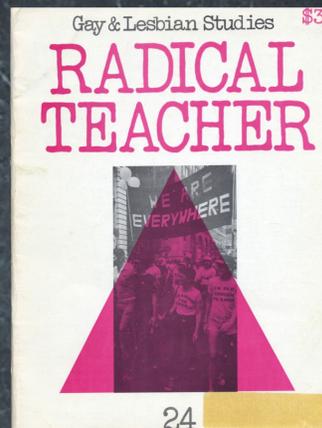
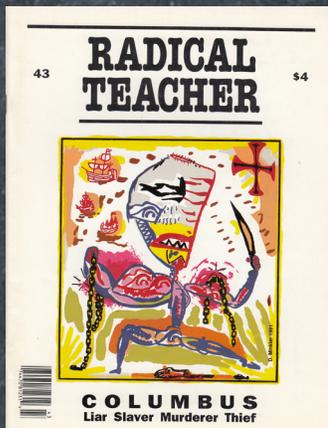
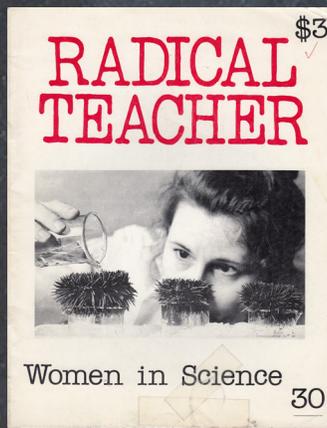
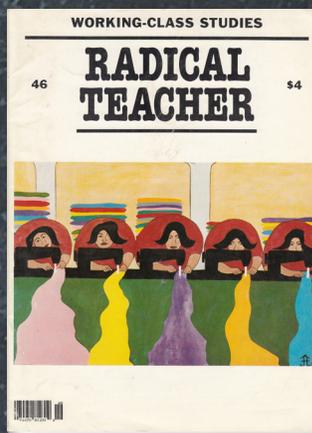
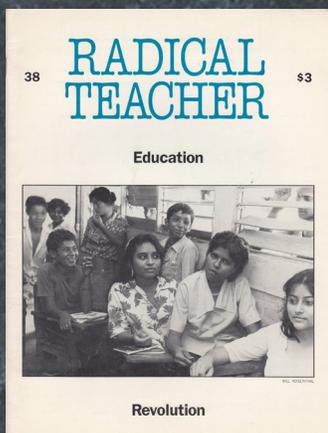
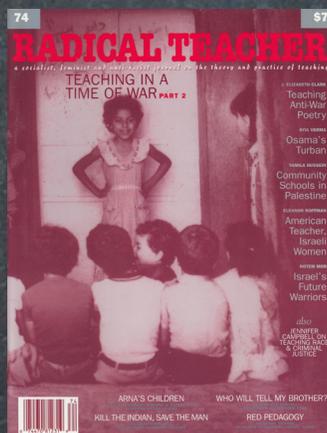
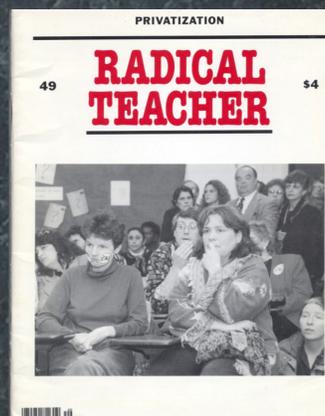
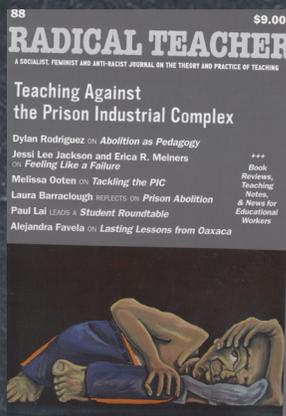
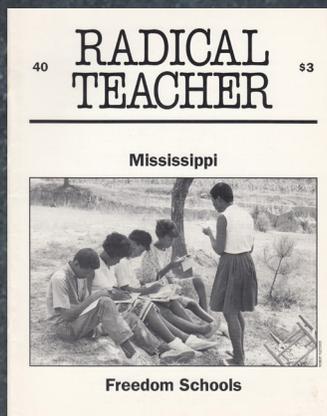


# RADICAL TEACHER

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



## Teaching Notes Greatest Hits

# RADICAL TEACHER

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## Introduction

by Bob Rosen

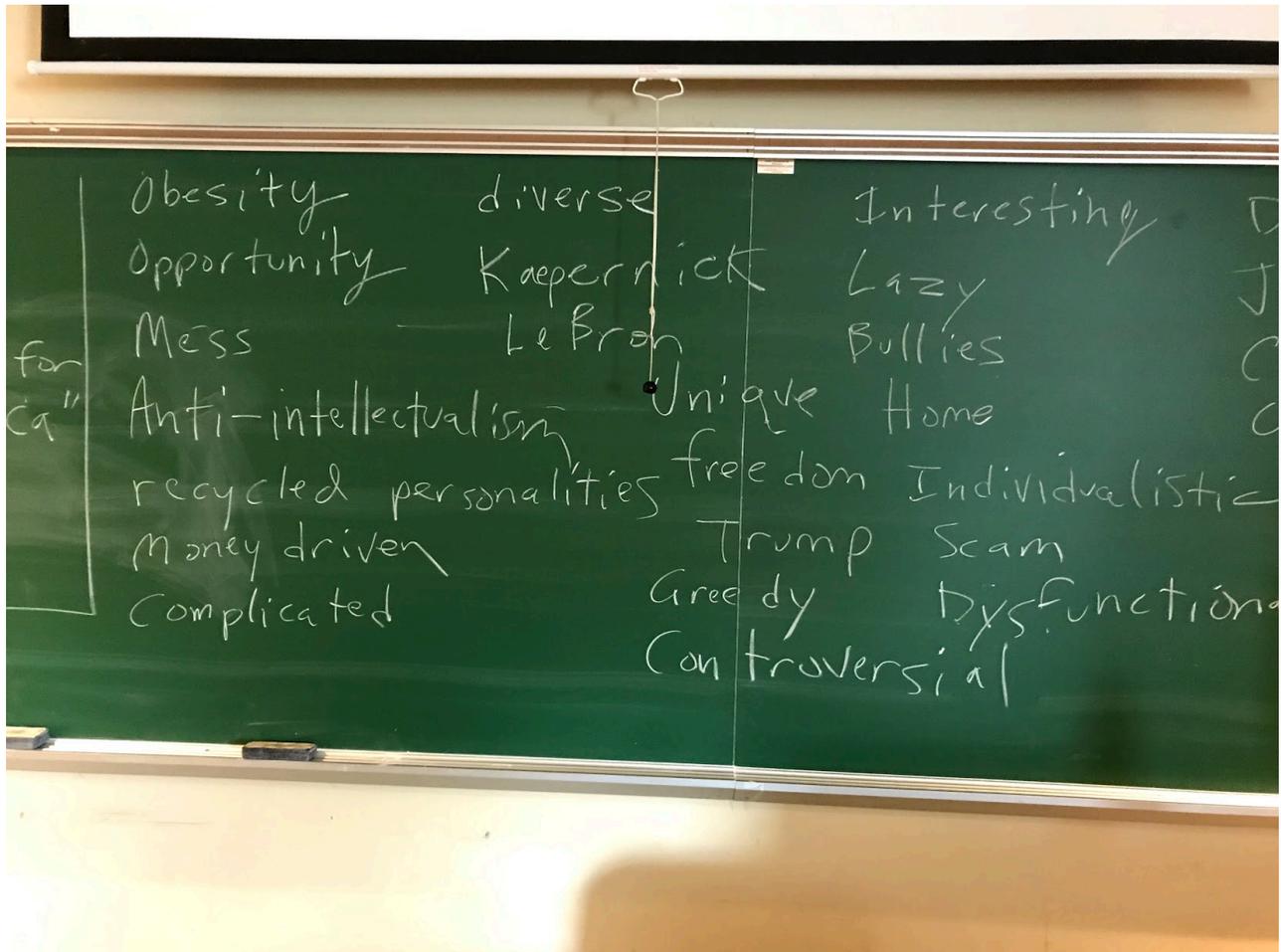


IMAGE COURTESY OF JOSEPH ENTIN

Among all the other retrospections that the present era has forced on us, the editors of *Radical Teacher* thought we ought to include questions about how the topics and approaches of radical teaching have changed over the years. What can four decades of classroom experiments in confronting societal inequalities teach us now? We decided to look at this question through the lens of the journal's Teaching Notes column, which began in issue number 11, back in 1979, when many of us were much younger. The editors decided at the time that it would be helpful to provide a place where contributors could write a brief description of a single book, film, poem, story, or other work that they thought our readers might find useful in their teaching. An outgrowth of the strong (though not exclusively) practical orientation of *Radical Teacher*, the column, we hoped, would spread the word about valuable materials and help busy radical teachers pursue their goals in the classroom

Almost four decades later, as many of us on the editorial board were waxing retrospective (and at least two of us were writing memoirs), we decided to reprint a sampling of past Teaching Notes. Six of us – Pam Annas, Jackie Brady, Paul Lauter, Frinde Maher, Bob Rosen, and Leonard Vogt – waded through over 300 Notes and cast several rounds of votes. In making our selections, we looked for Notes that were intrinsically interesting and, hopefully, still of use. We at first considered excluding Teaching Notes based on books that are now out of print but finally decided that just about everything is available somehow – whether from online used booksellers or Xerox machines or postings on Blackboard or downloadable pdf files. And we felt that even a good Teaching Note on a work truly unavailable, if provocative enough, could stimulate thinking about how to teach something else.

Our somewhat messy process kicked up the forty-seven Teaching Notes collected here. A few -- Jack Weston's rather dated 1984 Note on teaching "He Defies You Still: The Memoirs of a Sissy," for example -- we included because they helped mark an expansion of what *Radical Teacher* and many radical teachers were focusing on, in this case, homophobia in the classroom and elsewhere. And others we included simply because they were fun. Over all, we believe these selections provide a good picture of what the column has been and, we hope, of what has and hasn't changed for radical teachers over the years. This may not be "big data," but there are some patterns and trends worth noticing.

The early Teaching Notes largely reflect the journal's 1975 origin in the Radical Caucus of the Modern Language Association and its founding by literature professors.<sup>1</sup> Excitement ran high then for revising the literary canon, toppling its dominance by white male writers, uncovering lost works, bringing deserved attention to women writers, Black writers, and others traditionally marginalized. (The Feminist Press had been founded in 1970; Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press would arrive soon, in 1980.) Debby Rosenfelt's Teaching Note on a story collection by Alice Walker, as well as Pam Annas and Suzy Groden's Note on Ann Petry's novel *The Street*, are examples of early

contributions included here. It was a time when many teachers felt that teaching the right book could awaken the sleeping radical in students too long exposed to mainstream, canonical books, books terribly limited in their perspectives on race, gender, class, sexuality.

Over time, the approach to literary works featured in Teaching Notes grew more complex, as in Joseph Entin's Note on Anzia Yezerska's *Bread Givers*, and teaching itself became more complicated, as analyzed, for example, in Onita Estes-Hicks's "Teaching *Native Son* to Native Daughters." And what once might have seemed a very straightforward thing to do – teaching, for example, about the brutal history of slavery in a history course – revealed itself to be double-edged in Robyn C. Spencer's Note, "Mad at History."

As the backlash against the progress of the 1960s gained ground, and as Teaching Notes got longer (due to lax enforcement of the original word limit), contributors increasingly began writing not only about what to teach but also about how to teach. Much of this new emphasis on pedagogy started in Notes about teaching writing, not surprising given the English-centric nature of the *Radical Teacher* board (something we are always striving to change but rarely getting very far with) as well as growth in the field of composition pedagogy. This new emphasis also reflected the rapidly expanding trend, frequently analyzed in *Radical Teacher*, of hiring PhD's in English to teach Composition as adjuncts, which sometimes led them towards the left. We get an early glimpse of much of this in Buzz Alexander's 1982 Note on using Ira Shor's book, *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*, in a course for future community college teachers. And, later, we see a detailed discussion of pedagogy in Scott Oldenburg's "Grammar in the Student-Centered Composition Class" as well as in Shor's own Note, "Can Critical Teaching Foster Activism in This Time of Repression." And, in fact, writing courses, especially first-year writing courses, became a frequent site for all kinds of explorations: cultural criticism for Michael Bennett in "Teaching with *Writing About Media*"; anti-racist protests by Olympic athletes in a "compare/contrast" paper assignment for Lisa Verner; "race, class, ethnicity. . . sex" for Andrew Tonkovich in his Note on teaching Bing Crosby's and Otis Redding's renditions of "White Christmas."

Pedagogy is increasingly a concern in Teaching Notes about other kinds of courses as well. Mark Graham, for example, requires his students to create a wiki displaying their research into global commodity chains in a human geography course; Veronica Gaylie assigns future middle school teachers to develop a campus action in response to a film about war; Nathaniel W. Smith begins by asking students to guess the "race" of people in photos Frederick Douglass had used to show "the arbitrariness of race"; Linda S. Watts asks students to create works of art in a literary theory course; Vicki Reitenauer, as she describes in a long and detailed Note, implements a challenging program of "self-grading" in a gender studies course.

Some of the most stimulating Teaching Notes, usually more recent ones, are rooted not in success in the classroom but in stumbling, missed opportunity, mixed results, or simply failure. In "Reflections of a Transgender Medievalist," Angelique Davi describes being accosted by a stranger for her "gender-bending" identity while on a trip to London with a group of students and regrets letting a valuable teaching moment slip by. In "Ask More Questions?" Allison Rickett wishes she hadn't pushed her politics so hard, for she ends up diverting a promising student project down a reactionary path. And Mychel Estevez, in "Dear Solitary Black Student," contemplates the still unmet challenge of teaching his largely white class about racism without placing an unwanted burden on students of color.

