the tunnel vision that continues to plague a reform movement philosophically opposed to the concept of diversity, community, and fairness. At its core, the movement and its proponents assure themselves that the individual can overcome environment, that fighting for first place is in our DNA, and that failure is mostly self-imposed. Murry Bergtraum's fate as an institution was clearly the product of forces beyond its control. As a school of predominantly poor and immigrant students, it had little social capital. Perhaps the final irony behind these events is the story they tell of how corporate-inspired educational reforms implemented by a successful business executive, in the end, crushed a once successful high school whose mission was to prepare its students for that very world. Sacrificed to the cause of reform and flying below the radar of a public manipulated by media-savvy reform advocates, a group of a few thousand hapless young students in New York City were the victims of a woefully imperfect neoliberal social experiment for which no one has yet been held accountable.

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# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## The Non-Performativity of Implicit Bias Training

by Jessi Lee Jackson



IMAGE: NYCEDUCATOR.COM (2018).

In recent years, implicit bias trainings have emerged as a popular strategy for teaching people to understand and respond to present histories of racism in the United States. In particular, the trainings have been offered to police departments as a pedagogical intervention to reduce racist actions by officers. In February 2018, the New York Police Department announced plans to implement implicit bias training for all officers over two years, with Police Commissioner James O’Neill stating, “Training like this is happening at law enforcement agencies across the nation.”<sup>1</sup> Local and national leaders have called for implicit bias trainings in all police departments.<sup>2</sup> These trainings promise to apply contemporary psychological research on bias towards the reduction of racism and other forms of prejudice. They are presented as an effective, research-based strategy for guiding people to encounter, reflect on, and ultimately shift their own potential for biased action. Anti-racist scholars and activists have questioned these claims, suggesting that the trainings are falsely presented as a “fix-it-all” solution, that they focus too much on individual change, and that time and money would be better spent elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Legal scholar Destiny Peery raises doubts about the effectiveness of one-time trainings and writes of the necessity of a “multi-pronged approach focused more on fixing a broken system and less on fixing broken individuals.”<sup>4</sup>

As a counselor and educator invested in anti-racist practice, I was curious about how these trainings mix together education, psychological expertise, anti-racism, and critiques of policing. Educational spaces have taught me to interrogate my role in relationships of power and inspired me to action. I have seen classes and workshops impact my students similarly. Could they do the same for some police officers? As a counselor, I often see the application of psychological research towards the process of transforming problematic behaviors, as clients learn to manage anxieties, cope with shame, acknowledge harms, and build relationships of equal power. I wondered how implicit bias trainings could challenge police to acknowledge their part in racism and shift their actions and institutions in response. At the same time, I had a healthy skepticism about the ability of this trendy new intervention to meaningfully shift the complex and painful realities of American racism.

In my efforts to understand more about the problems and potential of these trainings, I reached out to the largest training organization on implicit bias in policing. Fair and Impartial Policing (FIP) is an organization led by University of South Florida criminologist Lorie Fridell. It emerged to meet the demand for training in implicit bias.<sup>5</sup> FIP expressed that they “love grad students” and allowed me to observe a 2.5 day train-the-trainers session, the most intensive of their three training options.<sup>6</sup> In addition to observing the training, I also reviewed the curriculum developed by FIP, reviewed participant feedback forms for over thirty FIP trainings, analyzed local news accounts and interviews, and reviewed popular accounts of implicit bias recommended by FIP trainers.

Apart from what occurs during the actual training time, some might argue that hosting the trainings is an important first step that performs a commitment to ending racism. In

this line of thinking, the speech act of stating, “we are confronting our implicit bias” is performative in the sense that J.L. Austin articulated in *How to Do Things with Words*.<sup>7</sup> In having a workshop, the department is enacting an opposition to racism. When a police chief shows up to introduce this training, he communicates to his officers that the department opposes racial bias. Reporting on the trainings in local media often follows this logic—the performance of the training is celebrated as proof that departments are tackling racism.<sup>8</sup>

Sara Ahmed’s concept of non-performative speech acts suggests a different understanding of how implicit bias trainings work. In non-performative speech acts, “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*.” The failure is the function. Non-performative speech acts are “taken up *as if* they are performatives (as if they have brought about the effects they name) such that the names come to stand in for the effects.”<sup>9</sup> The act of training stands in for the actual transformation of practices and policies. In this article, I examine a series of moments that illustrate how the trainings non-perform anti-racism, simultaneously stating a commitment to anti-racism and reinforcing racism. The trainings exhibit at least eight overlapping techniques of non-performance. They support police departments in claiming opposition to racism, while simultaneously:

1. defining racism as an individual, inevitable human neurological process,
2. assuming white innocence and black and Latinx criminality,
3. coaching people to give up explicit racisms in favor of dog-whistle racisms,
4. disorganizing behavioral prescriptions about how to act against racism,
5. soothing guilt and shame related to racist actions,
6. elevating scientific research over specific historical, community-based, or cultural knowledge,
7. treating individual bias, gender bias, heterosexism, and racism as interchangeable, and
8. reinforcing the authority of privileged white people to name and describe the world.

I examine moments in which these techniques emerge in the training. By becoming more aware of how nonperformance manifests, I hope both to critique how many implicit bias trainings operate and to provide tools for assessing how other educational initiatives may non-perform their stated commitments.

**Nonperformance Technique #1: Say you oppose racism, while defining it as an individual, inevitable human neurological process.**

The FIP training begins with the assertion that racism is a feature of the human brain. This message is consistent with the popular literature on implicit bias, which often frames human neuropsychological processes as the cause of criminal legal system inequities. In his bestseller *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell describes police decision-making in the police shooting of Amadou Diallou as an example of the universal brain process of “thinking without thinking.”<sup>10</sup> In *Unfair: The New Science of Criminal Injustice*, Adam Benforado describes racist legal outcomes as a phenomenon that requires Americans to “look into the deep recesses of our brains.” Benforado recognizes that there is “grievous unfairness in our house of law,” which he blames on “human psychology.”<sup>11</sup> While both Benforado and Gladwell identify racial injustice as a problem, they locate the problem in typical human brain processes.

Continuing within this frame, FIP founder Fridell explains, via video, that police departments are prone to bias, “because they hire humans.” The first section of FIP’s implicit bias training reiterates this perspective repeatedly, emphasizing the neurobiological basis of implicit bias. This message works to minimize white and/or police shame, through an argument that racism is normal and universal, a natural process of the human mind.

Naturalization is one of the central frames of color-blind racism critiqued by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva: “By suggesting these preferences are almost biologically driven and typical of all groups in society, preferences for primary associations with members of one’s race are rationalized as nonracial.”<sup>12</sup> The naturalization of racism marginalizes people whose life experiences led them to avoid developing, or helped them to unlearn, biases. These life experiences include being a person of color. They also include experiences such as being a part of interracial families, relationships, workplaces, communities, and friendships; active engagement with a variety of cultural expressions; or participation in political movements opposed to racism or confronting other forms of oppression through an intersectional lens. It also suggests that being able to see and notice one’s own bias is a strange, unusual skill, one that flies in the face of the behaviors determined by the “deep recesses of our brains.”

In suggesting “all humans” are characterized by implicit racial biases, implicit bias training centers socially segregated white experience as the model for what counts as human. It does this not because it is written by humans, but because those developing the curriculum do not engage with contemporary theories of racism. Scholars in critical race and gender studies have called for theorizing social power relations from the margin, highlighted the construction of the category of “human” through the exclusion of blackness, and drawn attention to the specific historical role of police in maintaining gendered racism.<sup>13</sup> Engagement with their work offers an immediate critique to the idea that “racism is human” or that police racism is caused by human neurological structures. For example, if one recognizes police work as pushing humans into bureaucratic systems, categorization may be understood as

a product of bureaucratic systems rather than human nervous systems.<sup>14</sup>

***Because it is grounded in this claim to universality among all humans, implicit bias training has difficulty addressing the specificity of contemporary U.S. police racism.***

Because it is grounded in this claim to universality among all humans, implicit bias training has difficulty addressing the specificity of contemporary U.S. police racism. It fails to substantially address the specific tasks and work environments of police, and how these specific factors intersect with racism. Further, it offers a hopeless take on racism, failing to mark major historical differences in the manifestations of racism and to imagine social worlds not structured through racial difference. A singular focus on neurological processes nonperforms anti-racism because it under-represents the possibility of social change, encouraging resignation to the “fact” of racially biased brains.

**Nonperformance Technique #2: Say you oppose racism, while assuming white innocence and black and Latinx criminality.**

After presenting the idea that bias is human, the FIP trainers run through a brief overview of social psychological concepts about biases and stereotypes. They then present a short clip from the movie *Crash*, designed to start conversation around biases. The clip features Anthony and Peter, two young black men played by actors Chris ‘Ludacris’ Bridges and Larenz Tate. Anthony is complaining to Peter about biased treatment in the restaurant they just left. Walking down the street, the two men notice as a white couple moves away from them and the woman pulls her jacket closely around her. Anthony continues his critique:

this white woman sees two black guys, who look like UCLA students, strolling down the sidewalk and her reaction is blind fear. I mean, look at us! Are we dressed like gang-bangers? Huh? No. Do we look threatening? No. Fact, if anybody should be scared around here, it’s us: We’re the only two black faces surrounded by a sea of over-caffeinated white people, patrolled by the trigger-happy LAPD. So you tell me, why aren’t we scared?

Peter responds, “Because we have guns?” and the two proceed to car-jack the white couple. At this moment in watching the scene, the police trainees laugh. They had expected to get lectured about biases, and the scene surprises them. A trainer reinforces the intended takeaway with an accompanying PowerPoint slide: “Sometimes, stereotypes are true.”

The training reads that moment in *Crash* as evidence of the truth of anti-black stereotypes: the young black men were being stereotyped as criminals, and they were criminals. The reading of the clip encouraged by the training emphasizes the truth of black criminality. Rather than

challenging all stereotypes, or ending disproportionate impacts of policing on black communities, trainers appeal to the idea of fact-based policing.

This is in line with the logic of predictive policing, in which statistical practices are mobilized to legitimize the heavy policing of black communities. According to this logic, the police are not stereotyping—they are responding to the objective truth of increased crime in these areas. Critics of predictive policing have argued that in these practices, black and Latinx people are never seen as innocent; instead they are always already assigned “increased risk” as a result of historical and ongoing practices of racist criminalization by police, which the statistical predictions then replicate.<sup>15</sup>

The training goes on to discuss how, even when usually true, stereotypes can be dangerous. Yet the trainers have already endorsed the link between blackness and criminality as true. They do nothing to convey the dangers of flattening people’s complex lives to stereotypic descriptions, except to note that *sometimes* the stereotypes are wrong. This overlooks how stereotypes create people as objects (rather than subjects) of knowledge, flatten their experiences, and ignore their agency. Treating a person as a caricature is always untrue. Hershini Bhana Young highlights the refusal of police and legal discourses generally to engage meaningfully with black women’s complex lives, discussing one black woman’s decision not to confess to a crime:

Part and parcel of Eva’s refusal to explain herself to the police are the clichéd explanatory responses that her actions would elicit, no matter what Eva might say about them. In other words, even if Eva were to speak, she would not be heard. The interpretation for her crime by the criminal justice system would diminish the complexity of her actions as a black woman, always already infantilized, sexualized, and criminalized.<sup>16</sup>

Eva does not speak because even when she speaks her voice is distorted by police expectation. Police choose the “easiest answer they could get” instead of trying to imagine the complexity of her life. Similarly, even as Anthony and Peter speak, their critiques of racial profiling are not heard. Instead, their revealed status as “criminals” is used to disqualify their authority on the criminalization of blackness. The laughter of the training group reveals their delight in “knowing” Anthony and Peter’s status: black criminals whose behavior can be interpreted without engaging their words and worldviews.