In 1977, *Radical Teacher* published its first issue (issue number 6) entirely devoted to teaching women's studies, and feminist pedagogy and teaching about sexism have been central concerns of the journal ever since. Early Teaching Notes, such as Saul Slapikoff's on using Anne Fausto-Sterling's *Myths of Gender* in a biology course, focus on exposing students to the fact of sexism. Similarly, Philip Frisk writes about teaching "Barbie Doll," a poem in which Marge Piercy hammers home the impact of a sexist culture. Later Notes, such as Anna Kurian's "Teaching *Titus Andronicus* in Contemporary India" and Erin Hurt's "Deconstructing 'Real' Love in the Classroom," about a course on "chick lit," complicate things by pressing students to become resisting readers. And Perin Gurel, in "Transnational Feminism, Islam, and the Other Woman: How to Teach," challenges feminist teachers to look at their own biases, at the ways they themselves have been socialized.

Over one fifth of the Teaching Notes reprinted here involve LGBTQ issues, not surprising since *Radical Teacher* addressed these issues early and often. And as the struggle for what was called "gay liberation" evolved, the Teaching Notes did as well. Early Notes, such as Cathy Hoffman and Diane Raymond's on the film *Pink Triangles* or Jack Weston's on "Memoirs of a Sissy," emphasize the importance of exposing students to the oppression of gay men and lesbians. Later Notes, reflecting later movement activism, bring in transgender issues: Daniel Farr writes of "Problematizing Sex/Gender with Transgender Marriage Law" and two Notes published together, by Alexandra Barron and by Charles Nero, focus on teaching the film *Boys Don't Cry*. The second of the two, "Boyz Do Cry: Screening History's White Lies," complicates the issue of transphobia with questions of race, as of course happened in LGBTQ movements themselves.

Race/ethnicity has been a consistent focus of *Radical Teacher*, and this too has been reflected in its Teaching Notes. In an early one, Susan Radner recommends the still very valuable 1987 film *Ethnic Notions*, which traces the changing ideological work done by stereotypes of African Americans during the slavery and Jim Crow eras. George Mariscal describes the ways short stories by Dagoberto Gilb push students "to consider class, gender, and ethnicity together" in a course on Chicano literature. Julie Bolt sees Sherman Alexie's collection *The Toughest Indian in the World* as a "great tool for complicating the issue of identity." Richard Hughes asks history students to look back at a 1938

*Federal Housing Authority Underwriting Manual* to discover the ways the US government helped create "a racialized version of the American Dream." And librarian Angela Pashia conducts an information literacy lesson that asks students to analyze tweets and news reports surrounding the 2014 uprising against police violence in Ferguson, Missouri.

Issues of class and class consciousness inform many of the Teaching Notes included here, but are perhaps best dramatized in James Thompson's Note on leading his literature students from a discussion of the safely distant class hierarchy of 18<sup>th</sup> Century England to a more clear-eyed view of class and exploitation in their own world. Other Notes take on other issues: Sanford Radner uses Graham Green's *The Quiet American* to teach about imperialism; Margaret Cruikshank uses herself as Exhibit A in teaching "Feminist Gerontology" in her women's studies course; Navyug Gill asks history students to compare the political spectrum they see in today's public discourse to that of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Europe in "Overcoming Being Overwhelmed in the Trump Era."

This introduction only touches on the rich collection here. We hope you'll find inspiration in some of these Teaching Notes and, better yet, consider submitting one of your own.<sup>2</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a good overview of the history of *Radical Teacher*, see the introduction by Michael Bennett, Linda Dittmar, and Paul Lauter to issue 100.

<sup>2</sup> Serendipitously, the poems accompanying this issue function as a Teaching Note grounded in a collective creative writing exercise on two topics: violence against women, and birth practices and reproductive justice. Do check them out.

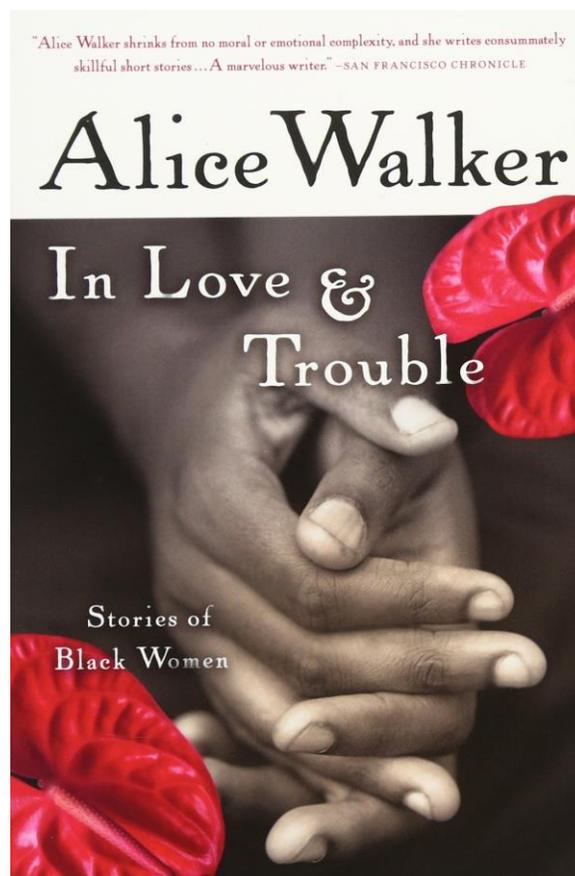
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## In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.15, 1980)

by Deborah Rosenfelt



*IN LOVE & TROUBLE: STORIES OF BLACK WOMEN* (MARINER BOOKS, 2003)

***In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women.* Alice Walker. Harcourt, Brace.**

These stories portray the sufferings and strengths of Black women in a wide variety of roles: from the old-fashioned Christian of "The Welcome Table" to the cultural nationalist poet of "Entertaining God"; from the frustrated hairdresser of "Her Sweet Jerome" to the strong farm woman-mother of "Everyday Use"; from the rootwoman of "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff" to the doctoral candidate of "To Hell with Dying"; from the garment industry worker "Roselily" to the writer of "Really, Doesn't Crime Pay?" This range led one of my students to remark, "I'll never say 'the Black woman' again."

In these stories, the Southern penchant for the grotesque and the Gothic becomes a revelation of the injuries inflicted on human personality and human relationships by racism, sexism, and the barriers of class. The stories grow out of a dialectic vision: they are structured around the contradictions between the old and the new (the old South, the old Negro; the new South or the urban North, the new Afro-American); between tradition and progress; between tradition as a source of strength and tradition as a source of oppression; between the lived realities of Black life in America and the theories of Black nationalism and Black revolution.

I have used this book for a number of years in upper-division classes in Women and Literature and Literature and Social Change, though it would be appropriate for any courses in contemporary American literature and/ or the short story. Usually, I ask each student ahead of time to pick one story s/he particularly likes to "teach" to the rest of the class. The students, mostly white, mostly from blue- and white-collar families, find them both instructive and moving. They enjoy analyzing the similarities and differences between the women's experiences here and those in works by white women writers and Black male writers. The content, while teaching something about Black culture, challenges their often stereotypical notions about Black women, as does Walker's sheer virtuosity as a writer. For, though the prose style is simple and accessible even to weak readers, the array of techniques -- variations in point of view, the uses of dialogue, a tonal range from irony to compassion, a control of image -- make them fun to analyze as literature too.



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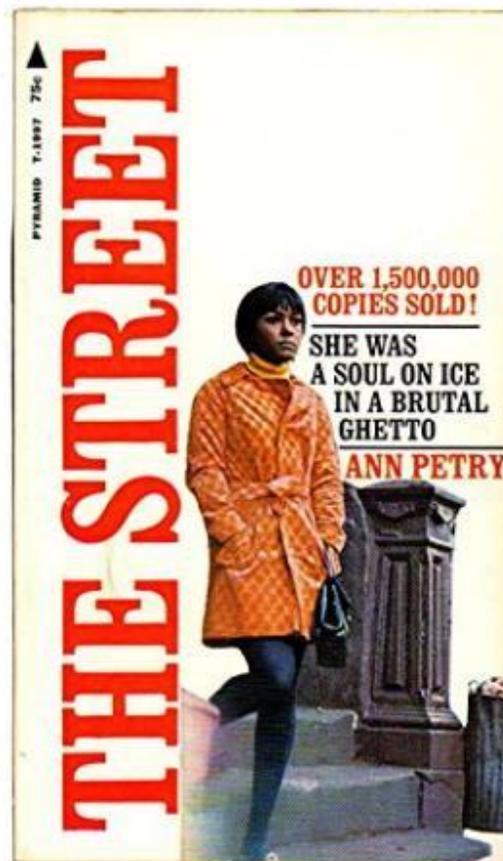
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## The Street

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.20, 1982)

by Pamela Annas and Suzy Groden



THE STREET BY ANN PETRY (HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT, 1946)

**The Street. Ann Petry. Pyramid, 1946.**

**T**he *Street* provides a powerful image of the complex ways sex, race, and class intersect -- in the life of a young black woman living in Harlem in the 1940s -- to constitute a single, unified oppressive reality.

We (Pamela Annas, Howard Cohen, Suzy Groden, David Hunt) taught this 1946 novel in Foundations in Law and Justice, an eight-credit interdisciplinary writing course for first-year students. Especially when socialists teach it, the course focuses on the gaps between law and justice. Our particular team consisted of persons trained in literature, philosophy, classics/cognitive developmental theory, and history. *The Street* shaped class discussion of the problems associated with defining and attaining social justice and, because it presents complex social issues clearly, subtly, and metaphorically, it turned out to be the point in the semester where students first understood imaginative writing.

Lutie Johnson, the central character, is determined to transcend the potential of her environment to crush and corrupt her:

She was going to stake out a piece of life for herself. She had come this far poor and black and shut out as though a door had been slammed in her face. Well, she would shove it open; she would beat and bang on it and push against it and use a chisel in order to get it open.

Lutie is a fighter, but by the end of the novel she loses, for as a young and beautiful woman she is the target of everyone's needs, wants, and fears. The white women she used to work for feared she wanted their husbands (in fact she wants nothing to do with any man); black women ignore her, or think she wants their men, or try to sell her to other men; white men try to buy or bribe her; black men try to rape or pimp her. Since no one is going to derive any benefit from Lutie leaving the street, there is an actively indifferent resistance to her struggles that finally defeats her through her own anger.

The characters on Lutie Johnson's street are symbolic and grotesque: Mrs. Hedges, an enormous strong scarred survivor of an apartment building fire, who sits all day in a ground floor window of Lutie's building, who sees and knows everything, and who names "the street"; Jones, the building super, who has lived so long in basements he "ain't human no more"; Junto, the squat white man who owns most of the street and who seems to have no personal life; Min, the shapeless woman who drifts in to live with Jones.

Each character is essentially alone. There is no community on the street. Lutie Johnson's struggle to preserve her integrity and self-respect is carried on in an environment of men and women who represent both the power of the street to defeat and shape lives and the capacity of human beings to discover ways to exploit, in both the negative and the positive senses of that word, any environment in order to survive.



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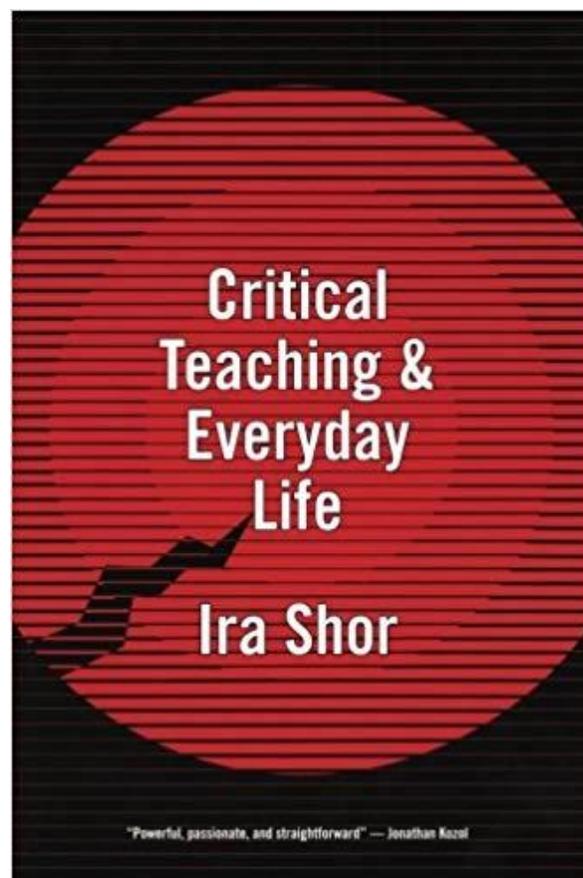
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## Critical Teaching and Everyday Life

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.20, 1982)

by Buzz Alexander



CRITICAL TEACHING & EVERYDAY LIFE BY IRA SHOR (UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, 1980)

**Critical Teaching and Everyday Life. Ira Shor. South End Press.**

Shor's book and teaching begin with an analysis of the community college, both generally and as he knew it during open admissions in New York: the economics of its establishment, the politics of its architecture, the students it serves, and how it serves them. Then he sketches out in general and demonstrates in stimulating detail an education for critical consciousness. He teaches from the everyday lives of the students -- their work, relationships, consumption habits -- and he practices a pedagogy of active student participation which involves the "withering away" of the teacher into an engaged and responsible facilitator and fellow participant in the learning process, as students work together and assert themselves in their education. A course moves from analysis of particulars -- a chair, one's worst job -- to various levels of abstraction and generalization, and Shor's knowledge of pre-writing, voicing, dialoguing, and drafting aid in making writing a shared, challenging experience for initially indifferent and even hostile students. Student-generated projects include the writing of marriage contracts and the rewriting of the college's stated Mission. The results in learning atmosphere and in students taking on responsibility for their own learning, lives, and society are remarkable and exciting. This book is the most substantial available presentation of methods for transferring Paulo Freire's pedagogy from the third to the first world.