Throughout the Fair & Impartial Policing implicit bias training, I witnessed attempts to communicate the humanity of black and Latinx people by suggesting that they might also be cops. In one story, they discuss an undercover cop getting shot by police; in another, they discuss an off-duty cop getting pulled over while on vacation upstate. This attempt to connect with cops through the possibility that the person of color they are encountering might be an undercover or off-duty cop seemed to be a strategic choice. It is an attempt to begin the process of unsettling racist expectations. However, it fails to address the idea that people of color who are not cops deserve to be treated as criminals. Rather, it divides people into populations of deserving and undeserving, linking expressions of black

culture to criminality and automatic guilt. Black cops are treated as occasional outliers to the assumed fact of black criminality.

### **Nonperformance Technique #3: Say you oppose racism, while coaching people to give up explicit racisms in favor of dog-whistle racisms.**

One “case study” discussed in the training involved a 911 call in which the caller reported a suspicious person, whose only suspicious behavior was being a black man sitting in a car in a white neighborhood—which they labeled a “race out of place” complaint. The trainers had just led a discussions of the danger of “profiling by proxy”—police responding to citizen complaints that are purely race-based. This seemed to be a clear place to state the absolute necessity of refusing to participate in the caller’s assumption of black criminality.

Yet, in discussing how to respond to the call, the officers present were not willing to state, “Just don’t respond” or to name the call as “profiling by proxy.” Instead, they discussed ways to coach the caller to identifying non-race-based suspicious characteristics. They entertained the possibility of sending a car to do a “drive by” without explicitly stopping or questioning the black man; or perhaps checking in with the “suspicious” man to “see if he was okay”—perhaps lying that he had been reported as unconscious in his car. Rather than responding negatively to explicit racism, they brainstormed strategies to move their actions towards those that had been deemed strands of “implicit” racism, and thus perfectly innocent and excusable. Rather than challenging racist practices, the exercise served to coach officers in how to shift expressions of explicit racism into colorblind racist language, which would have a racist impact but could be attributed to other factors.

A review of the training agenda suggests that the message “don’t engage in profiling by proxy” is the intended takeaway of this section of the training. Yet, in action, it transformed into a coaching session for masking explicit racism. The impact of those racist police actions on the person being profiled was not considered.

### **Nonperformance technique #4: Say you oppose racism, while disorganizing behavioral prescriptions about how to act against racism.**

Another way in that the training nonperforms antiracism is through avoiding clear behavioral directives. Instead, mixed messages about potential behavior changes are offered. Learning “the science” becomes the action taken, rather than the action of refusing to engage in profiling, or shifting departmental control to communities, or disarming officers.

A part of the FIP training curriculum contains a slowed-down encounter between undercover police and a person they deem “suspicious.” At the end of the exercise, in which the officers were able to identify the “correct” set of actions that avoided use of force, the trainers reveal that the case

follows the fact pattern of the Amadou Diallo shooting. The moral of the story, as presented by trainers, was this: slow down. They suggested that biased assumptions might be usefully overcome if officers were able to gather more information, as opposed to operating based on quick observations and assumptions that tend toward bias. In this case example, the training acts out Malcolm Gladwell's discussion of the Diallo case in *Blink*.

The next day, presenting the "new science" about implicit bias tests, the trainers state that there is "a very interesting new study" coming out. They describe this as the "Reverse Racism Effect" study, and explain that is so new that it has not been included in the earlier sections of the training. The trainer reviews the study's claim, which is that in shooter simulations there was a slight delay in officers shooting black suspects with guns.<sup>17</sup> The trainer summarizes the research by noting the threat to officers posed by this supposed new bias against shooting black people: "This hesitation—may cost lives." Black people are described as getting an extra break—a few undeserved seconds of consideration that white suspects don't get. Replicating the biases of the study, the trainers suggest that these extra seconds translate into police deaths. The lives of black people being shot by police are not considered.

One participant, clearly confused, asks, "but doesn't that go against what we learned yesterday?" He cites the "slow down" exercise. The trainer responds, "Well, we just want you to have the science. We'll be watching this and see what develops. Our goal is that you have the science."

One of the main messages of the training, "slow down, think about what you're doing, and question if it's linked to bias," has just been undermined. Instead, officers are given the opposite message: "Don't slow down to think, because then you might die." The muddle of conflicting "science" leaves officers with no clear message about how to actively avoid racist actions. At the same time, it tells them that their own racism is inevitable and natural. I hear the participant's question as one concerning the larger point of the training—he appears to be trying to figure out how to translate his learning into action. At this request, the trainers have no recommendations. The trainers' spontaneous statement of the goal of the training shifts from the official goal of transforming implicit bias in behavior. Rather, the goal is stated as giving scientific authority to officers: "Our goal is that you have the science."

**Nonperformance technique #5: Say you oppose racism, while working to alleviate people's guilt and shame around racist actions.**

The training functions according to the principal that shame and guilt are not helpful states for learning. It normalizes biased beliefs and actions, seeking to put participants at ease. According to feedback forms, it appears to succeed at this task. In participants' reviews of the FIP trainings, the "guilt-free" nature of the training was emphasized. One wrote, "It was refreshing to discuss these topics without being told how bad cops are."<sup>18</sup> At the Elon University Police training, these views were repeated: "It was a no judgement zone. The way it was done promoted openness and prevented defensiveness." Part of how the

trainings address guilt was through naturalizing bias throughout the population, as reflected by one review: "Deals with the root cause—human nature."<sup>19</sup> Another participant wrote that the training "explains how each person has bias in them even if they don't realize it." Another put it more simply, "I really thought this class was gonna suck. But it didn't suck!!!"<sup>20</sup> And others: "Wasn't what I expected." "Didn't allow political correctness to hinder the training."<sup>21</sup>

***Yet the pedagogical strategy of reducing shame may have negative impacts on people's motivation to take action. A recent research study found that strong negative affect associated with awareness of one's previous biased behaviors predicts reduction of those behaviors.***

Yet the pedagogical strategy of reducing shame may have negative impacts on people's motivation to take action. A recent research study found that strong negative affect associated with awareness of one's previous biased behaviors predicts reduction of those behaviors. After being made aware that they had been stereotyping others, negative self-directed feelings such as guilt and shame motivated participants to work hard to avoid stereotyping.<sup>22</sup> This may seem intuitive—if we feel bad about doing something, we try hard not to do it again. This is one of the primary social functions of embarrassment and shame; feeling these emotions reduces the odds that we will do the same things over again.

By relieving feelings of guilt, the training may further de-motivate participants to take antiracist actions. At the Weston, MA Police Department training, one participant wrote, "the fact that we could admit to some bias was actually a relief." This feeling of relief and comfort by participants is cited over and over again as a mark of success. But it is another example of how the training succeeds in nonperformance.

**Nonperformance technique #6: Say you oppose racism, while elevating scientific claims over specific historical, community-based, or cultural knowledge.**

Implicit bias training centers psychological experts and marginalizes communities of color. This marginalization makes it possible for participants to conclude that black communities are ignorant of the scientific dynamics of racism, and that they have no specialized knowledge in how police racism operates. The training fails to grapple with the obvious: police have been sent to this implicit bias training because of a pattern of racist police violence occurring in the present in the U.S. It distances participants from that reality.

The training omits any specific information about the role of police in maintaining contemporary racism, instead working hard to reinforce the idea that police departments are only racist "because they hire humans." While this might avoid immediately alienating defensive officers, it offers no space to grapple with ways that policing is specifically racist.

This omission non-performs anti-racism, obfuscating historical and community-based knowledge of police racism. The training curriculum's only admission of the historical realities of police racism was one slide, which showed a black-and-white photograph of cops with dogs attacking civil rights activists, followed by a picture of a news article about the Stonewall Riot. In talking about the slide, the trainer emphasized that, historically, cops had supported racist Jim Crow laws in their role as law enforcers. The problem was posed not as the specific actions of police, but rather the fact that they were sometimes tasked with enforcing unjust laws. In this telling, the burden of guilt is shifted from the officer to the law itself.

Far from situating police departments as especially involved in the production of racism, the training leads some to the conclusion that police might have expert knowledge on anti-racism.<sup>23</sup> Participants suggested that the training might usefully teach people in communities about racism. "[T]his should be pushed out into the communities." Some police participants thought that community members might be less likely to accuse police of racist violence after being taught that implicit bias is universal and natural. "The class also teaches not to automatically accuse an officer of something. Let them explain it."<sup>24</sup> FIP further reinforces this perception by leading "command-community" trainings, in which community members, local NAACP officials, and police leadership are trained side-by-side in the science of bias. This training encourages the idea that "both sides" of police encounters need more education about racial bias. Rather than leading the training, the local NAACP leadership is positioned as needing to be educated about racism alongside police.<sup>25</sup>

**Nonperformance technique # 7: Say you oppose racism, while treating individual bias, gender bias, heterosexism, and racism as interchangeable.**

Though the terms "implicit bias" and "unconscious racism" are often used interchangeably, this practice suggests a false equivalence between the two concepts. In media accounts, the bias training was often presented as an anti-racist initiative. Yet in the training, the term racism was rarely used by trainers, who presented examples of race, gender, sexual orientation, occupation-based, and personal taste biases interchangeably. For example, one trainer spoke about the perception that she, as a woman police officer, would be more likely to be gay. She then shared that she was happily married. Others spoke about the danger of assuming that women are less likely to be violent than men, sharing examples of times when petite women acted with surprising force in their attacks on officers. The one training moment that addressed the historical reasons for fear of police presented both anti-gay and anti-black policing as interchangeable. Showing slides of Jim Crow and Stonewall, the trainers suggest that both situations of police discrimination ended when the law changed. At one point, participants were encouraged to name biases against cops—that they all like donuts, or that they're all uneducated. In addition to treating different biases as interchangeable, this activity, like the example from the heterosexual officer unfairly assumed to be a lesbian, reinforces the idea that it is cops who are often the "true victims" of bias.

Discussing the NYPD implicit bias trainings, trainer Noble L. Wray insists that "the 800-pound gorilla in the room is racial bias."<sup>26</sup> While racism may be the implicit "main point" of the training, the replacement of race with bias has consequences. "Bias" is a term used to reflect individual prejudice. It is often referred to in the literature as a "preference" for members of a dominant group. As a term, it can be used unlinked from systems and specific historical contexts. It lends itself to a practice of discussing personal preferences divorced from social, economic, and institutional structures. In contrast, "racism" is a term that reflects the context of social systems organized by race. For example, Ruth Wilson Gilmore's definition of racism centers its material impact on the lives and bodies of those it targets. "Racism is the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death, in distinct yet densely interconnected political geographies."<sup>27</sup> This definition highlights the violence of racism, its production and exploitation of death. Focused on racism as it impacts material bodies in political geographies, this definition contrasts sharply with social psychology definitions of bias that limit inquiry to the individual mind.

**Nonperformance technique #8: Say you oppose racism, while reinforcing the authority of privileged white people to name and describe the world.**

At one point in the training, we break into small groups around separate round tables. Participants take the opportunity to refill coffee and grab a late-morning snack. I sit at a table with a small group of white men, their ages ranging from mid-20s to mid-30s. One officer turns to me, the observing grad student, with a question. "Have you or your friends ever experienced bias from cops?" We are both eating breakfast pastries. I sip on my coffee refill, feeling that the question is a test. It seems strange that this white man is asking me, a white woman, about my experiences of bias. This may be linked to the frame of bias, which shifts attention away from an explicit discussion of race towards any form of difference.

I tell him, truthfully, that I have not experienced racial profiling. I note that police have always acted professionally in their interactions with me. I also share that a friend has been repeatedly followed and questioned by a cop on the campus she teaches at, and it seems to be a fairly obvious case of racial profiling. She is black, her white colleagues are not experiencing the same scrutiny, and only one officer is repeatedly profiling her. I expect him to acknowledge that the cop in question is being inappropriate, but to emphasize that this scenario is an exception—a "bad apple."

The interaction doesn't play out as I expect. The officer looks at me incredulously. "That's it? He's following her? That's his job." He presses for clarification, "Did he say something racist to her?" I explain that verbal disrespect isn't necessary for it to be harassment—he is clearly singling her out because of her race. Her white colleagues are not being followed. The officer scoffs, "But that's nothing. That's not a case." He ends the conversation abruptly, turning away to talk with his colleagues at the table.

The officer could not or would not understand the harms in the scenario I was describing. Meanwhile, I couldn't make sense of his inability to do so. At that moment, we were engaged in what Derald Sue has called "a clash of racial realities"—I could see the racism, and he could not.<sup>28</sup> To him, the officer who harassed my friend was clearly innocent. He was imagining the "case" against him, noting its weaknesses. Throughout the implicit bias training, he hadn't been asked to try to imagine things from my friend's perspective, what it was like for her to feel her body marked as potentially criminal, as suspicious even in her daily place of work. In the course of 2.5 days, he had only further consolidated his sense of expertise, his sense that his point of view was authoritative and that his actions would therefore be just.

It is significant that FIP facilitators are almost entirely current or retired police who hold positions of leadership within their departments. Unless it is a "command-community" training, it is likely that everyone in the room during an implicit bias training will be a police officer. This training structure is based on the idea of using credible messengers: police are assumed to be more open to learning challenging material when it is delivered by "one of them." Participants repeatedly cite the use of officers to facilitate as an important strength of the training. One participant commented that the training "would not be as well received from civilian instructors."<sup>29</sup> However, if the goal is learning how to function at work without enacting bias against people who are racially and culturally different, the choice of police trainers and the police-only attendance do little to provide practice in this relational skill. Instead, the training reinforces police officers as experts in anti-racism.

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Implicit bias trainings for police utilize a range of strategies that undermine the stated purpose of the training. The techniques that I have identified in this article are a partial list of ways to non-perform anti-racism. When they are used, they empty out the potential of the workshops to spark action, transforming the seminars into hollow monuments to institutional good intentions.

The implicit bias training fails to acknowledge how small gestures of violence signal both the historical and present-day acceptability of larger gestures of violence. It disengages from any theories of racism, adopting the colorblind ethic that any recognition of race is negative. This outcome shouldn't be surprising from a literature that repeatedly centers the subjective experiences of white officers and marginalizes the experiential reality, long historical trajectory, and current critical theorization of racism. Trainings directed at individual officers are a type of intervention incapable of creating systemic change. Research in the field suggests that implicit biases may be more effectively confronted by another means: finding ways to place communities subject to bias in positions of power over police. Perhaps this is effective, in part, because it encourages people to contemplate what those in their supervising communities are thinking, and what they want. It is a structural change that accomplishes what brief

trainings cannot; it incentivizes engaging with other perspectives.

I am not claiming that these trainings fail in all ways; they are clearly successful by many training measures. They utilize adult learning principles, engaging participants through role-plays, small group discussions, and other interactive exercises. When I observed, officers seemed to be listening and thinking about the material presented. The handout materials, video clips, and presentation slides were polished and professional. The breaks were well timed, helping everyone to stay focused during the presentations. The trainers expressed passion for the material and a belief in the work, seeing themselves as a progressive force in policing. On their own terms, these trainings are overwhelmingly successful—and they succeed in non-performing anti-racism. They create the appearance of addressing police racism, without ever addressing police racism.

## Notes

1. Laura Dimon and Rocco Parascandola, "NYPD to start 'implicit bias training,'" *PoliceOne*. February 18, 2018, <https://www.policeone.com/patrol-issues/articles/470642006-NYPD-to-start-implicit-bias-training/>.

2. Implicit bias trainings are one of the major recommendations of the *President's Report on Twenty-first Century Policing* formed in the aftermath of the Ferguson protests. See

*President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing* (Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2015). In June 2016, the Department of Justice mandated department-wide training in implicit bias for all employees, including all FBI agents, DEA agents, ATF agents, and U.S. Marshals. See Department of Justice, "Department of Justice Announces New Department-Wide Implicit Bias Training for Personnel," 2016. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/departement-justice-announces-new-department-wide-implicit-bias-training-personnel>.

3. Kimberlé Crenshaw and Andrea Ritchie argue that "the problem is not [...] whether the police officers in question [...] had been exposed to implicit bias trainings." Rather, the problem is that "police relations reinforce the structural marginality of all members of Black communities in myriad ways." Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw and Andrea J. Ritchie *Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women* (New York: African American Policy Forum, Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies, 2015).

4. Destiny Peery, "Implicit bias training for police may help, but it's not enough," *Huffington Post*, March 14, 2016. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/destiny-peery/implicit-bias-training-fo\\_b\\_9464564.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/destiny-peery/implicit-bias-training-fo_b_9464564.html).

5. FIP has led trainings in police departments across the U.S. and Canada and was the recipient of a 2016 Department of Justice grant to train all DOJ officers. It is also the recipient of a \$4.5 million contract to lead the NYPD trainings announced in 2018.

6. The other trainings were a one-day officer training and a one-day supervisor training.

7. Austin, J. L. *How To Do Things With Words*. 2nd ed. (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1975).

8. For example, see "Lovejoy hosts seminar on impartial policing, seeks to address bias," *Clayton News-Daily*. April 23, 2017, [https://www.news-daily.com/news/lovejoy-hosts-seminar-on-impartial-policing-seeks-to-address-bias/article\\_8d1079f1-d8f3-55f6-a369-ffaadad2721.html](https://www.news-daily.com/news/lovejoy-hosts-seminar-on-impartial-policing-seeks-to-address-bias/article_8d1079f1-d8f3-55f6-a369-ffaadad2721.html); Kelli Linville and Cliff Cook, "Here's what makes a successful partnership between a police department and a community," *The Bellingham Herald*. January 4, 2017, <https://www.bellinghamherald.com/opinion/oped/article124398014.html>.

9. Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2012), 117.

10. Malcolm Gladwell. *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking* (New York, Little, Brown, and Company. 2005).

11. Adam Benforado, *Unfair: The New Science of Criminal Injustice* (New York, Crown Publishers, 2015).

12. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 76.

13. bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Pluto Press, 2000); Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom: Towards the human, after man, its overrepresentation—An argument." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257-337.

14. Former Seattle police chief Norm Stamper has highlighted the role of bureaucratic mandates in shaping police behavior. "In a bureaucracy, what gets counted counts." Norm Stamper, *To Protect and Serve: How to Fix America's Police* (New York: Nation Books, 2016), 2-3.

15. Joshua Scannell, "Broken windows, broken Code" *Real Life*. August 29, 2016. <http://reallifemag.com/broken-windows-broken-code/>.

16. Hershini Bhana Young, "Inheriting the criminalized black body: Race, gender, and slavery in 'Eva's Man'." *African American Review* 39.3 (2005), 385.

17. For part of the study, researchers used domestic violence scenarios with race-matched black and white heterosexual couples. Although described by researchers as reverse-racism, the findings could alternately be attributed to gendered racism. The delay captured in the study could be described as a hesitation in responding to black women's victimization, compared to quick responses to white women being victimized. Lois James, Stephen James, and Bryan Vila (2016), "The reverse racism effect: Are cops more hesitant to shoot black than white suspects?" *Criminology & Public Policy*, 15:2.

18. Fair and Impartial Policing, reviews from Cheektowaga, NY Supervisors' Training held April 2015.

19. Fair and Impartial Policing, reviews from Central Florida University training, August 2015 [http://static1.squarespace.com/static/54722818e4b0b3ef26cdc085/t/565d0b40e4b0c7f0a1ed19eb/1448938304661/Central+Florida+patro+8\\_2015.pdf](http://static1.squarespace.com/static/54722818e4b0b3ef26cdc085/t/565d0b40e4b0c7f0a1ed19eb/1448938304661/Central+Florida+patro+8_2015.pdf)

20. Fair and Impartial Policing, reviews from Weston, MA training, July 2015.

21. Fair and Impartial Policing, reviews from Weston, MA training, July 2015.

22. Mason D. Burns, Margo J. Monteith, and Laura R. Parker, "Training away bias: The differential effects of counterstereotype training and self-regulation on stereotype activation and application." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 73 (2017): 97-110.

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24. Fair and Impartial Policing, reviews from Elon University PD training, July 2015.

25. See, for example, Oscar Gamble, "Montgomery County police, community, and NAACP attend training on fair, unbiased policing," *The Times-Herald*. April 11, 2017, [https://www.timesherald.com/news/montgomery-county-police-community-and-naacp-attend-training-on-fair/article\\_d49eb05a-d482-594f-8161-b12eba5ed4f5.html](https://www.timesherald.com/news/montgomery-county-police-community-and-naacp-attend-training-on-fair/article_d49eb05a-d482-594f-8161-b12eba5ed4f5.html).

26. Al Baker, "Confronting implicit bias in the New York Police Department," July 15, 2018, *New York Times*.

27. Ruth Wilson Gilmore. *Golden Gulag* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 28.

28. Derald Wing Sue. *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2010).

29. Fair and Impartial Policing, reviews from Cheektowaga, NY Supervisors' Training held April 2015. [http://static1.squarespace.com/static/54722818e4b0b3ef26cdc085/t/554e48c6e4b043d4fe640cc9/1431193798960/cheek\\_Supervisors+4\\_23.pdf](http://static1.squarespace.com/static/54722818e4b0b3ef26cdc085/t/554e48c6e4b043d4fe640cc9/1431193798960/cheek_Supervisors+4_23.pdf)



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# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Tomes! Enhancing Community and Embracing Diversity Through Book Arts

by Stephanie J. Beene, Lauri M. González, and Suzanne M. Schadl



IMAGE COURTESY OF AUTHORS. FROM THE EXHIBITION "TOMES" (2018). THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO

## Introduction: Paper is Power

Strip the inner bark of a fig tree, boil it until it is pliable, and sort the string-like fibers. Separate the lighter fibers from the darker, using a stone to soften and flatten the pulp. Lay them out carefully on a wooden board, connecting the pieces, and weaving in whatever unique designs you prefer, before drying them naturally in the sun and air. In the absence of bark, the leaves of agave, recycled paper, or cardboard can also be melted, stirred with other plant materials, then pounded into sheets, placed on lightly greased metal boards, and dried in the sun. This Mexican recipe for making paper (or *amatl*, its Nahuatl word) is both ancient and contemporary. For many peoples in Mexico, the act of making this paper is a bold expression of indigeneity, asserting the collective rights of community and connecting the present with the past through techniques passed from one generation to the next. It is also medicinal, according to the coordinator of Ya Mumpot Ei Pati (those who make curative amate paper), who cites amate papermaking as an ancient ritual that conjures natural forces to combat maladies (Gomez de Anda, 2010). Amate paper is thus a living organism intricately woven through the fabric of community and history. It is powerful: capable of crossing time and space and curing ills.