After investigating George Steiner's questions about the viability of language and literature in the face of the Nazi experience, Stanley Milgram's experiments in obedience to authority, Richard Ohmann's radical critique of English teaching and use in America, and Freire's pedagogy, we came, in a core course for Doctor of Arts students (mostly community college teachers) at the University of Michigan, to Shor's book. The earlier texts established problems and possibilities, but nothing very concrete for the American college classroom, and Shor's work was vital. Most of the DAs who were teaching at the time immediately made dramatic changes in their classroom approaches and now talk of the results as being central to their thinking about education. They invited Shor to campus and with him raised questions that took us all beyond the book. The book is essential for teachers looking for reformulation of and recommitment to their teaching, whether on a radically political basis or not. Undergraduates who have worked with me in my course on Vietnam and film insist that I assign it as reading for my small-group facilitators, both because of its explanation of the politics of education and because of its strategies for student generated learning.



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## Pink Triangles

(*RADICAL TEACHER* NO.23, 1983)

by Cathy Hoffman and Diane Raymond



*PINK TRIANGLES* (CAMBRIDGE DOCUMENTARY FILMS, 1982)

***Pink Triangles*. Directed by Margaret Lazarus and Renner Wunderlich. 34 minutes. With Study Guide.**

**P**ink Triangles is a wonderful documentary which looks at the experiences and history of gay men and lesbians from a political angle. It tries to unravel the texture and causes of homophobia. Through interviews, on-the-street commentary, and footage from the 1930s and 1950s, this film documents the oppression of gay men and lesbians and suggests some connections between the treatment of gay people and other "minorities." There are particularly moving scenes from the Nazi concentration camps and interviews with Moral Majority leaders who call for the introduction of capital punishment for the homosexual.

This film is useful in several different contexts. It is obviously appropriate for any course which touches on homosexuality and lesbianism. It is also useful for raising questions about the nature of prejudice and the fascist nature of a state which dictates political and sexual conformity.

A Study Guide which accompanies the film is designed to help the teacher round out discussion or create a larger unit on issues relating to homosexuality and homophobia. The Guide also contains exercises which may help the instructor motivate more personal discussion.

The film has been used at Bentley College in several philosophy courses, including one on feminism and an introductory course with a section on sexual morality and stereotyping. Students generally believe that they are more "liberal" than the people interviewed in the film, and they are usually shocked and moved when the ensuing discussion quickly elicits their own homophobia. The instructor should take advantage of the broader political message of the film, for students do not often have the opportunity to tie together discussions of race, class, and sex oppression in the way that *Pink Triangles* does; though they frequently balk at such analyses, students cannot help but be struck by the similarities. Given more class time, one could use this film in conjunction with, for example, *The Word Is Out*, which looks at the individual lives of twelve gay men and lesbians.

*Pink Triangles* is an important film. It forces each of us to examine our own homophobia and its sources; with the rise of the "New Right" and its agenda of repression, there is no more pressing time for such an examination.



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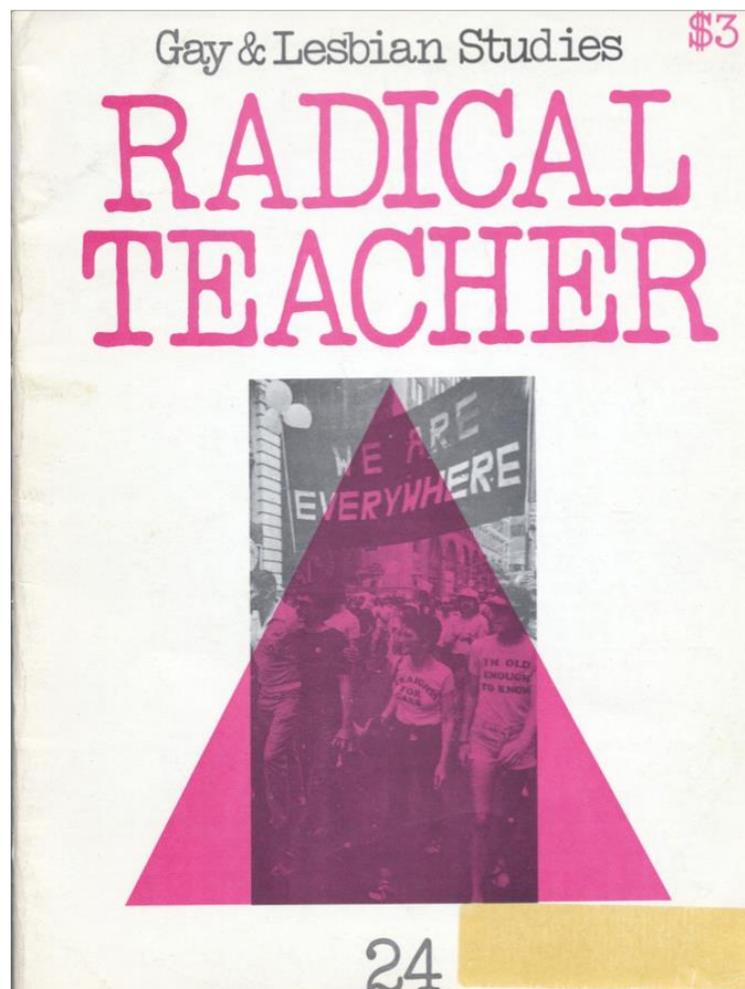
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## He Defies You Still: The Memoirs of a Sissy by Tommi Avicoli

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.27, 1983)

by Jack Weston



***He Defies You Still: The Memoirs of a Sissy* by Tommi Avicolti in *Radical Teacher* No. 24**

I used this memoir with good results in a second-semester composition class, sexually mixed and all (I think) straight, at U. Mass./ Amherst. Avicolti tells movingly and dramatically what it was like being gay in high school in the late '60s. I needed a short account to read in class (without threats of quizzes, my first-year composition students don't do assigned reading) in order to stimulate discussion and consequently themes for a paper. This was the second time I'd taught the course, which I devised, in which students write in two-week units about their own experiences (including friends, family, media) with sexism, racism, classism, anti-Semitism, anti-ethnicism, and, finally, heterosexism. The first time around, I had difficulty with the unit on heterosexism, probably because I was nervous with it and so put it off till the end, when we were rushed. This time I took it up third (next time, I'll put it second, right after sexism, because of all the connections), and after defining the new topic, sternly limiting our concerns to examining anti-social attitudes, behavior, and institutions (i.e., no attacks on homosexuals or defenses of homophobia), and telling something of my own history of and struggles against homophobia, I read Avicolti's memoir in three stages, with pauses for discussion.

There was lots of it, thoughtful, humane, and self-searching, mainly because many of my students hadn't thought before about the sufferings of young gays. I asked them to write not just a confessional but a useful paper about (1) an aspect of their own or a friend's homophobia, (2) an analysis of a heterosexist incident or social or cultural phenomenon, or (3) an explanation of how the writer avoided homophobia. I offered an alternative topic for students uncomfortable with the subject. But all twenty of the papers were about homophobia, and most were much better than those on the other subjects of the course - although about half appended notes asking me not to read the paper aloud in class.

I received the distinct impression that most of my students welcomed the chance to write about a heretofore suppressed subject - there was a kind of outpouring. Several papers were most gratifying: moving, honest, significant; three of these were about reactions to discovering that a friend or relative was gay or lesbian. Next time, I'll find short pieces like Avicolti's to read with the other units.



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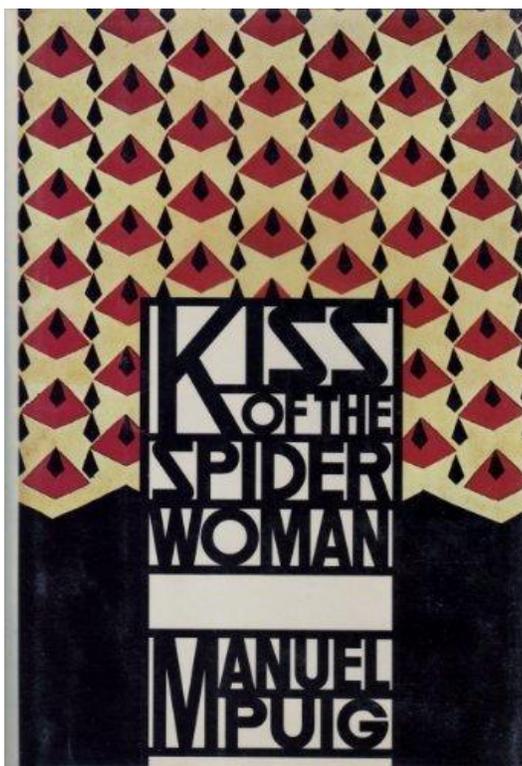
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## Kiss of the Spider Woman

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.29, 1985)

by Louis Kampf



*KISS OF THE SPIDER WOMAN* BY MANUEL PUIG (1976)

***Kiss of the Spider Woman*. Manuel Puig. Translated from Spanish by Thomas Colchie. Vintage.**

This novel, written by an Argentinian exile now living in New York City, follows the evolving relationship of two male prisoners locked up in the same cell. One is in jail for being a revolutionary Marxist, the other for being gay. Circumstances force them to relate to each other's ways of feeling, thinking, loving. The gay prisoner delights in telling the plots of campy old movies. The Marxist has ideological difficulties with these movies; the resulting clash of sensibilities is the device through which Puig unfolds both the plot and the politics of the novel. Not since the publication of Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* have I read a work of fiction which so resolutely and convincingly ties the political to the sexual. The prisoners' discussions, though deadly serious, are very funny. Though ultimately tragic, the suspenseful plot makes one feel good about some human beings.

I used *Kiss* in "Sex Roles in European and Latin American Fiction," a women's studies course I team-taught at M.I.T. with a woman. The students (23 women, 5 men) reacted very favorably to the novel, though two of the women were offended by the descriptions of gay male sex. Discussion was lively, largely sane, though often misguided. The teacher should be prepared to deal with some students' weird, though not necessarily malicious, notions. The warm human generosity and powerful intelligence of *Kiss* ultimately convinced the students that it was intimately related to their own lives.

The novel can readily be used for courses on modern fiction, gay studies, film, politics, and much else.



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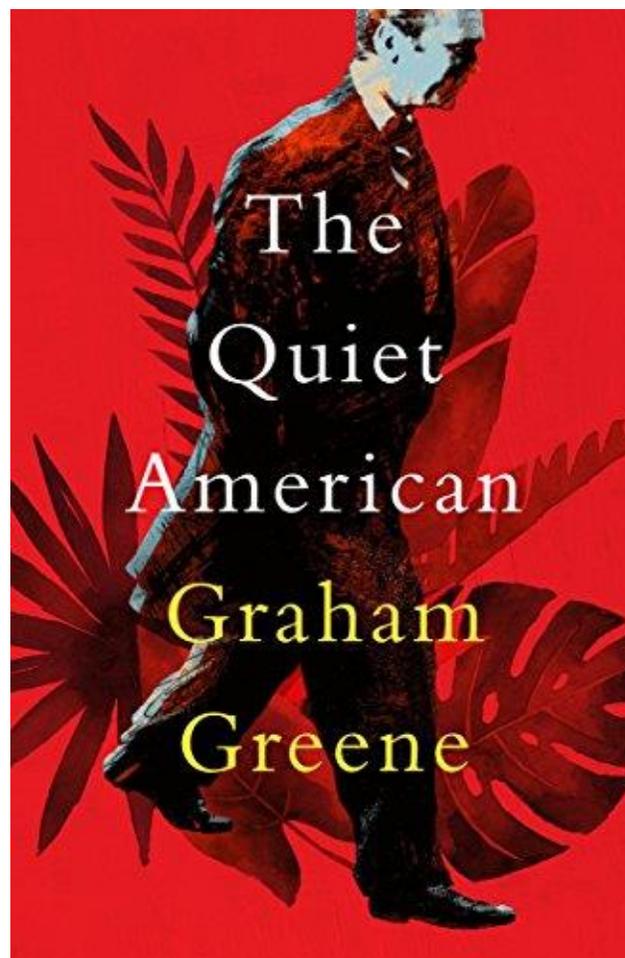
# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## The Quiet American

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.31, 1986)

by Sanford Radner



THE QUIET AMERICA BY GRAHAM GREENE (HEINEMANN, 1955)

***The Quiet American.* Graham Greene. Penguin Books.**

In some eras (our own Reagan 1980s, for example) political radicalization is often accomplished most effectively by indirection. Greene's 1955 novel is a case in point: set in Vietnam on the eve of the French expulsion, it fronts as a love story and skillfully-contrived murder mystery. These elements initially grabbed most of the students in a seminar I recently taught on the 20th century English novel. This group was largely made up of yuppies-in training and actual suburban housewives; politics was not their main interest in the study of imaginative literature. Yet, in the final class discussion on the book, issues such as past American involvement in Vietnam and, especially, the possibilities of future intervention in Nicaragua dwarfed all "literary" matters. At the end of the semester, *The Quiet American* was voted most meaningful by my students, over such modern classics as Joyce's *Portrait* and Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*.

Actually, the personal love story and the political plot which describes covert American meddling right before the fall of Dienbienphu are beautifully integrated in this novel. Greene's view is that sexism, racism, *real politik* -- all are underscored by a common nefarious triad: manipulation, deception, and the threat of violence. Pyle, the protagonist, is an American secret agent: in looks, thinking, speech, and action - a young Ronald Reagan. In attempting to woo the native woman, Phuong, away from her longtime lover, Pyle uses this triad, much in the same manner as, acting professionally, he operates to create a "third force" between the French and the Vietnamese. In both private and public realms, the sanctimonious stink of White American male moralism is redolent: "I wanted to protect her." In the end, Phuong doesn't succumb to Pyle's "dollar love," and he becomes the victim of his own political intrigue.

Skillfully crafted, politically prophetic, this is also a short readable book, appropriate for non-literature majors as writing motivation in Freshman Composition courses, or part of a genre Introduction to Literature approach. I paired it (in an anti-imperialism unit) with *Burmese Days*, Orwell's look at the same area a quarter century earlier; Tim O'Brien's fine *Going After Cacciato* articulates with Greene on the other end, massive American killing and dying in Vietnam in the 1970s.