When the Spanish encountered paper among the Mexica in the 1500s, they perceived and feared this power. As Sandstrom and Sandstrom (2016) note, the native peoples of Mexico “used [paper] to make books concerning their religious beliefs, adorn statues of the deities and decorate temples, fashion priestly regalia, accompany the dead on their journey to the afterlife, dress sacrificial victims before putting them to death, make offerings to the deities in their pantheon, and divine the future” (paragraph 2). Painters of codices were known as *tlacuilos*, in the Nahuatl language, and it means both painter and scribe (Pohl, 2002, p. 18). Notably, Sandstrom and Sandstrom (2016) underscore that the *Codex Mendoza* records the annual receipt of 480,000 sheets of paper as tribute paid from Mexican peoples to Spanish authorities, who worked hard to confiscate, destroy, and replace amate paper with European variations, while pilfering native books or codices written by *tlacuilos*. After colonization, many codices were annotated in Spanish to aid the European reader and record “those who came to convert the indigenous peoples to Christianity” (Pohl, 2002, p. 20). Many of these codices are currently named after and housed in European repositories, depicting the “process of colonization and its effects on both colonizer and colonized” (Pohl, 2002, p. 20). It is thus important to recognize that communities throughout Mexico and the Southwestern U.S. have passed the knowledge of paper- and book-making down through the centuries—certainly before colonization—and they maintain its centrality within many communities today. Ya Mumpot Ei Pati note that curanderos from San Pablito in Puebla, Mexico, have maintained the ritual and its story in their spoken legends and in contemporary artisanship (Gomez de Anda, 2010).



## Bi-lingual/ Bi-cultural meanings

This article highlights important connections between the spoken word, handmade paper, cultural memory, and natural sustenance—in books and in artworks. The projects displayed in the exhibition slide back and forth between two worlds: books and artworks; pre-colonial and contemporary; English and Spanish, with a dusting of Mayan and Mexica languages. “Tomes (toh-Mez) + Tomes (tohmz) = Tomes” (“Tomes”) brings together two projects that highlight Mexican artists’ books as documents brought to life in communities through performance described herein. Following a description of the exhibit, the article makes a case for recognizing and accepting multiple meanings in the same construction, be it a word like “tomes,” or sculpted works of art presented and manipulated as books or printed portfolios. The English plural for scholarly books, *tomes*, is pronounced tohmz, and indicates weighty volumes of knowledge. In Spanish this combination of letters means something entirely different. As a conjugation, it is pronounced toh-Mez and means “you eat,” “you drink,” or “you take,” depending on the context. Written with no context, the signification is the same. Once spoken and heard, however, the word is remarkably different, depending on whether one is a Spanish- or English-language speaker (or both). The title of the exhibit plays with Spanish

and English for the distinct purpose of highlighting the prospective disconnect between at least two of the audiences our libraries and archives serve. Likewise, the themes referenced in the title—scholarly books and consuming food or drink—are equally significant because of their prevalence in the works displayed. One side of the exhibit displays contemporary codex-like tomes from an indigenous collective in southern Mexico, with a facsimile copy of the *Codex of Tlatelolco* (1994) as its backdrop. Indigenous paper- and dye-making practices connect structural, visual, and aural elements that invite tactile and olfactory experiences of indigenous papermaking. On the other side of the exhibit, five Mexican artists' books and portfolios, made to look like food or drink, are blended and served in a series of displays, inspired by diverse community interventions and descriptions of non-indigenous artists' books compiled at outreach events throughout 2017-2018. Care was taken to maintain continuity from one vitrine to the next.

Both sides of the exhibition invite interaction with multimodal, multisensory pieces that were created in and for communities. We struggled with the best way to create an exhibit that would honor this communal interactivity in a classroom space designed for a more passive and individual experience. Our intent in this article is to share how we integrated community as well as multisensory and phenomenological components by employing student and community engaged research in our design. We hope this article and the exhibit offer some insight into what happens when exhibits are reframed as educational experiences, sharing authority and expertise with audiences and community members. 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?

In a personal account and critique of traditional exhibition design, Kenneth Hudson (1991) writes, "although my mind was being adequately fed, my senses were not" (Hudson, 1991, p. 460). He continues, "Under normal conditions...in our daily life, we make use of all five [senses], but museums, like film and television, restrict us to only two, sight and to a lesser extent, sound. The result is...overintellectualized. We are given no chance to feel, to taste, and to smell" (Hudson, 1991, p. 461). In critiquing typical exhibition experiences, he says, "they are at best two-sense [experiences] and often only one-sense, whereas we all know that life is a five-sense affair" (Hudson, 1991, p. 461). Similarly, Elaine Heumann Gurian (1991) theorizes that, because we have internalized certain cultural preferences for some modes of learning over others, we have not fully exploited the sensory possibilities and opportunities for displaying cultural objects. She posits that "we have been taught that one mark of the civilized person is verbal ability" while "many of us also believe that in exhibitions focusing on aesthetics, the 'visually literate' person should know how to use visual cues provided by the objects without any additional assistance...and so we often do not write explanatory labels... and rarely use auditory, olfactory, or tactile techniques" (Heumann Gurian, 1991, p. 183). Multisensory exhibitions, in contrast, "offer many entry points," which "facilitate a range of learning experiences, without prejudice," offering choices and opportunities for visitors to utilize all the senses (Heumann Gurian, 1991, p. 184).

A multisensory experience may also be less Eurocentric and more aligned with indigenous ways of knowing. In other words, "the European tendency has been to split up the senses and parcel them out, one at a time, to the appropriate art form. One sense, one art form. We listen to music. We look at paintings. Dancers don't talk. Musicians don't dance. Sensory atrophy is coupled with close focus and



sustained attention....Absolute silence governs the etiquette of symphony halls and museums....In contrast with conventional exhibitions...which tend to reduce sensory complexity...indigenous modes of display...present an important alternative" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1991, pp. 416-417). The exhibit space in our archives and special collections, comprising 20 individual vitrines, was designed for close focus and sustained attention to individual items separated from one another.



In celebration of the codex, "Tomes" invites visitors to take in a multiplicity of sights, smells and textures. Events couple taste and sound as well as viewing. On display are works that challenge the silos and sensory atrophy that Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1991) critiques so eloquently, and the confines of our exhibit space presents. As one community participant notes, these two angles on Mexican artists' books suggest to the non-expert that the artists' book genre reflects an inherently indigenous expression, brought to life through collective action. Through the power of paper, ink, and memory, indigenous expression here engages multiple senses, emotions, and ideas as audiences consume or "take in" the book, evoking empowerment through enactment. Their interactions with these unique pieces transcend a mere display or reading of a label and result in an emptying that takes words off the page, food out of the bowl, and drink from the bottle, in order to feed the community.

Instead of viewing rarified collections as dusty wares to be carefully preserved, how might we, as stewards of communal spaces and artworks, provide better access and outreach so that communities can interact with pieces that richly symbolize their homes, their traditions, their native languages, and their families? Many universities, museums, libraries, and archives write mission statements that speak to multiculturalism, inclusion, and diversity, but words on the page mean little without context. How do we leverage these noble goals into performing better outreach and engagement with our communities and their collections, which are entrusted to us?

Through the yearlong process of developing content for "Tomes," we found that inviting community members to handle archival materials without gloves, oversight, pretext,

surveillance, or heavy guidance helped us learn alongside them, enabling us to gain insights that we incorporated into the exhibition. We curated objects, took them into the community, and asked the community what it saw, so we could turn a cold archival classroom into a communal table with wares and knowledge to share and "take in." The exhibit continues to evolve according to community feedback. We recognize how unusual an unfixed exhibit is within standardized archival exhibition and preservation

practices, but we believe our approach to collaboration is an effective tool for breaking down barriers to traditional authority and hierarchies.

As such, it helps to reframe our relationship with the audiences we serve and the collections we share with them. They are as expert as we are. Institutions are increasingly turning toward "collaborating with

partners and individuals in ways that do not privilege singular or dominant narratives," where "individuals...become producers of knowledge, where exhibitions are being planned through a constellation of perspectives, and the objects displayed are created as a product of dialogue and collaboration" (Pegno & Farrar, 2017, p. 169). By engaging active and potential audience members in conceptualizing exhibitions, these non-linear, complicated, ambiguous, open-ended experiences enhance our collective expertise (Villaneuve & Rowson Love, 2017, p. 47, p. 179). As museums, libraries, and affiliated organizations strive for financial and cultural sustainability, partnerships with diverse audiences who are "experts in their own interests...preferences..and values" can aid institutions in considering expertise along a continuum of shared authority (Koke & Ryan, 2017, p. 47). Of course, there is a range of comfort levels on this continuum, where institutions may choose to situate their relationships with patrons. "Tomes" finds itself "at the far end," in "the position where the institution gives up its role in [labeling] the experience and provides a platform for the community to speak" (Koke & Ryan, 2017, pp. 47-48). The risk we run, which has manifested, is that those who are accustomed to traditional descriptions felt alienated by the absence of traditional labeling. They didn't know what they were looking at and felt confused by the indigenous provocation displayed. This article describes how "Tomes" unfolded as culturally provocative outreach, using diverse collections and community experience to re-present the archives through a more public scope.

## Background: Demographics

The Southwestern U.S. is important to this project because, as our regional backdrop, the area defies absolute and categorical definitions. Should it be thought of as a quarter of the United States or as a cultural border zone? A north to the Mexicans or a west to Americans? (Meléndez, Young, Moore, & Pynes, 2018, p. 2). The region is not just a place on a map, but an idea, a concept, a human, cultural, ethno-cultural-geographic, spiritual, historic, political, and ecological border zone rich with features that have fueled



landscapes for generations. As part of what many call Aztlán, it is united with the rest of Latin and Central America through its written, oral, and familial histories. Our institution is a large public university in one of only five U.S. states where a majority (60.8%) identify as non-white. Reflective of this demographic, 59% of the university's students also identify as non-white; and of that percentage, over 42% identify as Hispanic or Latino/a, with nearly 10% identifying as indigenous (University of New Mexico Office of Institutional Analytics, 2018). Located in the majority-minority metropolitan area of more than 909,906 (United States Census Bureau Population Division 2016), more than 23% of the Albuquerque metropolitan region's population is bilingual; and of this percentage, 74% speak Spanish and English "very well" (The Neilson Company, n.d.). As Spanish-capable librarians at such an institution, it does not take us long to appreciate that Spanish-speaking communities are underserved by the special collections and archives, despite the notable institutional focus on materials from the region and in non-English languages; and on outreach efforts coordinated with multi-ethnic student services (Keating & Aguilar, 2009). A 2015 Pew Research Study, *Libraries at the Crossroads*, found that patrons who identify as minorities use libraries less than average, and then more often for services rather than collections (Pew Research Center, 2015). In a series of outreach experiments, we hoped to engage local communities around collections, heeding Durrani and Smallwood's (2008) call to respond to local contexts in innovative ways that "will enable libraries to... bridge the gap between the information rich and the information poor" (Durrani & Smallwood, 2008, p. 137).

## Projects Informing "Tomes (toh-Mez) + Tomes (tohmz) = Tomes"

The first project comes from two separate graduate-level research assignments: one was an independent study in which the student identified, described, and selected potential exhibit targets among Latin American artists' books, paying special attention to pieces that featured native languages and ways of knowing; the other research assignment, which became the basis for one half of "Tomes," examines how the printed works of Taller Leñateros

challenge colonial and Eurocentric ways of knowing, being, and seeing. Based in Chiapas, Mexico, the Taller Leñateros gives a decidedly indigenous answer to European-based knowledge and organization systems, bookmaking, and printed artworks. The English equivalent of the Spanish term *taller* is *workshop*, and in this case, it underscores the active and broad collaboration found within a community-based cooperative. The Taller Leñateros is a self-governing workshop comprised generally of Mayan women, yet the collective consists of a multiethnic collaboration of diverse peoples from diverse language groups and diverse socioeconomic backgrounds (Cinco Puntos, 2009; Taller Leñateros, 1999). It began without financial capital, relying solely on available spaces within the community, and emerged from the "collective ideas, and indigenous-peasant popular knowledge" of the group (Taller Leñateros, 1999).

The Taller's first book, *Conjuros y ebriedades: Cantos de mujeres mayas* (Past & Bañuelos, 1997), exhibited in "Tomes," was published in Tzotzil Maya and Spanish. It has been described as "the first book Mayan people have created, written, illustrated, printed, and bound—in paper of their own making—in nearly five hundred years" (Gies, 2010). The book offers the native Mayan language alongside Spanish, subverting the dominant hierarchy of English entirely. More importantly, the sculpted cardboard face that embodies the book cover implements ancient paper engineering, derived from recycled cardboard, plant pulp, and coffee. The face takes on color and texture from these living materials, transforming the piece into something more than a book. The cut out eyes turn the face of the book into a mask, incorporating the indigenous practice of "opening the eyes of the book," which, for Tzotzil-speaking peoples, indicates that the book sees-- but remains silent as long as it is closed (Gies, 2010). Like other performance

traditions, the book/mask only becomes animated once performed; in this case, once a reader opens it and speaks, or performs, the words to an audience.

Originally an oral language, Tzotzil challenges Eurocentric norms of the individual quietly reading a book, alone. *Conjuros y ebriedades* (Past & Bañuelos, 1997) is made for speaking aloud in community and not for reading in silence. In a poetic reversal such as this, a vignette might serve to bring more clarity to the situation. In describing a potlatch ceremony exhibition at the U'mista Cultural Center in Alert Bay, British Columbia, Canada, scholar Patrick Houlihan uses the terms "poetic impact" to describe the exhibition's design: "On the seating platforms surrounding three sides of the large, open dance area where the actual performance of the potlatch might occur, the masks, rattles, and other ritual paraphernalia of the potlatch are arrayed...By this placement the expected positions of object and visitor are reversed. The visitor is made to pass before the objects at rest in the places normally reserved for spectators. It is in this reverse placement that one experiences also the reversal and confusion of roles. That is, the object becomes the viewer, and the visitor becomes the object... And since many of the objects displayed are masks with eyes, noses, mouths, ears, etc, the confusion is real. Who's on exhibit?" (Houlihan, 1991, p. 206). Much like the masks and seating platforms, the vitrines line the exterior walls of the library's gallery. With some of the books on display having eyes that gaze and follow spectators, the books beg to be interacted with. They confuse the roles of observed and observer, as in Houlihan's example. Further confusing things, the gallery is also used as a classroom and meeting space, and is often filled with chairs and tables, aiding in the feeling of being watched from the display cases. For Houlihan, this moment of "poetic confusion" is essential to the exhibition of 'other' cultures because it forces non-indigenous viewers to confront the unexpected, beyond what is familiar; and in doing so, viewers are "shocked" out of presumed knowledge into new dialogic processes of learning with other communities and cultures (Lavine, 1991, pp. 155-156).

Line drawings and woodblock prints accompany *Conjuros y ebriedades* (Past & Bañuelos, 1997), as well as other books exhibited, such as the accordion-folded journal, *La Jícara* (Taller Leñateros, n.d.). Taller Leñateros promotes this publication as a "literary art journal.... printed in silk-



screen and bound as a pre-Hispanic codex" (Taller Leñateros, 1999). The journal focuses on contemporary literature, most often in the form of poetry, that is also meant to be performed—that is, spoken aloud. The significance of the *jícara*, *xicalli* in Nahuatl, and *rakure* in Huichol, is worth noting: this tiny gourd has been used in different parts of Mexico to serve liquids like chocolate, mezcal, and peyote; and is currently sold as a vessel for drinking tequila and mezcal. With its intricate line drawings that link delicate page to delicate page as it unfolds accordion style, the book captures motion in much the same way as the *jícara* pouring liquid from its container. This movement, metaphor, and symbolic significance is visually replicated by the engraving of a maiden, long hair flowing, pouring out liquid from a vessel on the cover of each issue of *La Jícara* (Taller Leñateros, n.d.).



The artists' books or journals of the Taller Leñateros are therefore much more than unique tomes for archival promotion or exhibits. They are the products of a culture, and the works of a community. In contrast to European-centered conceptions of individualism, the workshops produce knowledge that is socially intersubjective, with the first goal being to "document, exalt, and disseminate indigenous and popular cultural values: literature in indigenous languages, visual arts, and the painted codex" (Taller Leñateros, 1999). The Taller's works are always written in the native Tzotzil language, serving the Mayan community primarily, with Spanish or English as secondary translations, for the purposes of broader dissemination. As with other Native American groups, the preservation of their language and the act of writing, living, and disseminating their native

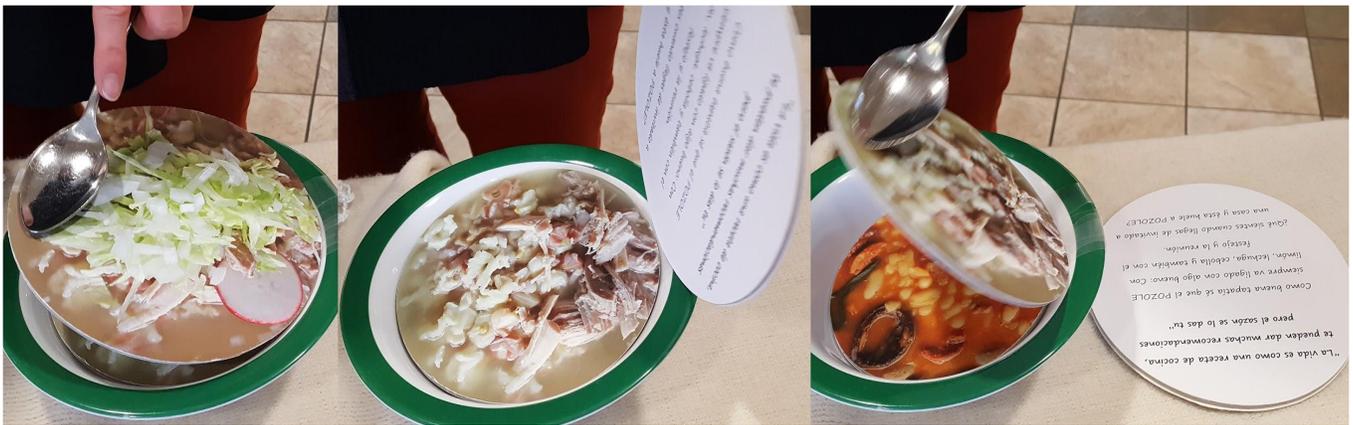
language is a way of saying, we are not extinct and we are not an artifact.<sup>2</sup> For the members of Taller Leñateros, the book is more than a tool for accessing information: It is a lived experience.

Taller Leñateros creates another embodied performance in *Bolom chon*, in what we might traditionally think of as a children's book. A jaguar leaps out as the child opens the pages of the book. An accompanying audio CD immerses the child in the sounds of the book, as Tzotzil children sing the song *Bolom chon* in their own language. The book transports the child into an oral story and performance, absorbing the reader and making the jungle and jaguar physically and experientially real. *Bolom chon* comes accompanied with a child's jaguar mask to wear while reading the book. The child reads while listening to the audio and wearing the mask, as they transform into the jaguar of the song. *Bolom chon* destabilizes perception and senses in a fully immersive, exciting, visual, oral, and performative media experience.

Another objective of the Taller Leñateros is to "recover ancient techniques that are disappearing, such as the

or served, food and drink because each of the artists' books incorporated, resembled, or recalled food and beverage. For example, one of the works selected for this project includes a bowl and a silver spoon as part of the "book." By using the spoon, the reader pulls magnetized life-like photographs of soups one-by-one out of the simple plastic bowl (Gurrola, 2013). Each turn of the soups unveils smaller images of soups within the bowl, into which the reader descends, literally and metaphorically consuming different soups. Each of the soups, including caldo (lime with chicken and rice) and posole, are well known to the audiences with whom we interacted. On the reverse side of each life-like image of soup are Spanish maxims, which can only be read once they have been taken out of the bowl by the spoon. The soup visually, metaphorically, and physically links the artist with the reader through the embodied act of ladling the soup - or flipping the magnetized photographs over and reading the maxims (Gurrola, 2013).

This process of ladling the soup forces the reader to use familiar tools, like a bowl and spoon, in novel and playful ways. Feeling the cool spoon and pulling back each



extraction of wild plant dyes and the recovery of indigenous languages" (Taller Leñateros, 1999). Pigments are made from native plants, paper is made by hand, and various types of glues are made from natural processes, designed to encourage and strengthen familial relationships as children and adults gather materials and preserve community recipes. This exhibition, like the communal bookmaking exhibited within its vitrines, encourages a linked community experience that lies both within and outside its gallery walls, promoting understandings of diverse cultures through dialogues on collaboration.

## Eat/Drink/Read: Sumptuous artists' books on display

The project occupying the second half of the exhibition is an innovative response to the call for multiculturalism, inclusion, and equity at an educational institution in one of the most multilingual and multicultural states in the U.S. We brought five rare Mexican artists' books out from the Special Collections to select programs and events that overlapped with the themes in the books. The five events were in public spaces where bilingual, diverse audiences could interact freely with the texts. Importantly, each event was near to,

photograph leads the reader to imagine the smell and taste of onions and lime, while simultaneously experiencing the warm soup swallowed and settling in a satisfied belly. When unique archival materials are shared with communities outside of the sanctity of spaces that adhere to archival restrictions, educators can learn from and with the communities they serve.

Instead of describing the pieces and instructing community members, we simply observed and recorded participants metaphorically consuming these unique materials. This project brings an oral history element forth from our local communities. For example, for some of us, posole brings us back to the first time someone served us posole as a child; and for others of us that is a newer experience, as an adult in the Southwestern U.S. The books' overlapping themes of Mexican food, drink, identity, and domestic intimacy centered around the communal table are understatedly powerful. Many of the participants we interacted with were very familiar with the recipes in the books, with mezcal and tequila, with tacos and tortillas, with caldo de pollo and posole. They had their own versions and variations of recipes, stories, traditions, and family memories. As a border state in the Southwestern U.S., many communities in New Mexico maintain multigenerational ties

through culinary traditions. The affective politics of food can be seen as one way to extend identity in the web of multilingual, transnational, social, political, and cultural networks (Arellano, 2013; Morton, 2014; Pilcher, 2012).