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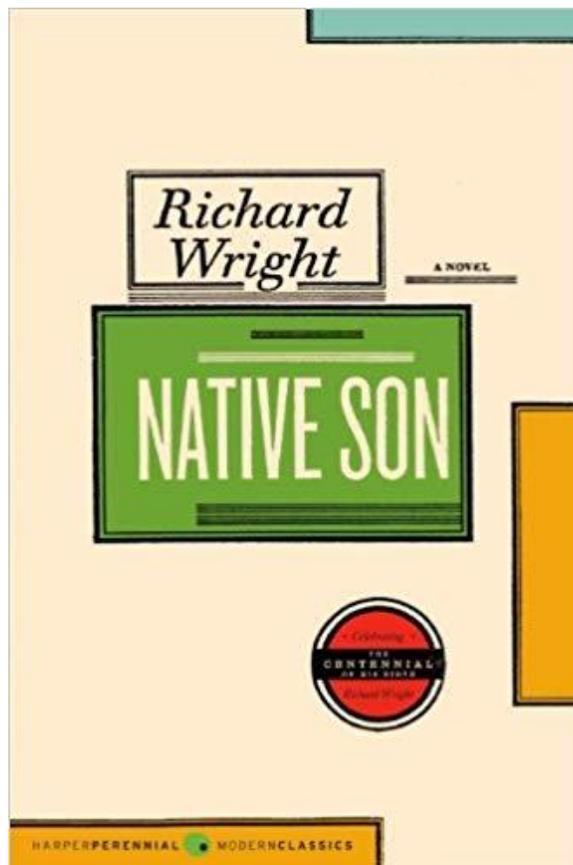
# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Reconciling *Native Son* and *Native Daughters*

(*RADICAL TEACHER* NO.34, 1988)

by Onita Estes-Hicks



NATIVE SON, RICHARD WRIGHT (HARPER, 1940)

Following several taxing class sessions on *Native Son* this past semester, once again I questioned the wisdom of teaching Richard Wright's novel in the inhospitable climate of rising racism. Even on the campus of a self-styled progressive liberal arts college in New York, the hostile responses of white students, the defensive remarks of black students, and the tensions between the two groups of undergraduates mirrored the growing intolerance and tensions of these trying times.

Under optimum circumstances, teaching *Native Son* is not an easy task. Published in 1940, the novel gave birth to Bigger Thomas, an illiterate, nineteen-year-old black youth. Bigger lives with his mother and siblings in a rat-infested, one-room apartment on Chicago's Southside. Angry and fearful, poor and unemployed, he takes a job as chauffeur to the wealthy white Dalton family and enters the alien and imposing world of Chicago's prestigious Hyde Park. Conditioned by his fear, Bigger accidentally murders Mary Dalton, the spoiled daughter of the family.

Then, on the run, he deliberately kills Bessie, his loyal and exploited black girlfriend, fearing that she will lead police to his hiding place. With two killings against him and very little in the way of personal attributes to recommend him, Bigger is not an easy character to discuss or explain. Blinded by their own illusion of freedom and free choice, today's students readily reject the sociological defense which Wright painstakingly builds. Discarding Wright's humane sociology, white students recoil from the novel, their fear of black violence confirmed in the murders Bigger commits. Equally resistant to Wright's unravelling of Bigger's dehumanization, black students see Bigger's murder of Mary Dalton as an act of just revenge, nemesis visiting Hyde Park, avenging it for creating the Southside ghetto.

This past semester, the arduous task of teaching *Native Son* was made more difficult by polar opposites in the classroom. A young white student, always prepared and vocal, registered her resistance by refusing to complete the text of *Native Son*, the one black book on the reading list. She tried to take refuge behind her abhorrence of violence; however, under probing, her intolerance surfaced in a spontaneous comment -- "I'm sick and tired of it." The "it" here referred to the issue of black life, even when that life was reflected in literature. This student's extra-literary motives were shared by a black counterpart, an articulate and ambitious young woman, who, in contrast, had read the text intently, using Wright for her own purposes. She displayed an eagerness for discussion which matched the other student's determined silence. Misreading Wright and misunderstanding Bigger, the black student spoke eloquently in Bigger's defense and supported his crimes.

In concealed dismay, I reminded Bigger's attacker of her former willingness to suspend disbelief and work through a text, chastening her for dismissing Wright without reading him. I then asked Bigger's supporter to make a defense of his murder of Bessie, his hardworking, poignant black girlfriend. Could a humane writer advocate acts of murder? Weren't literary texts imaginative trips into cultures and

spaces beyond our own? Why was Wright's depiction of an urban ghetto relevant today? Did *Native Son* contain any truths for their generation? Under probing, the students pondered these and other issues, but resolved nothing, remaining frozen in their racially determined molds. Frustrated, once again I readied myself to abandon Wright, haunted by the sense of alienating students when the semester yet had another one-third duration.

Shortly after our discussion of Wright, the case of Larry Davis erupted in New York. Davis, an illiterate, twenty-year-old Bronx youth, bears uncanny resemblances to his fictional counterpart. Accused of the murder of drug dealers, Davis eluded police in a massive manhunt which could have come from the pages of *Native Son*. Like Bigger, Davis sought shelter in the ghetto, bringing scores of police to the local neighborhood. His widespread publicity matched the coverage of Bigger's Southside manhunt. As had happened in Chicago, New Yorkers were taking sides and, while Davis did not write a ransom note which further publicized his exploits, his alleged call to a talk show host galvanized attention. Like Bigger, Davis could not, would not give up, convinced his case would not receive justice. The manhunt became the talk of the town.

One morning following the Davis phone call, a normally shy and retiring student broached the case in class. This older woman, a returning housewife with two teenage daughters, had heard the telephone call and began making connections between Larry Davis and Bigger Thomas. Transfixed by the similarities between the two young men, she lit up as she began expressing a new understanding, not only of Bigger Thomas, but also of the humanizing capabilities of literature. "Had I not read this book," she explained, "I would have no way of entering into the mind of a Larry Davis." This sudden convert to Wright continued to address the class, displaying a self-confidence newly discovered. "I was up all night, bothered by that Davis boy, understanding what it meant for him to be cooped up somewhere in hiding, because I had read what Wright described of Bigger's situation in hiding." Finally, she made connections in the motives of the two, which brought together lessons of literature and life. "As Bigger lived in wealthy Chicago and ached to possess some of the good things he saw but had no way to get by legitimate means, so too Larry Davis, a school dropout, unable to read or write, was surrounded by all this wealth in New York and went about getting some of it in his own way."

The student's sincerity as well as her insights gave new meaning to the novel, and ushered in one of those unforgettable moments in a classroom when isolated bodies claim their rightful identity as a class: a group united in a common pursuit of knowledge. The undergraduate who had placed her defense of Bigger in a philosophy of revenge finally saw the flaws in her position and decided to explore the theme of revenge in a paper. The classmate who had not completed the text realized her mistake in having missed the opportunity to grasp the plight of another individual; she determined to finish the novel.

Leaving class, I gave thanks that the times had conspired to help me redeem Wright and bring his special message home to a new group of students. Perhaps, I thought, I would once again venture with Wright and risk the dangers of making a way for his uncanny *Native Son*. Once again life had proclaimed the necessity of art in reconciling *Native Son* and native daughters.



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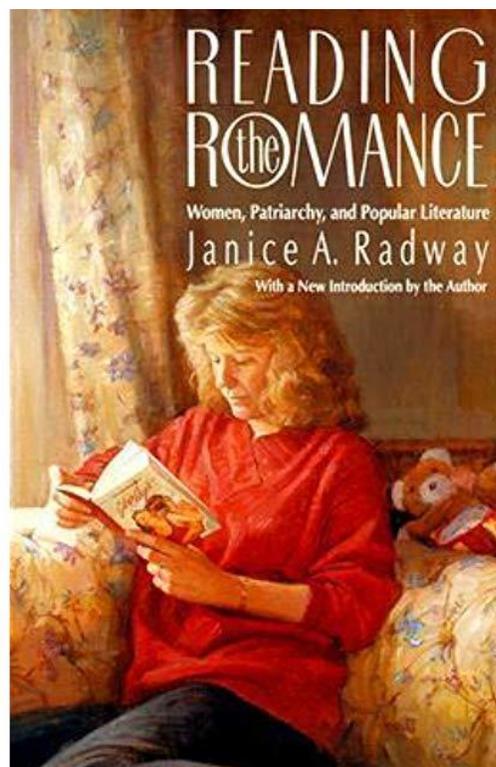
# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.37, 1990)

by Richard Ohmann



READING THE ROMANCE: WOMEN, PATRIARCHY, AND POPULAR LITERATURE, ED. JANICE A RADWAY (NORTH CAROLINA PRESS, 1984)

***Reading the Romance; Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature.* Janice A. Radway. University of North Carolina Press.**

Radway's book is about romances of the Harlequin and Silhouette variety, whose sales make them easily the most popular book genre in North America. She tells lucidly the story of their development in the context of the book industry, as this rather quaint, family business became fully a part of monopoly capital during the postwar period, and adopted the techniques of sales and audience-creation long standard in other areas of mass culture.

But really, her book is about readers and reading. The phenomenal success of romances has naturally stirred the contempt of high culture critics, and more recently the concern of feminists, who have generally understood these narratives as promoting a kind of false consciousness, coating patriarchal values with a frosting of fantasy.

Radway avoids the condescension of this approach, noting that it presumes a stupefied mass audience unaware of what its experience means, until politically correct intellectuals intervene to explain the deeper significance of the texts.

Instead, Radway talked to actual readers -- a particular network of midwestern housewives, grouped around a woman who rated and sold romances through a newsletter and store. What she found was more complicated than the picture drawn by other feminist critics. The "Smithton women" appropriated romances as a pleasure strictly theirs, an antidote to the endless claims made on them by husbands and children, and a defense of "female" values like emotional sharing and (more or less) egalitarian marriage. Beyond that, the romances let readers identify with spunky heroines who "tamed" rough, sexy men and asserted their own rights. True, the women also, and finally, used romances to renew the energies they gave to conventional marriage and family. But for many, regular reading of these books fed a kind of proto-feminism that made for real gains in their lives, within the limits patriarchy sets for women. Some more recent romances even test those limits.

I used *Reading the Romance* in a class on popular fiction, made up entirely of college seniors, who were enthusiastic about the book and the subject. I believe that most college students would respond similarly: although Radway's book is quite sophisticated in method and theory, it is written in human prose, and it makes clear the real-world importance of its subject. Besides, that subject is one almost certain to have touched the lives of women in the class, whether or not they have ever been romance readers; and Radway's treatment poses a challenge to male readers more subtle than but as far-reaching as that offered by more direct feminist statements.

I had students read some romances and pool their responses, working partly in groups divided by sex. Are they the "right" readers for these books? Why and why not? What uses do they make of this reading? What happens to their high culture expectations, if any? We also worked with a group of magazine romances and confessions, two very distinct genres aimed at a more working-class audience, to see how Radway's analysis did and didn't work with these stories. A group of stories from *Intimacy: Black Romance* brought race into the picture. Some students have gone on to projects on men's fiction, in biker magazines and magazines like *Penthouse*. If I were doing a similar course again, I'd build such study into it, and maybe do a unit on Louis Lamour westerns and the like. With more time, I'd ask students to interview readers of genre fiction, as some of mine have chosen to do. Radway's study points out in many directions; I've only hinted at its richness.



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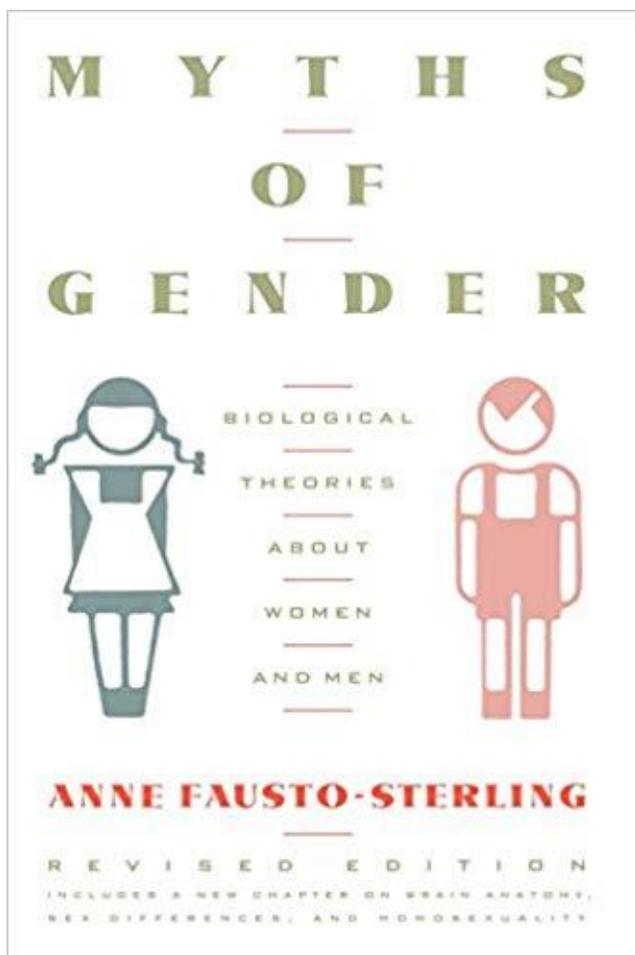
# RADICAL TEACHER

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## Myths of Gender: Biological Theories About Women and Men

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.37, 1990)

by Saul Slapikoff



MYTHS OF GENDER BY ANNE FAUSTO- STERLING (BASIC BOOKS, 1985)

***Myths of Gender: Biological Theories About Women and Men.* Anne Fausto- Sterling. Basic Books.**

About a third of my course "Contemporary Biosocial Problems" deals with issues of how biologists deal with issues of gender. Since half of the students in the class are non-science majors and the rest biology majors, there has always been some difficulty in finding readings that address the former group of students without patronizing the latter. For the most part, the books that I have used in the past have been perceived as too difficult by the non- science majors. Now, fortunately, *Myths of Gender* is available. My students, regardless of major, have loved using Fausto-Sterling's book because of its easy readability and clear explanation of biological concepts that in the past students have found difficult. To quote one art history major:

The Fausto-Sterling book is the one I've been waiting for: it's like a God-send. She presupposes virtually nothing on the part of the reader, and yet it is a substantive, well-researched work. She presents the vital scientific background without going into detail ad nauseum, as well as thorough, comprehensible statistical information which facilitate[s] understanding how she ... goes about building or taking apart arguments. (Devan Paillet)

Focusing on the role of ideology in science, Fausto-Sterling critically examines research in areas such as gender and brain organization; genes and gender; hormones and menstruation, menopause, and aggression; and sociobiology. I can imagine *Myths of Gender* being a key text in courses that deal with gender through a variety of disciplinary approaches.