Like the *taller*, the selected artists' books challenge conventional definitions by incorporating sculptural elements, printmaking conventions, objects, scents, even tastes and smells into the conceptual structure of the book. They also document complexities in material culture, forcing readers to engage different senses and experiences. One 'book,' better described as a portfolio, named the *Karwinskii Effectus* (Herrera, 2012) after the intoxicative effects of the *Karwinskii* agave from Oaxaca, opens to sixteen original prints depicting different forms of inebriation and five carefully preserved and presented bottles of artisanal mezcal. The agave plant and indigenous patterns in these prints are reminiscent of characters found in Mesoamerican codices and contemporary popular culture, including *La Jícara* (Taller Leñateros, n.d.). The familiarity of these images and the beverage they accompany, not to mention the feeling of getting drunk, made this a highly accessible piece. Of the five we took into community settings, this item was the second-most consulted. For that reason, its images are predominant throughout the exhibit. It was also quite surprising to many in the community, who couldn't imagine alcohol in the archives, and were aghast at the sex and nudity depicted in some of the prints in the portfolio. Even so, some secondary teacher participants commented that the tie between alcohol and sex provided an excellent and accessible teaching opportunity on health literacy. Indeed, we were surprised to learn from a resident biologist that the animal depicted in many of the prints and on the labels of the mezcal was a bat that fed off the agave; additionally, we learned from a group of *mescaleros* visiting campus that the name *Karwinskii* is the species of agave.

Other reactions were delightfully unexpected: participants smelled the tea bags in *Hunab Hunab Ku: té de manzanilla sobre haikús* (De Jesús Villalpando González, 2010), for example, even though they have no smell but resemble tea.

A participant related tea to deeply personal memories, brought about through smell: "The tea is very powerful—the

smell makes me remember stories—memories." *Hunab Ku* (De Jesús Villalpando González, 2010) is a upcycled tea box with Mayan characters and lettering on the outside, which symbolize movement and energy in a spiraling design reminiscent of the yin-yang symbol. Words for harmony and balance symbolize equilibrium by their pairing with haikus and tea. Twenty-four individually wrapped tea bags are each printed with haikus.



Participants also smelled the mezcal bottles in *Karwinskii effectus* (Herrera, 2012), which surprisingly do have a smell. Many asked to taste the mezcal and, though most were half-joking, we often engaged in conversations about preservation. An interaction with a science resource-fair participant expressed interest in using *Karwinskii effectus* (Herrera, 2012) for research on organic farming and asked for a taste sample of the mezcal. After referring the participant to a local Albuquerque liquor store that stocks mezcal, we realized the opportunity to expand connections between creators and institutions such as ours who preserve and/or promote their products (in this case, both the artists and makers of mezcal, called *mescaleros*). An exciting output from this interaction was UNM Professors from the interdisciplinary cross-campus group "Food, Environment, and Resilience" convening these collections, including *Karwinskii effectus* (Herrera, 2012), with Oaxacan *Mescaleros*, local distributors, students, and community members.

Another book, made to look like blue corn tortillas in a tortilla warmer, employs Mexican papermaking recipes to create tortillas replete with family images, indicating the parallels between sustenance and the warmth of community around a table. The artist is Russian-Mexican, but her work emanates indigeneity in its incorporation of papermaking, visual imagery, ancestral memory, and the food that she chooses to symbolically represent. A group in our study passed around *Mis Tortillas* (Akhmadeeva, 2014) and read the back of each tortilla aloud, individually as well as in pairs. Participants helped one another with translations, all the while sharing recipes, ideas and memories, articulating their frustration with varied Spanish fluency. For example, a teacher participant related a story of inviting a *tortilleria* to class, explaining how the act of making tortillas together with this Spanish-speaking businessperson inspired a collection of shared recipes in high school classes, ultimately enhancing student engagement. We use this idea in our exhibit, asking participants to take a recipe and leave another.



The communal knowledge evident at these events underscored Alvarez's (2016) observations that learning occurs at the locus of taste, aesthetics, dialogue, and memory. Participants in the development of the exhibit shared stories and recipes through Spanish and English and gestures when words were insufficient. Performances ensued more than once as participants enacted stories in order to make relatable local and regional cultures and traditions. These interactions led us to envision the exhibit as a play between Spanish and English and the spaces in between.

One thing that was abundantly clear was that *Dies Solis* (1995) did not interest very many of our participants. The cloth-covered box opens to a fine-press book that can be propped open like a five-star-restaurant menu, alternating between prints and recipes. It is held together by a thread of red lettering reciting a tongue-in-cheek prayer for the last supper. We didn't even see this tiny red lettering until one of us, Suzanne, was making archival scans of the object for this article. While the recipes resonated with the local community, the high quality handmade cotton paper made them feel apprehensive about touching the book. Talk about the power of paper! It was the least performed artists' book of the grouping. In collaboration with the University Archivist and a fine arts student, we reenacted the red lettered subtext in the exhibit, extending it across the top of the vitrines in vinyl red lettering. We also highlighted the most accessible recipe, *caldo de pollo*, which tied it to our most accessible and performed artists' book: *¿Caldo?: sazónado con refranes populares* (Gurrola, 2013).

The range of descriptions used by participants opened a world of possibilities for how such objects could be described, as well as enormous questions of complexity. Adding these phenomenological components to the

traditional visual, written, and expressive literacies brings a richness and depth to a uniquely human experience. Certainly, the universality of some human experiences, such as the warmth of homemade soup, or the zest of lemon, needs no translation. Indeed, the reactions we observed from community members prompted us to imagine a fuller range of possibilities for instruction, exhibition, and outreach in library and educational services and programming.

Thus, some of the observations from the community forums worked their way into the exhibit which is the subject



of this article. The exhibit integrates and expands on some of these sensory components, inviting visitors to smell lavender, sage, and rosemary and to feel the tactile differences between twine, leather and fibrous papers derived of plant materials—all of which were used to make the early codices. Visitors can choose to leave haikus on tea bags that visually replicate the haikus on the teabags from the artists' book, *Hunab Ku* (De Jesús Villalpando González, 2010), or they can leave recipes in response to *Dies Solis*.

Through the process of bringing together these projects and communities, we identified several important lessons. First, words to describe may always be elusive, especially when dealing with objects outside of (or just outside of) one's own culture. Recognizing multiple ways of knowing, that is, multisensory pathways to knowledge, may provide one model for engagement. Second, what is familiar to some is always unfamiliar to others. Confronting this reality is essential for the promotion of diversity, but the process is messy and we must descend into the messiness if we are to succeed as educators. One cannot speak for someone else, nor represent someone else's reality. Therefore, creating buy-in with communities represented by an institution means allowing for other voices and expertise. Inadvertently, this also means being comfortable with your own ignorance and allowing others to inform your path to





learning. It means allowing for truly collaborative processes all along the way. “Tomes” works to center marginalized collections, produced by and for marginalized peoples. Installing exhibitions in spaces which are often historically dismissive of people of color breaks down patriarchal barriers, invites playfulness and creativity into uninventing and sterile spaces, and pushes the boundaries of what is possible in academic hierarchies. In order to shift the balance toward inclusion and empowerment, and avoid fetishizing communities like Euro-centered exhibitions have done to colonized peoples for generations (Karp & Lavine, 1991), care must be taken to create collaborative exhibitions that open up the frame of authority and level the field of expertise (Villeneuve & Rowson Love, 2017).

## Future Considerations & Conclusions

“How important is it to recognize the limits of one’s own understanding?” asks Allan Johnston, in his article in *Radical Pedagogy* (Johnston, paragraph 15). “At some point [during] reading..., and especially works from times, cultures, and perspectives different from one’s own... one [must] face sensibilities that are in many ways fundamentally different from one’s own” (Johnston, paragraph 5). Any organization which mounts an exhibition runs the risk of assuming they know what visitors want to see, or ought to see, and how they might choose to experience the works displayed (Koke & Ryan, 2017, p. 47). This exhibit is an attempt to subvert that tendency and extend the continuum of authority, offering visitors multiple modes for leaving their mark on the exhibit. Preliminary comments demonstrate how performative and tactile object-based inquiry leads to transformative learning. How do people interact with books that contain food, drink, and smells, with objects that recall recipes and make mouths water? How do communities interact with and describe materials whose intent is to push what comfortably translates between English and Spanish? How can we collaborate to provide better access to collections that represent their families, communities, or traditions? What sorts of differences are observed between the ways people handle and describe unique objects if they are not instructed first?

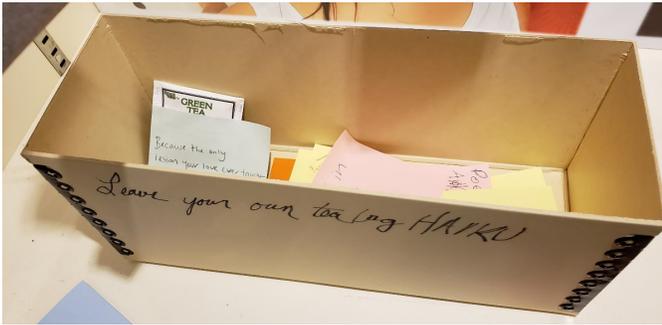
We are still exploring these questions. Indeed, “education is not only the content but also the *process* of

facilitating learning,” and “engagement suggests application, personal relevance, and usefulness of information” received (Blake, Smith, & Adame, 2017, p. 89, emphasis theirs). Through the experimental projects described here, we feel confident that the educational goals of facilitating learning did occur and are still occurring, even as we tweak the exhibit in response to current visitor feedback.

Working collaboratively with community members has its challenges. Engaging community members to reframe exhibits and programming as a cooperative process requires time, thoughtfulness, longer deadlines, and a certain comfort with messiness that comes with sharing ideas and products before they are finished. “While shifting the balance might make an institution more relevant to some, it can also disappoint traditional audiences who’ve come to... [expect] to learn from ‘experts’” (Koke & Ryan, 2017, p. 54). However, inclusive practices require empowering marginalized communities to come to the center and take a leading role in curation, education, and description—authoritative processes, which are typically internal rather than external. As we brainstorm the creation of a virtual



exhibit that will live alongside and complement the in-person exhibit, we again realize the excellent opportunities that emerge and re-emerge for educators, librarians, and archivists to critically engage the questions raised by these objects, the cultures that produced them, and what occurs when they are re-presented for others.



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# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Poem Sundown

by Peter Neil Carroll



## Sundown

Teaching adult teachers in the Mississippi Delta,  
I ask Wilmer, the oldest black man in the room,  
who was the oldest black man he ever knew  
and what, if anything did that old man teach him?  
Wilmer rubs his chin, speaks softly, without  
hesitation, telling the story he'd heard---

*that night in September 1919 when a posse  
shot into a meeting of sharecroppers  
planning to start a fair-price store,  
and the farmers, those not killed on the spot, fled  
into the woods, and for a week the hounds hunted  
them, treed the luckless survivors, whose bodies  
were tossed by the dozens onto slow moving trains  
trundling north and buried there by persons unknown  
who also could never go home---*

When he stops, the teachers sit stock-still,  
numbed by the horror, though not surprised  
how word-of-mouth keeps their history alive.  
Now with parched voices they tell their own  
stories---shotguns stacked at the doors, fear  
of sundown, fear of having business in town,  
fear even of what could happen tonight.