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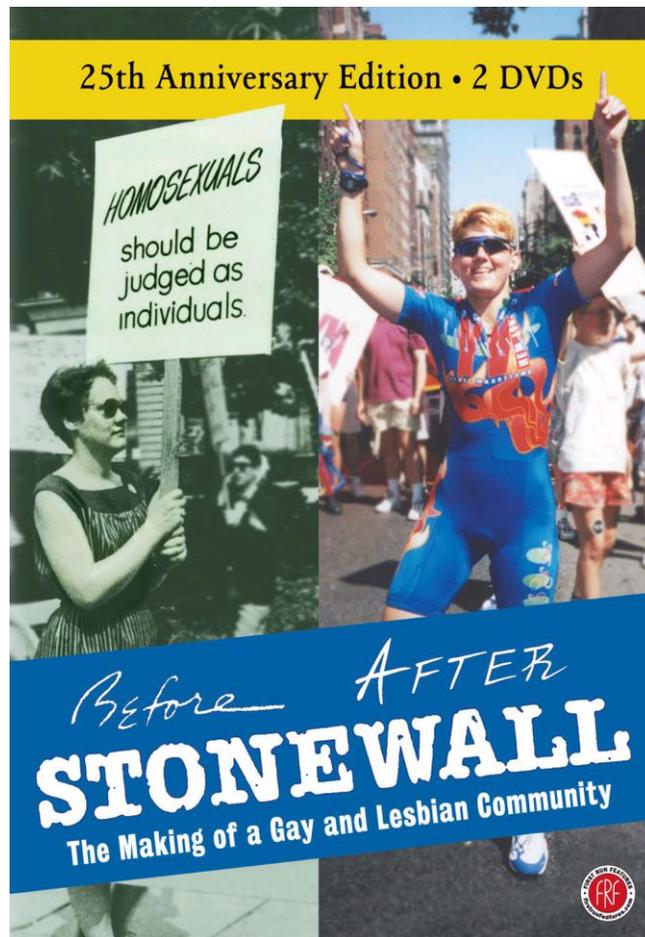
# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Before Stonewall: The Making of a Gay and Lesbian Community

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.38, 1990)

by Scott Bravmann



BEFORE STONEWALL: THE MAKING OF A GAY AND LESBIAN COMMUNITY. ANDRE WEISS AND GRETA SCHILLER (NAIAD PRESS, 1985)

***Before Stonewall: The Making of a Gay and Lesbian Community.* Andre Weiss and Greta Schiller. Naiad Press.**

As lesbian and gay communities have become more visible, academic work within the movement has developed substantially. But there has been little material that has attempted to make lesbian and gay history available to younger readers. A notable and recent exception is a book by Andre Weiss and Greta Schiller. *Before Stonewall: The Making of a Gay and Lesbian Community* offers a sensitive, brief introduction to the origins of contemporary lesbian and gay cultures and political activism. An outgrowth of the movie by the same name, this book can either serve as a supplementary written guide to the movie or stand independently as a text for classroom discussion.

In spite of limited space, the authors have tried to avoid simplifying, and hence further distorting, lesbian and gay existence. Rather than offering a uniform picture of what being gay meant at a particular time, the book's and film's oral histories present a mosaic of race, gender, and class experiences.

Since information about homosexuality remains heavily shrouded in ignorance, superstition, and bigotry -- which has only been further exacerbated by the AIDS epidemic -- this volume delivers important and timely information. Included at the end of the book are a discussion guide and suggested reading list for teachers. The book (and film) could be used in a variety of courses.



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## Ethnic Notions

(RADICAL TEACHER NO. 39, 1991)

by Susan Radner



*Ethnic Notions. Directed by Marlon Riggs. 57 minutes. 1987.*

***Ethnic Notions*. Directed by Marlon Riggs. 57 minutes.**

**E***thnic Notions*, a too academically titled but powerful documentary video, depicts caricatures of African Americans in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Through cartoons, photographs, motion picture films, sheet music, and household items such as a sugar jar, the distorted images of the Sambo, Coon, Pickaninny, Mammy and Uncle are shown to both reflect and perpetuate racism. Differences between the slavery and post-slavery eras, and between the North and South, as well as the sharp contrasts of these images with the actual lives of African Americans are illustrated. Narrated by Esther Rolle, the film has a commentary which ties together the visual images. It ends with a question: have these stereotypes changed and improved in our post-Civil Rights era? The negative stereotypes served historical purposes: when whites needed to believe that their slaves were not rebellious, they created caricatures of happy, singing and shuffling darkies. During Reconstruction, when newly- emancipated Blacks were demanding the right to literacy as well as the vote, whites created caricatures of Blacks as dangerous, vicious animals. Children were always portrayed as animal-like, though lovable and cute. No recognition of the dignity of African Americans was permitted.

The most poignant section of the video describes black actors' reaction to these stereotypes. Originally played by white men in blackface makeup, the Jim Crow character evolved into the minstrel, who then was played by black men in blackface. The plight of Bert Williams, an early twentieth-century black minstrel, is depicted by a contemporary actor, Leni Sloan. Black actors were forced to perpetuate the negative stereotypes, though they tried to humanize them. Film clips of Hattie McDaniel, Steppin Fetchit, and Paul Robeson as the Emperor Jones illustrate their conflicts.

The film can be useful in the classroom in a number of ways. First, it raises questions about the images themselves: how do these stereotypes still affect us? Are contemporary black images -- Bill Cosby, Aunt Jemima -- an improvement over the older ones? Second, the film can be used as a study of how the mass media define reality. The point is made repeatedly both visually and through the commentary that the result of these caricatures was to deny the essential humanity of African Americans and to perpetuate violence against them. It juxtaposes graphic photographs of lynchings and hangings of African Americans with the stereotypes of Blacks as savages. Questions about who controls the media then follow logically. Finally, students come away with a better sense of the history of racism and history as ideology, topics which have been generally ignored in most American history syllabi.



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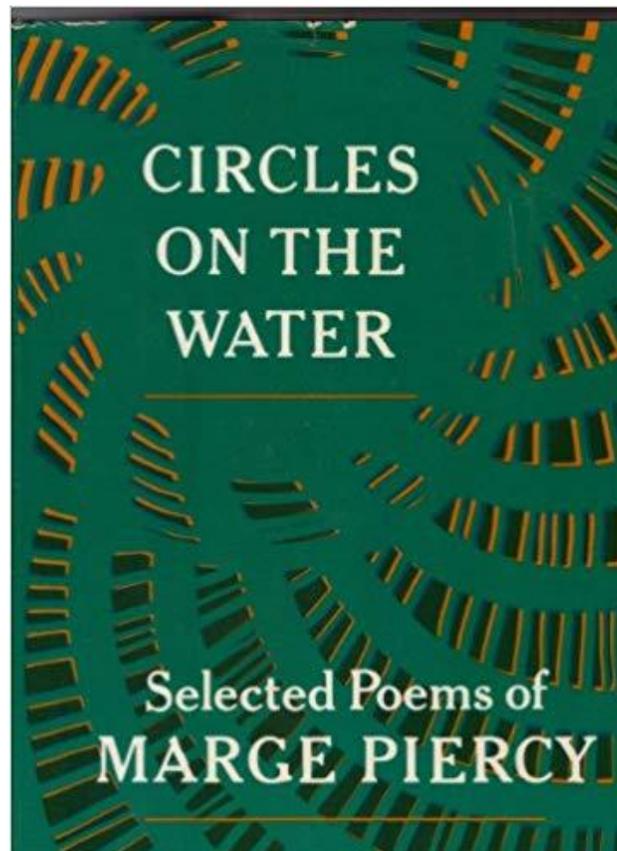
# RADICAL TEACHER

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## "Barbie Doll"

(RADICAL TEACHER NO. 39, 1991)

by Philip Frisk



MARGE PIERCY. IN *CIRCLES ON THE WATER*. 1982.

**"Barbie Doll." Marge Piercy. In *Circles on the Water*. 1982.**

I have used this short poem of twenty-five lines to "teach" about sexism, and it has never failed to stimulate lively, productive discussion. The poem tells the life-story of a young woman (unnamed) who is normal in every way, except for a couple of minor "flaws" in her appearance. The narrative voice tells us that she has a big nose and fat legs, something she is cruelly reminded of by her peers at the onset of puberty. From then on, her life becomes an unending torment as she tries to follow everyone's advice regarding exercise, diet, and how to act ("wheedle") in order to overcome her "problem." None of it works: people still see a big nose on fat legs.

So the author, in a bitter, bitter touch of grotesque comedy, has her cut them off. Soon after, in the funeral parlor, she is displayed with a cute, little nose and long, straight, slim legs, and everyone says how good she looks.

Apparently, the undertaker has given her the Barbie Doll look after all. The poem ends with this bitter comment: "Consummation at last./to every woman a happy ending."

In discussing the poem, I try to bring out a number of questions regarding the Barbie Doll image: Where does it come from? Is it a creation of men or of women? What ethnic groups and what socio-economic status does Barbie represent? Whose economic interests are most served by the Barbie Doll ideal? How has the image of Barbie changed over the years and what do those changes reveal? More generally, what problems may women have in relating to an image of ideal beauty, which is imposed on them? What other forms of cultural imperialism can we identify? What are some strategies subordinate groups use to counteract the cultural myths and life-styles of more dominant groups?

"Barbie Doll" (as indeed any other symbolic object) can lead different groups in different directions. Using this poem with black students, for example, I often find that they pass rather quickly through the politics of gender (raised by the poem) in order to get to the politics of race, which they see as an analogous but more serious issue. For this reason, I find it best to first elicit from each member of the class some kind of personal response statement (to which I pay close attention) before I begin to develop my own agenda for discussion. (I may ask them, for example, to "tell us in writing about someone the poem reminds you of.") Otherwise, despite my own "enlightened and progressive" intentions, "teaching them about sexism" can easily be seen as just one more example of the kind of coercive pedagogy they are all too familiar with.



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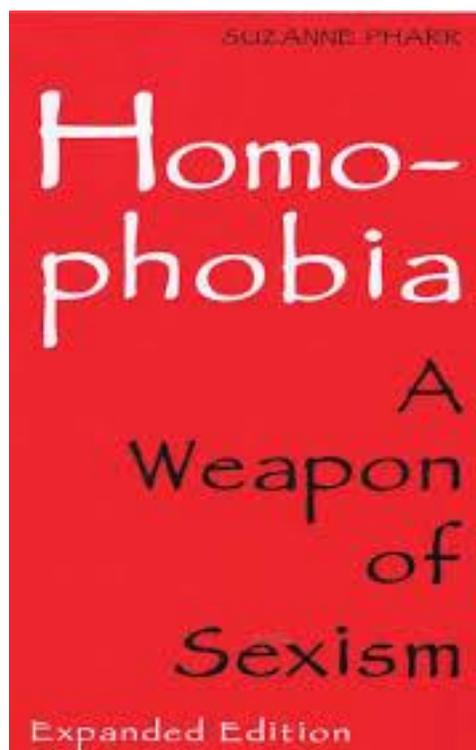
# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.40, 1991)

by Carole Sheffield



*HOMOPHOBIA: A WEAPON OF SEXISM. SUZANNE PHARR. WOMEN'S PROJECT, 1988*

**Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism. Suzanne Pharr. Women's Project.**

In just ninety-one pages Suzanne Pharr manages to engage students in a very complex and deeply personal political struggle. That she does this without minimizing the scope of her argument is testimony to the power and the economy of her writing. Essentially her argument is that "sexism, that system by which women are kept subordinate to men, is kept in place by three powerful weapons designed to cause or threaten women with pain and loss ... the three are economics, violence, and homophobia." Students in my "Politics and Sex" course read this text after they have been studying the economics of oppression and sexual terrorism for several weeks, so they are somewhat prepared for the next step -- integrating the oppression of lesbian women and gay men into their understanding of racial and sexual domination. What they are not prepared for, however, is the extent to which Pharr draws them into her analysis.

One of the most powerful tools of oppression, inherent in each of the weapons of sexism discussed by Pharr, is privilege. Throughout the book, Pharr analyzes not only the dynamics of privilege and how it is constructed but also how it is reproduced by each one of us. Reading Pharr, male students, for example, both straight and gay, begin to come to terms with their participation in "lesbian-baiting" and how it is a manifestation of misogyny. When she describes the alienation and invisibility she felt in her early life as a lesbian -- "I showed the world only a small portion of who I was and even that portion was a lie" -- she leads non-lesbian women to examine the depths of their own oppression. They understand that they too have lived partial lives due to sexism and begin to wonder, enthusiastically, about further connections between themselves and their lesbian sisters. Lesbian students write how liberating it is -- often for the first time in a college environment dominated by heterosexuals -- to hear the word lesbian spoken repeatedly with acceptance and not with ridicule. Most of the students are impressed with the section on "strategies for eliminating homophobia" because it involves them; it offers them specific and realistic strategies which they can use in their own lives.

Pharr's personal as well as analytical voice is so authentic that students are able to suspend their homophobia and truly listen to an integrated analysis of oppression and injustice. They begin to see that lesbian and gay rights is not simply a "bedroom issue" as they had been taught to believe. *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism* succeeds in showing us "the truth of the inter-connectedness of all oppressions."