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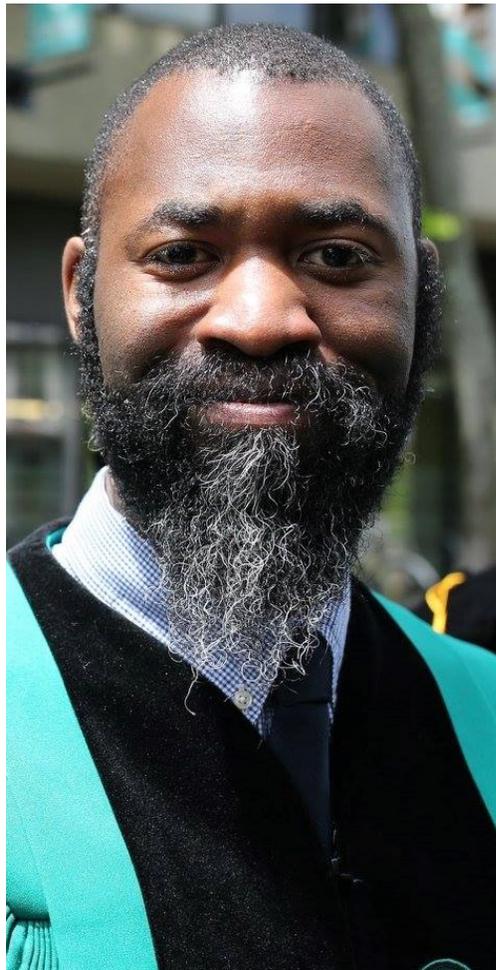
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# RADICAL TEACHER

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

Two Poems by MEH

by MEH



## when asked what i learned in elementary school being bussed from Mattapan to Wellesley

what they think is appropriate: to treat Black hair  
like a pregnant woman's belly, question if  
larger nostrils enhance breathing, probe my legs  
for extra calf muscles under skin our teacher said  
doesn't bruise because she can't see the blood-  
screams beneath. i learned to tolerate

the frumpy lies of well-intentioned white women—  
bosoms heaving, eyes liquid with *Reaganomics*,  
Willie Horton and how they imagined my parents  
(a crack whore mother, an imprisoned father)—  
and their messianic attempts to save me  
from my stable home. i learned to master

Simon-says skills; to be a chameleon; to code-switch;  
to bite my tongue instead of theirs; to make excuses  
for them, yet allow awkwardness to pant circles around heads  
asking what i prefer to be called (*Colored? Negro? African  
American? Black?*) never landing on my name. i learned to execute

the affirmative action of elementary arithmetic—  
( $\text{effort}^2 * \text{time}$ )/ $x$  = equity; that history is an art  
painted in primary colors: white supremacy,  
white privilege, white fragility; that darker shades  
are plucked out, passed over: crayons reserved  
for trees, rocks, dirt; that other tales struggle to sing  
through the cacophony of the single story (slavery,  
civil rights, poverty) muting a talented tenth;  
that i should be grateful. i learned to accept

that "Cohen" and "Karelitz" were nigger-names before  
my orange bus replaced their yellow stars; that kids  
say the darndest things when grandparents remember  
the *Shoah*, unlike others whose ancestors held whips  
or felt pilgrim pride in the face of fallen feathers; i learned  
to endure the cultural appropriation of slang,  
when every bobby and becky becomes "my brothah,"  
"my sistah," with teeth clenched, lips parted, hoping  
for the day they can reclaim "my nig. . .". i learned to drink

the cafeteria's chocolate milk, my back wall-braced;  
to never trust sudden movements; to fight for every inch  
of slide and swing, each papier-mâché turtle i "couldn't  
have created on my own"; to recite "today's a good day  
to die"— every day— down checkered halls to my seat  
beside the office secretary, she who understood  
the intersection of round pegs and square holes;  
to enjoy solitary confinement recess; to admire the ants  
who rebuild their lives after every collapsing storm  
or malicious white sneaker. i learned

that they think i can't swim.

## the surprising thing

*"...we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are,  
to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it."  
~ The Fire Next Time, James Baldwin*

i've only been called "nigger" once by a student— at least in my presence— and that under his breath. i wonder if i'm doing something wrong, if it's my fault it happened only that one time. i may need to make them more uncomfortable with my skin or centeredness, my uppity angry Black man way of calling spades, pots and kettles exactly what they are. racists, red-lining, mass incarceration, stop and frisk: all discussed with the mandatory minimum expectation that they consider their complicity through complacency. yet they remain unmoved in all the worst ways. the subtle things give me pause: their academic ease with Shakespeare, O'Brien, and O'Connor, how Scottish ghosts, draft-dodging Vietnam, and mass-murderers roaming the Georgian countryside feel familiar, yet Okonkwo, Janie, and Pecola are wholly "other"— their stories inscrutable, lives they "can't relate to"— their humanity opaque as the sharpie swastikas ill-fading in our bathroom stalls, the Snapchats of Black necks in nooses casually shared, the bombs threatening to shrapnel the mosques of classmates they never seem to see. hidden behind expensive laptops held together by MAGA bumper stickers, they demand to know why a student bussed from Boston would scream "FUCK WHITE AMERICA" and think it's appropriate (he was suspended. he's still screaming: quietly, more dangerously). and here i stand: still employed— picking cotton from fresh aspirin bottles after every utterance which slices a peace from my soul—and asking questions that make them cringe. light is unsettling. like when they tell me how their heads snapped right hearing a grandparent—or uncle, or mother, or best friend— topple the house of bullshit cards they built on the "post-racial Obama-era," with a sharp exhale of breath which revealed the truth bubbling in their heart. i ask them about their silent response. so it was surprising, struck me as odd, that it only happened when i told a white boy to put his phone away—the straw that broke his fragile back. deferred his dreams.



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Review  
*Awake, A Dream From Standing Rock*

by Erica Cardwell



AWAKE, A DREAM FROM STANDING ROCK. (2017). BULLFROG FILMS.

In January of 2017, just after Donald Trump officially became our forty-fifth president of the United States, drilling resumed on the Dakota Access Pipeline in Standing Rock, North Dakota. Just one month prior, the Standing Rock resistance camp of water protectors, indigenous families, and spiritual leaders were celebrating a victory after nearly a year of holding space at Standing Rock. In protection of the sacred land of the Oceti Sakowin people of the Great Sioux Nations, the drilling had ceased and an executive ruling from President Obama and the Army Corps of Engineers denied the permit for the pipeline. This moment of victory represents the power in collective action and peaceful strategies for world building underneath a capitalist regime, despite Trump's undoing of this historic motion. The ripple effect left an impact on the global movement for environmental justice.

*Awake, A Dream From Standing Rock* is a moving overview of the year-long fight for justice at the Standing Rock resistance camp. The film is a collaboration between indigenous filmmakers and activists Myron Dewey and Doug Good Feather, and environmental filmmakers Josh Fox and James Spione. *Awake* serves as an historical chronicle of the #NODAPL movement for environmental justice and the protection of ancient land. It calls into question the meanings of "ownership" and "development" as we examine a steadily evolving relationship to our shifting climate.

The film is useful to teachers with a "radical" commitment to addressing the present, and facing mainstream inequities head on. The question of "ownership" can be dissected in a range of teaching contexts, for instance, composition and literature classes looking at imperialist themes, as in Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" and other frequently-used texts. "Development," particularly as it relates to urban education setting, offers us a striking landscape of gentrification. As one of my students said in such plain and unaffected brilliance, "There's always construction." Those of us that consider ourselves "radical educators" take these particular terms to task quite often in our classrooms.

*Awake* demonstrates this in the form of lived/learned practicum--from the dedicated prayers and presence of the individuals at the resistance camp to the worldwide impact it caused. The global movement reached from Oklahoma to Australia, and from Florida to the South Pacific--indigenous communities were joined by non-indigenous and secular supporters organized against this fascist nightmare in a veritable attack on our foundations. Therefore, *Awake, A Dream for Standing Rock*, is not only a fantastic pedagogical tool but also teaches the significance of process in our collective liberation.

Presumably for its narrative construction of facts and memoir, *Awake* has been billed as a fiction film and not a documentary. It is framed around a dream, lending a non-

linear chronology to the format. The film is organized in two parts and is available on Netflix, which presents educators with the opportunity to assign out-of-class viewings of the film. Part One introduces a dream as the film's premise--recounted by Floris White Bull, member of the Oceti Sakowin tribe, water protector, mother of five. Floris describes her vision of the "black snake," the pipeline that will run beneath the Missouri river, threatening oil spills and widespread water contamination. Some educators could utilize the statistical frequency of oil spills and the long-term effects of water contamination (e.g., lead contamination in Flint, Michigan) as a learning tool in science and biochemical student research projects. And, likewise, in composition classes "limited clean water access" and "water contamination patterns" could be a generative research topic.

Also in Part One, viewers are introduced to key #NODAPL organizers such as Tara Houska, indigenous lawyer from Washington D.C., who outlined specific divestment strategies for meaningful acts of resistance against the pipeline. This framing offers context for social justice resources for banking, as we guide students and community to differentiate between capital and wealth. As we continue, the significance of the Standing Rock soil is instilled in the viewer, along with the psychic peacefulness of the community of youth and elders who refuse to fight despite rightful ownership of the land. As Floris's dream - - a consistent theme of the film -- can attest, these acts of resistance not only respect sacred land, but also act as a bridge in acknowledging our humanity.

On Thanksgiving Day -- Survivor's Day, according to the Great Sioux Tribes, in acknowledgement of their massacred ancestors -- members of the resistance camp constructed a bridge to cross the Missouri River. The youth offered a calm request for historical acknowledgement, clarifying the legacy of Thanksgiving in the context of their native lives. Part One ends as Floris realizes that she is not dreaming. She is awake. Her dream provides a difficult omen of conflict-- the November 20th incident where North Dakota police use water hoses, rubber bullets and direct force to overtake the resistance camp. Floris warns, "We are all guests on Mother Earth."

Part Two opens with a more somber tone as we enter the resistance camp at Standing Rock, hovering above heads bowed in prayer. "Church isn't over," someone cries out as the police attempt to interrupt. One leader stands up and greets the police, organizing the praying group in a chorus of "Thank you," continuing forward with the precedent of peace and sacred protection. The conditions have noticeably changed as winter sets in. Young activists handle and organize heaping trash bags of donated clothes and resources from all over the country--bringing into context the boxes set up in schools and community centers, with "Standing Rock Donations" scribed in permanent marker.

Along with winter, the press has also arrived, demonstrating the amplified visibility of the #NODAPL movement. In this section, the harsh realities of the front lines of Standing Rock certainly increase their potency, as

well as the complications of resistance work in our current technology-saturated age. Thus, surveillance rears into question, as drone cameras capture helicopters swarming in their persistent rounds. The police presence has also increased, as law enforcement officials not only “supervise” any entrances and exits from the camp, but also follow the filmmakers and greet them by name. Despite increased policing and surveillance, the overall energy of the community remains dedicated and even, as intergenerational circles form and sing Lakota hymns of faith and gratitude.