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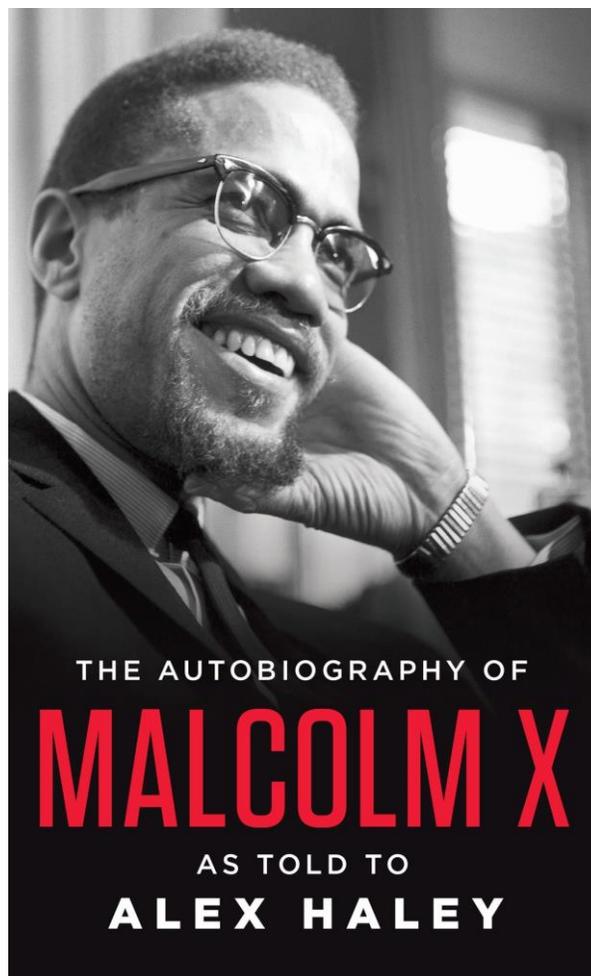
# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Reimagining America: The Arts of Social Change and The Autobiography of Malcolm X

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.47, 1995)

by Linda S. Watts



THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MALCOLM X, 1965

**Reimagining America: The Arts of Social Change. Mark O'Brian and Craig Little. The Autobiography of Malcolm X. Malcolm X and Alex Haley.**

In the *Autobiography*, Malcolm X characterizes himself as, among other things, an unconventional reader and learner, in part due to his time spent in the prison library during incarceration: "No university would ask any student to devour literature as I did when this new world opened to me, of being able to read and understand."

His self-presentation (brought forward in this case through collaboration with Alex Haley) helps dramatize the role context plays in reading and responding to a literary text. Within a course on literary analysis and theory, I invited students to respond to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* through an assignment calling upon class members to function as Malcolm X suggests he did, as an unconventional reader and learner.

In conjunction with the assignment, I ask students to read sections of *Reimagining America: The Arts of Social Change* pertaining to the forms of literary study conducted by Tim Rollins and Kids of Survival (KOS). Rollins engages New York City high-school students in artistic practices by which they transform their experiences and reactions to literary texts into visual forms. In addition to traditional artistic materials, the resulting visual pieces often involve alterations or treatments of actual book pages from such texts as *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *Journal of the Plague Year*, and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

Within the context of our course, I asked students to create and comment on a visual piece of the sort KOS prepares, using a passage from the *Autobiography*, along with whatever other materials they chose to incorporate in rendering a cultural interpretation of the text in visual form(s).

Students defined their own passages, identifying them by page number within their written commentaries. Students also chose the subject/focus of their essays, although I indicated some issues they might wish to raise: the impact of social movements, the role of the individual in effecting change, the experience(s) of race, concepts of learning (including the intellectual, universities, and literary study), the role of leaders, the implications of interpreting one's personal history (or roots), and the origins of change in an individual life. I did require that students take some risk within this process by speaking to a matter about which they perceive or anticipate controversy.

One such student responded to the assignment by fashioning an art piece from a found object: an empty 40-

ounce malt liquor bottle. To the outside surface of this vessel, he applied language with gold-colored paint and affixed visual images culled from magazines. Crowned by the words "ALL ARE WELCOME" are images of people of color. Above their heads snake words from (or derived from) the *Autobiography* (e.g., "Tens of thousands of yesterday's and today's school drop-outs are keeping body and soul together by some form of hustling," and "The white man has brought upon the world's black, brown, red, and yellow peoples every variety of the sufferings of exploitation"). His written commentary named the heavy marketing distribution of these large-portion, high-proof alcoholic beverages to communities populated by people of color as a consumerist form of colonialism.

Through these somewhat unorthodox practices for literary study, I hoped it might become possible for students to offer more and different connections/insights than earlier essay assignments in the course accommodated. By such an assignment, I also hoped to suggest that students of literature might present their work in a variety of formats including, but not limited to, the by-now familiar five-page critical essay.



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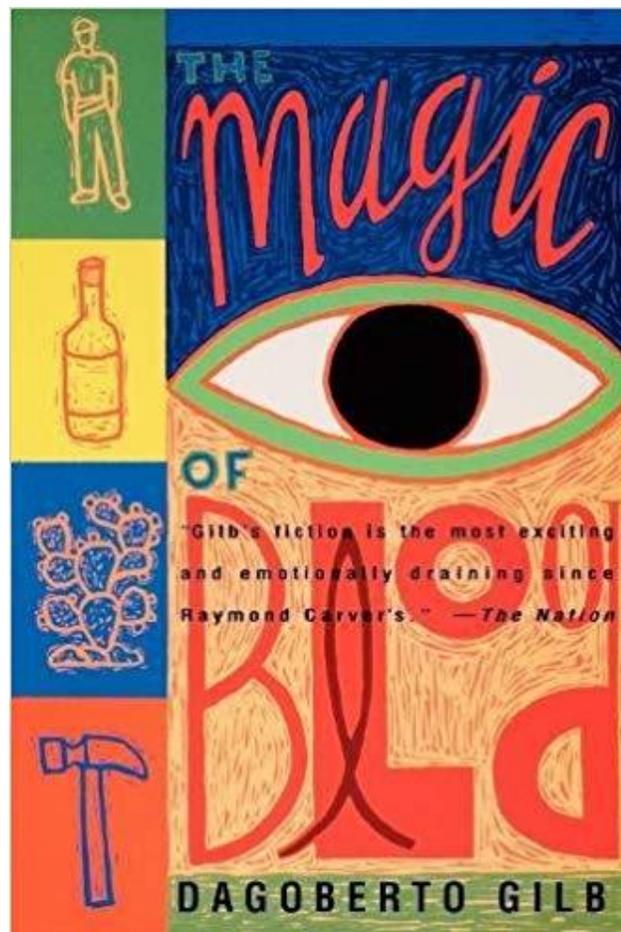
# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## The Magic of Blood

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.49, 1996)

by Jorge Mariscal



THE MAGIC OF BLOOD. DAGOBERTO GILB. GROVE PRESS, 1994.

***The Magic of Blood.* Dagoberto Gilb. Grove Press.**

Student expectations upon entering a course on Chicano literature are that the focus of discussions will be on issues of ethnicity and something called race. This latter category is one that most students think they understand. Given the absence in American education of any analysis based on class, students believe race (superficially understood as skin color or nationality), and perhaps gender, are the most powerful determinants of individual and group identity. University faculty who practice "cultural studies" do nothing to meliorate the situation, since, despite their repeated incantation of the race-class-gender trinity, they often have a weak understanding of class structures and little interest in what we used to call class conflict.

Dagoberto Gilb's 1993 collection of short stories, *The Magic of Blood*, forces students to consider class, gender, and ethnicity together in ways to which they are not accustomed because class and class-consciousness dominate the text. In part because Gilb himself is a professional carpenter and member of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners Local 1256 in New Mexico, he situates questions of Chicano/a identity within a rich panorama of working-class life. The ethnic context is certainly important as characters move through various Mexican-American communities in the Southwest, from East Los Angeles to El Paso and back again. In the opening story, "Look on the Bright Side," the Chicano protagonist takes his family on vacation to Baja California and upon returning to the U.S. experiences the frustration of being harassed by the Border Patrol. In "The Death Mask of Pancho Villa," competing forms of Mexican and Chicano working-class masculinity are juxtaposed in a narrative frame that is perhaps one of the most accurate and hilarious portrayals of the effects of marijuana ever written.

But it is in the descriptions of working-class people irrespective of their ethnicity that Gilb excels. A recurring term throughout the collection is "pride," which for Gilb's characters means pride of workmanship and respect for labor. Even though most of the characters rebound between part-time construction work, lay-offs, and dire economic predicaments at times carrying them to the brink of homelessness, they hold on to the belief that a job well done and respect for the labor of others are solid foundations upon which to build their identities. In the story "Al, in Phoenix," we meet Al, a mechanic who is so skilled at auto repair that the narrator is forced to overlook his rude and possibly racist behavior. And the pleasures of steady work even at minimum wage set the tone for "Getting a Job in Dell City."

Tim Libretti's assertion in the recent "Working-Class Studies" issue of *Radical Teacher* is an important one: "Chicana/o literature is already a deeply proletarian literature." What is different about Gilb's narratives is that they supplement the representations of farm-workers' lives that make up the bulk of early Mexican-American classics by introducing students to the complexities of Chicano working-class life in the great urban centers of the Southwest.



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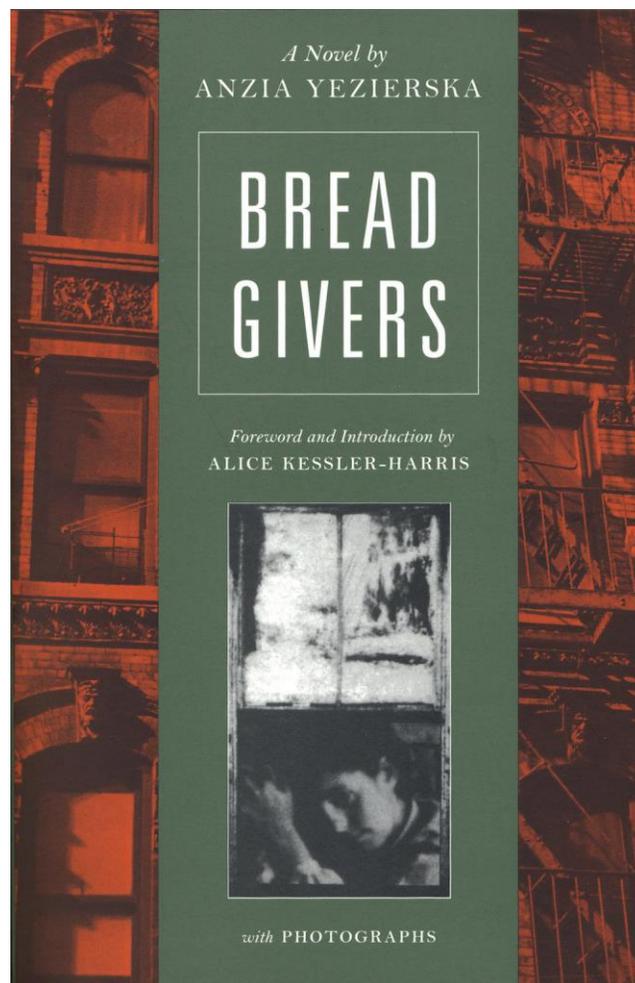
# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Bread Givers

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.55, 1999)

by Joseph Entin



BREAD GIVERS. ANZIA YEZIERSKA. (PERSEA BOOKS, 1925)

## Bread Givers. Anzia Yeziarska. Persea Books.

Teaching Anzia Yeziarska's *Bread Givers* at an elite university, I've discovered that students typically find the novel very pleasurable, even reassuring. At first glance, it offers a straight-forward rendering of a familiar tale: immigrant girl "assimilates" and makes good, leaving behind oppressive Old World customs for New World independence and professionalism. In addition, the novel seems to offer direct access to the immigrant experience, a genuine slice of Jewish-American experience, a look at "the way it really was." This notion is reinforced by the novel's introduction, written by social historian Alice Kessler-Harris. Kessler-Harris contends that in the novel Yeziarska "opens the door wide and leads us" into ghetto life, "plunging us directly into the woman's experience of immigration." In addition, she states that "Anzia Yeziarska and Sara Smolinsky, the novel's narrator, are emotionally interchangeable."

To understand the novel as a "direct" transcription, rather than an imaginative translation, of "authentic" experience is to cast Yeziarska as a mere scribe, rather than a cultural agent, and to imply that literature represents unmitigated access to "truth" rather than a highly-mediated ideological act. And to believe this is to place ourselves as readers in positions of power over the figures and culture we are reading about -- we understand them, we tell ourselves, we know the "truth" about their experience. When teaching *Bread Givers*, I aim to move students away from this seductively safe and reassuring way of reading towards an understanding of the ways in which literary narratives, no matter how seemingly "simple," are always already complex acts of rhetorical and cultural power. As Fredric Jameson argues in *The Political Unconscious*, narratives of socially marginalized groups must be placed within a crowded field of ideological contestation: "[T]he affirmation of . . . nonhegemonic voices remains ineffective if it is limited to the merely 'sociological' perspective of the pluralistic rediscovery of other isolated groups: only an ultimate rewriting of these utterances in terms of their essentially polemic and subversive strategies restores them to their proper place in the dialogical system of the social classes."

Rather than as social history, then, *Bread Givers* can more productively be read as what Kenneth Burke, in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, calls "equipment for living": "strategies for selecting enemies and allies, for socializing losses, for warding off evil eye, for purification, propitiation, and desanctification, consolation and vengeance."

To give students a sense of the ways in which *Bread Givers* functions as "equipment for living," I often begin by introducing one of the "allies" whom the novel won for its

author -- William Lyon Phelps, renowned Yale University Shakespeare scholar who gave Yeziarska's novels high praise when they were published during the 1920s. Phelps, a high-culture gate-keeper, lauded Yeziarska's writing on much the same terms as Kessler-Harris does: "Her stories, both of the poor and their dreams, are authentic," he wrote. "There was so much style in some of the books by Meredith and Henry James that it got between the reader and the object . . . but in Yeziarska's tales there is nothing. One does not seem to read; one is too completely inside."

Support from figures like Phelps helped Yeziarska to succeed in the commercial culture of American letters -- success that entailed life choices quite different from Sara Smolinsky's. While *Bread Givers* ends with Sara's marriage to a fellow Jew and reconciliation with her father, Yeziarska herself abandoned her husband and daughter to pursue a professional writing career. Phelps's praise of Yeziarska's fiction and the significant differences between author and protagonist raise several provocative questions for discussion. Why did Phelps find *Bread Givers* so appealing, so reassuring? How do we account for the contrasting personal and professional lives of Yeziarska and Sara -- why doesn't Yeziarska have Sara leave teaching and her husband to pursue a writing career? If the novel confirms Phelps's way of seeing on several levels, does it also smuggle in certain challenges to the worldview of readers like Phelps? Does the novel lack literary "style," as Phelps suggests -- or is the very appearance of simplicity actually a form of "style" that Yeziarska, an accomplished professional writer, created? Such questions lead back to the text itself, but with a new agenda for reading that focuses on the novel as an artifact that performs cultural work, that is engaged in -- and continues to be an object of -- ideological struggle.



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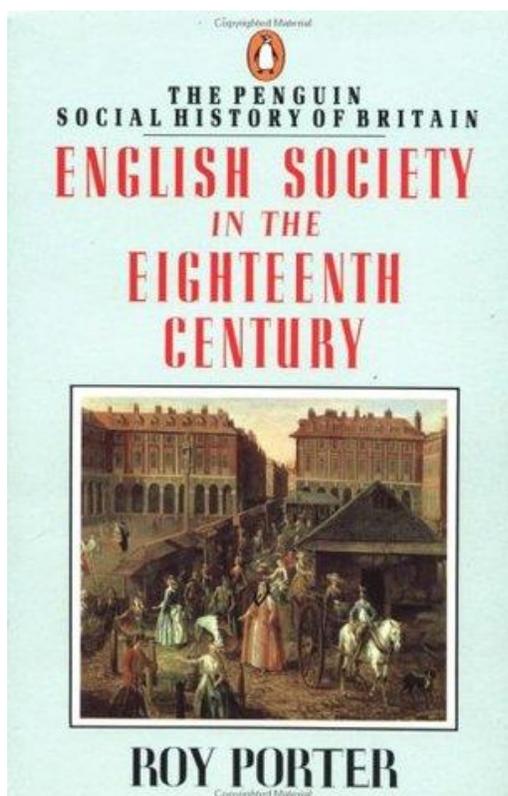
# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## English Society in the Eighteenth Century

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.61, 2001)

by James Thompson



ENGLISH SOCIETY IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY. ROY PORTER. (PENGUIN USA, 1990)

**English Society in the Eighteenth Century. Roy Porter. Penguin USA.**

To imagine a past, in any way different from the present, seems more difficult than ever before. Colleagues everywhere at every level describe students who appear to think that civil rights was a problem way back then that has been largely solved, just as sexism was something that used to plague us and now feminists have outlived their usefulness, that labor unions are an outmoded relic, socialism an ancient belief akin to that of the druids.

Class-consciousness is a delicate and therefore difficult (and all too easily patronizing) topic to introduce into classrooms where people often believe that they are middle class and therefore classless. In summer school each year, I teach a bread and butter eighteenth-century British literature survey class to a heterogeneous mixture of upper division undergraduates and a few English Education majors in the School of Education finishing their MATs. As secondary reading I assign parts of Roy Porter's *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*, a readable and accessible one-volume social history of early modern Britain.

After they read his chapter on social hierarchy, I ask the class to draw it on the board as a hierarchy, fitting groups, professions, and kinds of labor into his picture of the interlocking chains of deference and obligation that make up the Old Society. Upon picturing to our satisfaction this ladder, with its many little rungs of artisans, soldiers, small holders, grandees, weavers, shopkeepers, bishops, actresses, lawyers, servants, surgeons, and so on, we then try to draw our list and then arrange its present variant, with the initial aim of tracing what happens to specific figures -- lawyers, doctors, actresses -- in the process of modernization. On facing blackboards, we end up with two vertical lists of professions, each organized into a rough status hierarchy, from bottom to top.

First, it becomes clear immediately that we have much greater difficulty drawing our own social hierarchy than we do that of mid-eighteenth-century England, which feels puzzling to all of us. Second -- and this is less obvious, but eventually evident as we work away -- we keep confusing wealth, celebrity, and prestige, as if in the older model, the clear markings of aristocratic order and land owning offered an explanation or a frame that the present structure lacked, organized as it is around the naked prestige of sheer wealth.

One of the issues we have to chew over is whether our sense of status is skewed by social prominence: how do we rank faceless wealthy fund managers with Oprah, for example? Because the ideal of the Old Society is the landed gentry and their agricultural estates, it is much easier to

imagine face-to-face relations between the squire, his tenants, and his field hands than it is to imagine the much more abstracted, obscured, and distant relation between an individual laborer in Kuala Lumpur and a multinational corporation's CEO, much less to imagine the relation between that laborer and a stockholder in Dayton, Ohio. But one payoff in this exercise is that the former relation helps us to understand the latter two, if only by way of structural similarity: in all three relations, some are enriched by the labor of others.

More years ago than I care to remember, at a Marxist Literary Group meeting in Pittsburgh, where I first heard of such a thing as cultural studies, someone spoke of his goal -- to try and entice his students to imagine and desire a genuinely better way to live, rather than to desire more things. This still seems to me to be a worthy goal, and one intimately tied to both political memory and personal aspiration as envisioned through schooling and advancement.



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# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Open Letter to a Young Negro, A Courageous Stand, and The Eye of the Storm

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.63, 2002)

by Lisa Verner



JESSE OWENS (LEFT), RALPH METCALFE (SECOND LEFT), FOY DRAPER (SECOND RIGHT) AND FRANK WYKOFF (RIGHT)

THE USA 4X100 METRES RELAY TEAM AT THE 1936 OLYMPIC GAMES IN BERLIN.

**"Open Letter to a Young Negro." Jesse Owens with Paul G. Neimark. In *Blackthink: My Life as Black Man and White Man. Morrow.***

**"A Courageous Stand" and "The Eye of the Storm." Kenny Moore. In *Sports Illustrated*, Aug. 5, 1991, pp. 60-77, and Aug. 12, 1991, pp. 62-73, respectively.**

These works recount two incidents of racism at the Olympic games of 1936 and 1968. At the Berlin games, the last before World War II, Hitler walked out on Jesse Owens, refusing to watch the African-American athlete compete in the broad jump. Owens, although rattled by the slight, won the event after having been befriended by his German competitor, Luz Long, the man Hitler groomed specifically to beat Owens. Owens credits Long's advice and support with giving him the strength and direction he needed to compete after such an insult. Thirty-two years later, African-American sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos, the gold and bronze medal winners respectively in the 200-meter dash at the Mexico City games, raised black-gloved fists on the medal stand during the playing of the national anthem to protest racism at home and abroad generally and within the International Olympic Committee particularly. They were stripped of their medals and blackballed from professional sports and the military.

I assigned these readings for a compare/contrast paper in a first-year composition class at Tulane University, an elite private school in the Deep South, where I was studying for my doctorate. The majority of my students were white and middle- to upper-middle-class; the few students of color in my classes were usually either attending on athletic scholarship or were from the surrounding community.

I fashioned this assignment in response to encounters with student athletes as a writing tutor during my first year of graduate school and later as a composition instructor. My tutorial students often complained of their marginalized position in academia, and I noticed that when left to their own devices, African-American student athletes almost invariably chose to write on topics that engaged their identities and experience (e.g., the paucity of African-American head coaches at the collegiate and professional levels). Thus, this assignment resulted from my need to locate material that would both engage an often marginalized segment of the student body and empower them with a socio-political context for athletics. I also hoped that by studying two different and in many ways conflicting approaches to civil rights, students would achieve an understanding of historical contingency and culturally determined methods of social protest.

The first semester I assigned these readings, my class was composed entirely of white students and the assignment failed. All my students insisted both in class discussion and

in their papers that Owens's way -- transcending hatred to make friends with Long, who he admitted was "a Nazi white man who fought to destroy my country" -- was a morally superior and more effective form of political protest than Smith and Carlos's "divisive" and "shameful" gesture. "More dignified," "more patriotic," and "loving" were phrases repeated constantly throughout their papers. By allying themselves with Owens's "we must all see each other as individuals" philosophy, my students enabled themselves to ignore both their own complicity in maintaining racist systems of thought and the necessity of collective action and sacrifice in any form of social progress.

The next semester, out of eighteen students, three were African-American males, one of whom was a student athlete, and the assignment was much more effective, in large part because I was not the only one critiquing Owens. Rashi, one of the African-American students, immediately grasped the socio-political nature of the assignment and articulated the contradictions and shortcomings of Owens's approach for the class. Noel, the student athlete, assisted in this effort and on one occasion abruptly and eloquently silenced white apologists for Owens. In response to my query about why Owens would take such a conciliatory tone when he had to have encountered and been angered by racism throughout his life, in contrast to the usual student recourse to Owens's "nobility" of character, Noel replied, "He was scared." This response, spoken by a man who himself had to "perform" within a system of white privilege, who perhaps himself was "scared" of having his scholarship yanked by those in power, validated the critique of Owens in ways that no amount of intellectual interrogation from the white teacher could.

As a result, I believe, of the presence and contributions of my three African-American students, opinion as expressed in class discussion and in papers was profoundly affected. Fully half the class wrote papers defending Smith and Carlos's approach as more courageous or appropriate than Owens's and/or recognizing the historical contingency of the athletes' situations and responses to racism. In his paper's conclusion, Rashi wondered why, although he had attended an all-male, traditionally African-American Catholic high school, he had never heard of Tommie Smith or John Carlos before now; he then asked, "who decides what goes in our history books?"

I am glad I persevered with the assignment despite its dismal debut, and I believe it can be instructive and enlightening for all kinds of students. Its failure that first semester, however, points to the real and urgent need for genuinely multicultural classrooms. As a white female instructor, I am particularly vulnerable to white students dismissing my defense of Smith and Carlos as "bleeding-heart white liberal guilt." The presence and contributions of the three African-American students forced reluctant white students to confront an anti-racist perspective that was no longer theoretical and removed.



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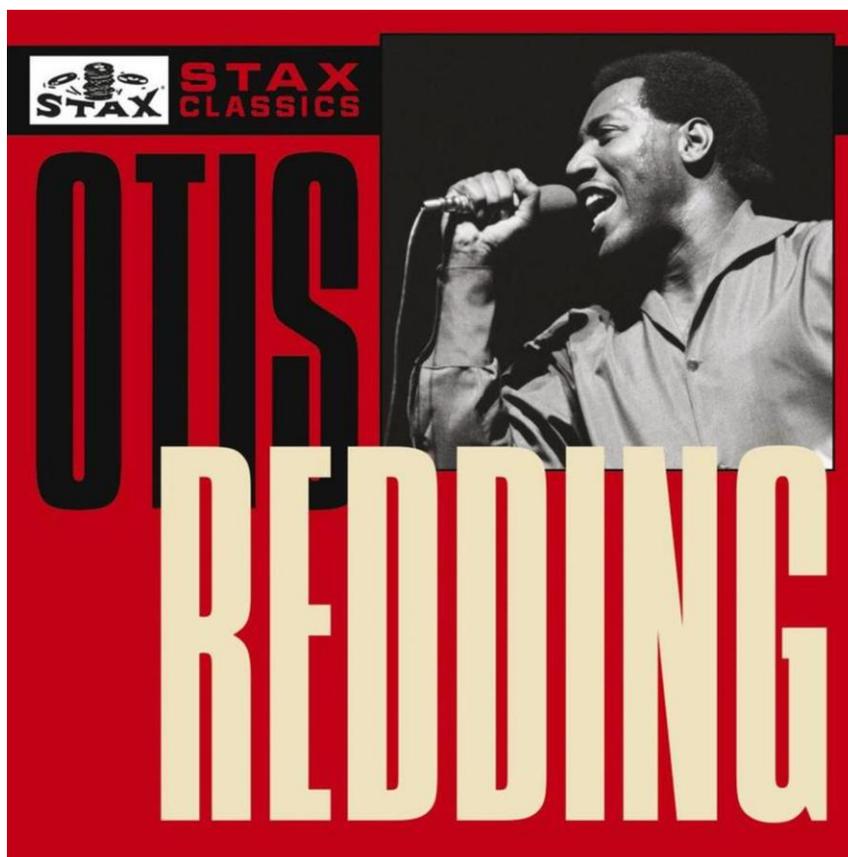
# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## White Christmas and Otis: The Definitive Otis Redding

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.65, 2002)

by Andrew Tonkovich



THE DEFINITIVE OTIS REDDING (CD, COMPILATION, REMASTERED) ALBUM COVER.

**White Christmas. Delta Records.**  
**Otis: The Definitive Otis Redding. Rhino Records.**

How, then, to be the kind of teacher who uses popular culture as a classroom teaching tool and yet not seem to be exactly that cartoon hippie instructor who tries, lamely, to be hip with his reluctant students, as on "Beavis and Butthead"? I am a UC Lecturer teaching lower-division composition classes to talented, bright, and bored undergraduates there mostly against their will, who locate "composition" and writing somewhere near dental work. Lucky them (!) when they encounter a middle-aged pony-tailed socialist with a goatee wearing his "No Nukes" t-shirt and exercising a predilection for writing on the board such phrases as "the social construction of reality" -- exactly as the Sociology teacher in the famous back-to-school episode of "Buffy the Vampire Slayer." (I am not making either of us up.)

Yes, pop culture pedagogy is, indeed, one way to funnily distract students from the mandatory, often punitive-seeming (to both students and teachers) experience of comp class. But using film, television, and recorded music to get students to see the value of analysis, interpretation, and essay writing as skills which might empower them beyond the classroom is also potentially risky. I failed with the Sex Pistols, for instance, and Loudon Wainwright III, two of my own favorites. Go figure.