*Awake, A Dream for Standing Rock* is truthful context for capital-driven “development” on sacred land. For our students, it provides a powerful framing for the local and national issue of clean water access, bringing it from a headline to a reality. Above all, this film represents the heart of movement building -- deep and sustainable connections with community. *Awake* is a film to share with our students across learning modalities as an inspiring example of contemporary resistance work.



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## Teaching Note Nepantla: Making a Space for Discomfort in an Elementary School Classroom

by Abby Emerson

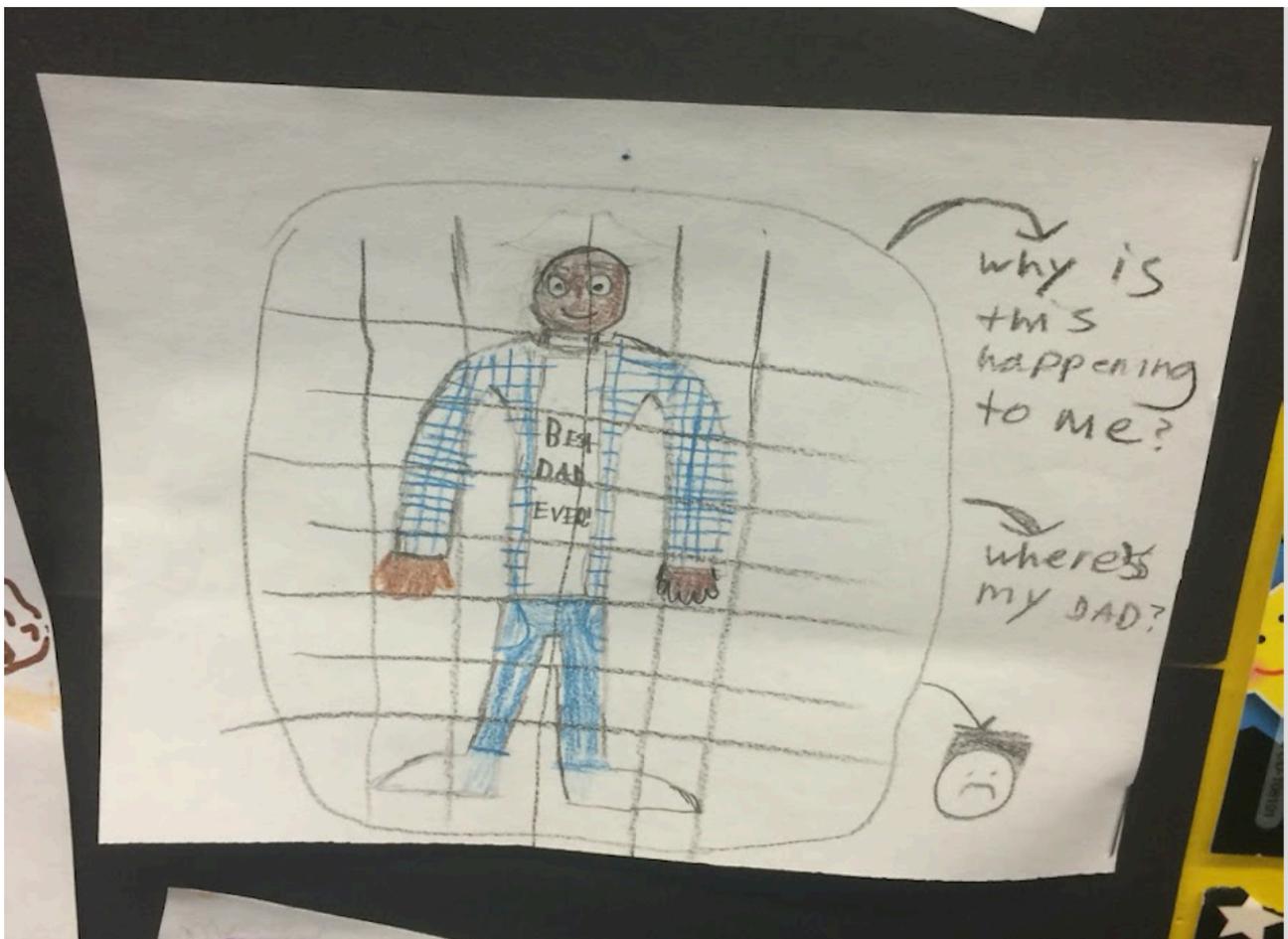


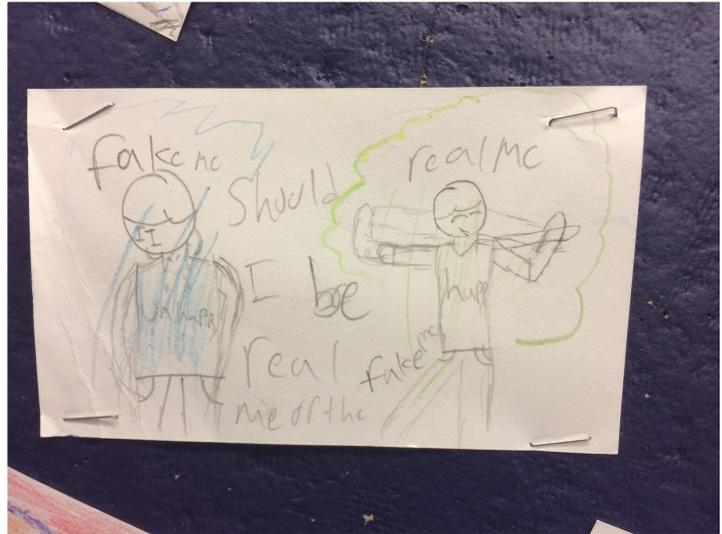
IMAGE COURTESY OF AUTHOR

Last year, I was introduced to the work of Gloria Anzaldúa through a course I took on Black, Latina, and Transnational Feminisms as part of my professional development. Many have used and still use the Chicana scholar's work in their research, their practice, and their pedagogy, and I wanted to see what she could bring to young peoples' lives if her work was shared with them explicitly. Our classroom sits on the fourth floor of a public school on East 3<sup>rd</sup> Street in New York City. Our classroom of 27 students is an ICT (integrated co-teaching) setting where students come with many different strengths and many different academic and social needs. There has been one concept I directly and concretely integrated into our fifth-grade classroom: nepantla.

Anzaldúa's examination of nepantla has been critical to the way in which I approach the socio-emotional work of the elementary classroom. She writes about nepantla in *Interviews/Entrevistas*:

With the nepantla paradigm I try to theorize unarticulated dimensions of the experience of mestizos living in between overlapping and layered spaces of different cultures and social and geographic locations, of events and realities – psychological, political, spiritual, historical, creative, imagined...

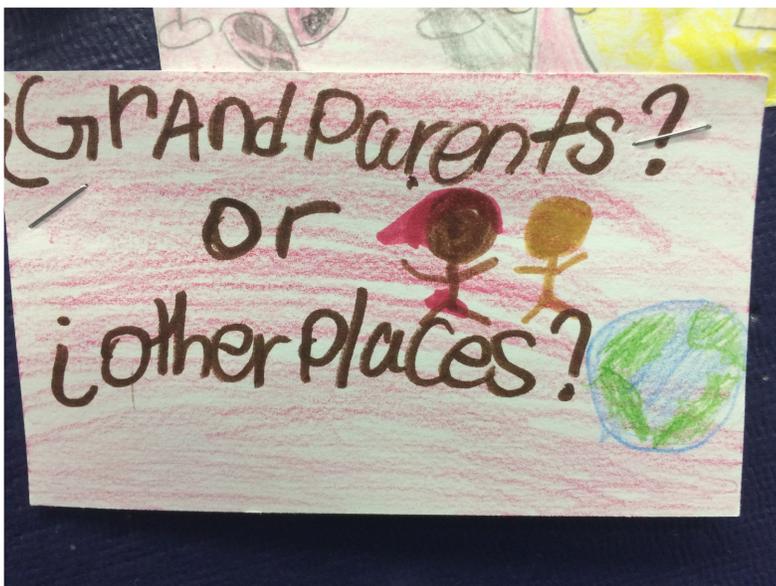
While nepantla is obviously a nuanced concept, I've explained it to my fifth-grade students in a language they can understand. My students are a loving group of children from various backgrounds. Many have family in Puerto Rico or the Dominican Republic, some come from families who immigrated from the Ukraine, and some Bengali students struggle with very real tensions around Islamophobia in our country. Nepantla has resonated with many of them and been very powerful in processing the "layered spaces" of their lives.



Anzaldúa writes about the transformative change that can happen when tensions around nepantla are present. Nepantla is a space of discomfort, but it possesses potential for growth, so I've worked to thoughtfully bring up those topics I sense tensions around with my students. By hearing about Anzaldúa's nepantla paradigm, my students make space for ambiguity in their lives through refreshing interpretations of the world. Children can sometimes see the world in distinct binaries (adults too!) and conversations around nepantla have helped them broaden their perspectives. It has also helped them see that they are not alone in their feelings of being "in the middle."

I first introduced nepantla during a morning meeting where we address the socio-emotional needs of the students. After having a conversation about the concept, the students brought up powerful feelings of discomfort present in their lives. One student expressed torn feelings around his father being in prison. In an artistic rendering, he first drew his father wearing a "Best Dad Ever" t-shirt and then drew the bars of prison over him. Making space for students' discomforts to be brought to the forefront allowed students' complete selves to start to have a place in the classroom. Students did not have to put on a front, but could show a range of emotions to their peers.

In later lessons students connected nepantla to conversations we'd had around gender spectrums and binaries. As we discussed multiple ways of being in regards to gender, students wondered, "Is this like nepantla?" They concluded yes. They also drew connections to historical figures struggling with activism. Historical figures like Bayard Rustin or Clara Lemlich felt compelled to public leadership for social justice, but also felt outside pressures or obligations that complicated their convictions. Students saw this as nepantla manifested.



By focusing on Anzaldúa, my students also benefited from the presentation of highly intellectual work by women of color. Our school uses a somewhat traditional socio-emotional curriculum, but I've worked to reframe the concepts they attempt to teach by bringing them up through other means. Instead of me, a White woman, explaining a concept from a binder I was handed in September, why not bring the voices and words of people that look like my students to the forefront?

Since incorporating Anzaldúa's idea of nepantla into the classroom, I have seen my students draw clear connections between abstract concepts that would otherwise seem unrelated to young minds. My recommendation for all teachers would be to find the voices of scholars, leaders, and activists that ignite your pedagogy or inspire your students and bring them directly into the classroom. It could be a scholar like Gloria Anzaldúa or it could be Civil Rights Activist Bayard Rustin. Socio-emotional content that we are already required to teach can be revised, transformed, and elevated by centering these voices.

Just as nepantla has encouraged my class to articulate the layered and complex spaces in their lives, our work as critical pedagogues must also seek to do that. As Audre Lorde wrote in "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," we must "descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of the future..." Nepantla encourages us to look beyond the black and white, the binary, the straightforward, and see different ways of existence. These existences are multi-faceted and multi-dimensional and that can be chaotic. However, when we embrace that uncertainty, we can emerge with a deeper knowledge of ourselves, our students, and our own pedagogy.

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## Contributors' Notes



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

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