Johnny Cash's "Boy Named Sue" worked well enough. Students "got it": the rhetorical flourish, the cornball humor, the necessarily instructive bit of redemption at the end. But they really hated the music.

Yet listening to songs and even reading their lyrics at the same time helps students to trust their instincts, to build confidence by thinking things out loud -- and, importantly, writing them down. Listening to music also lets them imagine that exercising a cultural critique -- even about pop culture -- is one way of becoming a literate, active, engaged citizen intellectual.

While instructors at the University of California are given lots of leeway to teach creatively, up against not only a strict and impossibly ambitious syllabus, but a ten-week schedule, they may need --especially new teachers -- "tried and true" thirty-minute exercises in, say, models of inter-textual interpretation. With a finite number of shopping days till Christmas, I share this "application analysis" exercise because it consistently works, helping to teach students to go beyond only comparison and contrast and see how understanding one "text" helps us see another.

And, yes, it's fun.

Bing Crosby's "White Christmas" is, you'll recall, a heartwarming, even cloying nostalgia bouquet, though not

without its melodic appeal and, yes, that beautiful voice. Of course, many students do not recognize this 1940s era holiday classic. Otis Redding's version is even less familiar. Perfect.

I first play the Der Bingle version, using as questions for discussion the four topics in Jack Rawlin's chapter in *The Writer's Way*: "Thesis, purpose, audience and tone." We go through this short list in reverse order, ending with the thesis -- "intellectual or emotional argument" as I call it -- of the song. With its opening of Christmassy bells, strings, and background chorus (tone), students of course recognize the nostalgia theme, guessing that the likely audience is their -- or somebody's -- grandparents, a student or two further speculating that this might involve World War II and being far away from home. "Purpose" is easy, as is "thesis": the idealization of a particular kind of snowy old-time Christmas, despite perhaps never having seen it, makes people love family, hearth, and home.

Not surprisingly, nobody mentions race, class, ethnicity, or sex.

Then I play the Otis version, with its obviously joyful, sexual but also slyly ironic response to the old fogey standard in which, as the liner notes indicate, "[Otis] can't quite bring himself to say 'May all your Christmases be white' the first time through, so he gently stammers and ad-libs his way around it in a clever, horn-spurred turnaround until he can make his hidden agenda perfectly clear."

And, yes, here some clever student guesses at "audience," which leads to a short digression on "genre," in which their teacher discusses briefly rhythm and blues, soul, and Motown.

And when we try to answer, together, the question of how our "reading" (or "listening") to Otis says something about how we now hear and understand Bing, things really get rockin'.

What, exactly, is Der Bingle saying? To whom? What is Otis saying, especially when he seems now to be talking to Bing and those folks from twenty-five years earlier? And why does he seem to have turned a benign carol into either a sexy song or a political song or a Black song or...?

And, my favorite question: How might those old 1940s folks respond to the Redding version? And, yes, well, how do you suppose they did, class, when the Otis version appeared at the height of the Civil Rights and rock and roll and anti-war movements?

That's when I turn down the music and let them write for twenty minutes, responding to the above. May your teaching be merry and bright. And may all your Christmases be, well, not exactly white.



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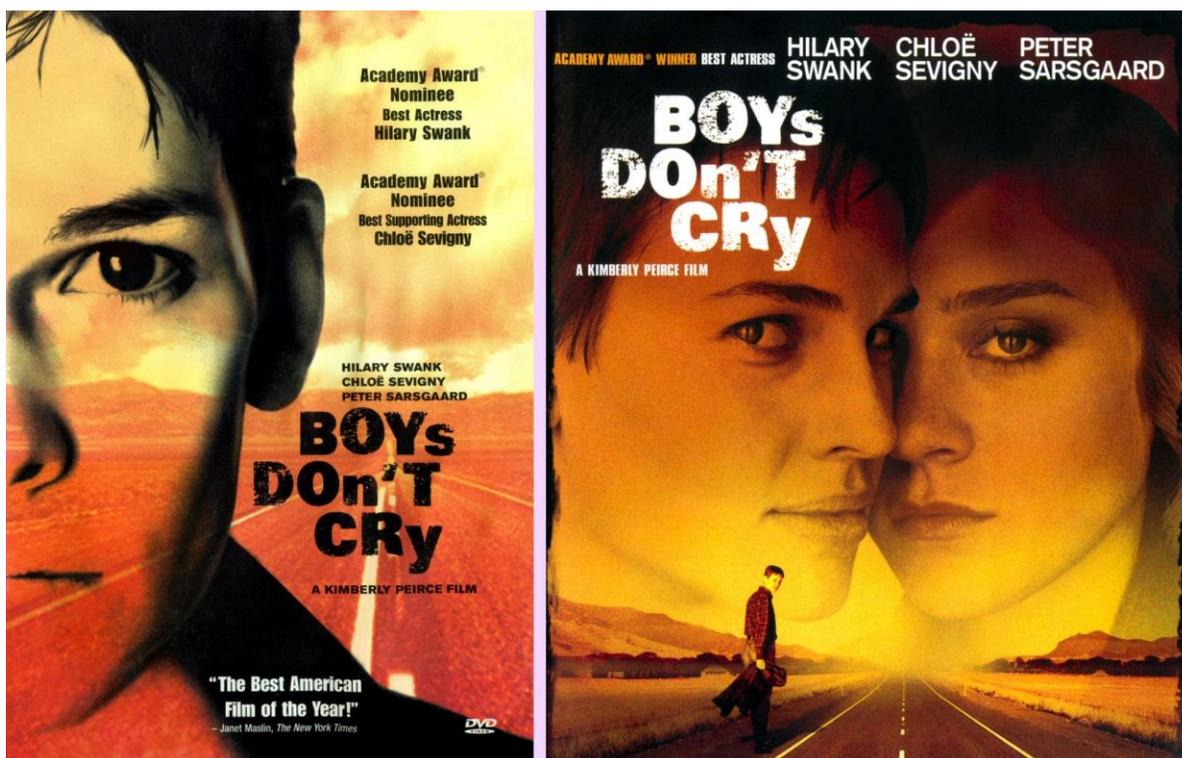
# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Boys Don't Cry

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.67, 2003)

by Alexandra Barron



BOYS DON'T CRY. DIRECTED BY KIMBERLEY PEIRCE. 114 MINUTES. FOX SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES, 1999.

***Boys Don't Cry*. Directed by Kimberley Peirce. 114 minutes. Fox Searchlight Pictures.**

Over the past three years I've taught Kimberley Peirce's film *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) to my undergraduate literature and composition classes at the University of Texas at Austin. The film is a fictional recreation of the life and death of Brandon Teena, a young transgendered man living in Nebraska who was brutally murdered when he was discovered to be biologically female. There is a political efficacy in films which position viewers to identify with queer characters, something *Boys Don't Cry* does very well.

My students had a range of reactions to the film. Their comments included: "Brandon was sick; that is a disease; we learned about it in psychology" and "Poor, uneducated people in those rural places are so messed up." On the other hand, one student wrote in a free write: "Boys Don't Cry positioned me in terms of Brandon. Everything we see is from Brandon's point of view. At first this made me uncomfortable because I have never seen a movie from the point of view of a sexually ambiguous character before. It took a little adjusting to at the beginning, but throughout the movie I found myself hoping things would work out for Brandon."

Others wrote that they identified with Brandon, they liked Brandon, and they felt his pain. They described his struggle as "universal"; he wanted to find himself and to be with the girl he loved. Interestingly, the female students also wrote about wanting to protect and care for him. This identification provides a way into a story some wouldn't normally want to enter. It also makes for a great discussion on how we construct masculinity culturally and what makes Brandon so appealing -- his James Dean bad-boy quality and sensitive masculinity, his desire to please, his all-American white-boy looks, etc. (See Craig Wilse's review in *Make 2* [Spring 2000]: 17-20 on the film's treatment of race, including its erasure of Phillip Devine, an African-American man murdered with the real Brandon Teena.)

Another exercise that I found useful in class discussions asked students to think about what the "truth" of gender is in the film. To facilitate this, we drew up a list on the board of all the different ways in which Brandon was perceived. He is referred to as a boy, a girl, a "dyke," a lesbian, a "faggot," a hermaphrodite, someone with a sexual identity crisis, and "it." Then we tried to get at what definition of Brandon's gender the film was privileging, and from there we moved on to discussing if there is a "truth" of gender. It was a very spirited discussion because people ranged from diehard women's studies students who believe gender is a performance and cited Judith Butler in class to students who

argued that biology is destiny and anyone who has female genitalia is a woman. At least this discussion made everybody realize that the truth of gender is contested, and that other definitions besides their own exist -- though some people, obviously, do not need their eyes opened to transgendered identity or the hate directed at those who don't conform to gender norms.



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# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Boyz Do Cry: Screening History's White Lies

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.67, 2003)

by Charles I. Nero



RALLY TO STAND WITH RAPE SURVIVORS. MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA. DECEMBER 17, 2016

**"Boyz Do Cry: Screening History's White Lies."  
Jennifer DeVere Brody. In *Screen 43:1 (Spring 2002):*  
91-96.**

I teach a first-year course at Bates College called "White Redemption: Cinema and the Co-Optation of African American History." It examines what I call "white redemption" narratives that resolve the ethical and moral dilemmas whites face as members of a dominating and oppressing group by figuratively liberating whites from racism. Most of the films I use make explicit reference to African Americans; however, I also use some films that are noteworthy for their omission of black people.

This year I paired Kimberley Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* with Jennifer DeVere Brody's essay "Boyz Do Cry: Screening History's White Lies" in order to encourage students to think critically about the representation of race and gender in an independently produced film that had garnered mainstream critical and commercial success and had been lauded for its progressive viewpoint.

I approached this assignment with trepidation, anticipating strong resistance from students. *Boys Don't Cry* had played a pivotal role in galvanizing youth and queer activism around transgender issues and in alerting the public to the severity of hate crimes. Since I knew that several queer students and their allies would be in this class I wondered especially if they would assume I would damage their cause by giving arguments to homophobic interests. Fortunately, my worst concerns did not materialize.

Brody's essay is a rather short and clearly written polemic that is quite accessible to an undergraduate audience. Brody makes a compelling argument that the success of *Boys Don't Cry* may have been due to the omission of Philip Devine, an African American man who was present and slain at the same time as Brandon Teena. The omission of Devine from the story allowed for the emergence of a traditional romantic narrative in which white women are sympathetic victims. Further, Brody calls attention to interviews in which Peirce revealed that she was concerned that showing the murder of an African American man might draw audiences' sympathies away from the murder of the white females. Brody's essay brings to light how difficult it is to discuss simultaneous oppressions without creating a hierarchy about whose oppression is worse.

The students -- most of whom are white New England American, suburban, straight identifying, and middle- to upper class -- were very resistant to discussing race in the film. The typical comment was that the omission of Devine was not racially motivated, merely a plot device. Filmmakers, these students argued, could not be expected to put everything into one film. Even students who agreed

that the omission might be racially motivated were inclined to excuse it because Devine's presence might have taken the film's focus away from the hatred of queer people.

Further discussion focused on whether we assumed that all queer people were white or that filmmakers had to make a choice between race and queerness. The assignment culminated in an eight person parliamentary style debate on the topic "*Boys Don't Cry* is one more screening of history's white lies." Each debater wrote an essay detailing their research and their contribution to the group process. The other students could give brief speeches in support of one of the two teams. The class voted for the winning team and each student had to justify his/her vote in writing on the ballots; anonymity was optional. The ballots were given to the debaters to read and then to me; they were available at the next class for all students to read.

The debate format allowed the entire class to engage in a more structured form of discussion. The fact that the winner was decided by only two votes is significant. Clearly many did not endorse calling attention to the racial choices Brody identifies. However, the essays show that students were able to recognize the importance of thinking critically about representations of race and gender and, equally important, that they were willing to challenge as unacceptable the idea that oppressions have to be ranked into a hierarchy.



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# RADICAL TEACHER

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## Photos from "True Pictures"

(*RADICAL TEACHER* NO.70, 2004)

by Nathaniel W. Smith



PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN: SUBJECTS UNKNOWN (BOXERS), QUARTER PLATE AMBROTYPE, C. 1860-65. COLLECTION OF GREG FRENCH.

**"Photos from "True Pictures." Gregory Fried. *Common Place*, Vol.11, No. 2. [www.common-place.org/vol-02/no-02/fried/](http://www.common-place.org/vol-02/no-02/fried/) Accessed February 10, 2002.**

A white teacher in a mostly white suburban public high school in Pennsylvania, I was researching Frederick Douglass when I came across Gregory Fried's online article "True Pictures," which included photographs that Frederick Douglass himself had hoped would draw attention to the arbitrariness of race, and I decided to use them in class.

On the day of the lesson, I handed each student one of the pictures. I explained to them that these pictures were taken around the time of emancipation (1863, to be precise), and that Frederick Douglass had hoped to use them to educate people against slavery and racism.

Then I gave them three minutes to describe the image and explain how Frederick Douglass might have wanted to use these in an anti-racism / anti-slavery campaign. I allowed them a few minutes to react and interpret, alone or in small groups. Afterwards, I asked them to share their responses. Students unanimously agreed that the picture of Isaac and Rosa arm in arm was symbolic of interracial harmony, depicting black and white together in youthful innocence. With the other photo, students assumed the children were teaching the man to read -- white kids working to help the downtrodden black man.

Once students aired their reactions, I explained that every person pictured was a freed person, a former slave. They had all been "black," made to live as slaves, unable to pursue their rights through legal institutions. So were they in fact black, or were they white?

Following this exercise, the debate was tightly focused on what qualifies a person for their race. No one claimed colorblindness -- they had already revealed assumptions about race in their answers. Furthermore, their ideas about how the photos would be used demonstrated that race (and racial uncertainty) is exactly what makes them powerful images in the first place. Therefore, race is assumed and interpreted by all parties, regardless of whether they consider themselves prejudiced. We then moved on to discussing how, with all this uncertainty, we ever decide that any person is of a specific race. Students debated whether ancestry, color, or culture is the key.

If they argued that ancestry is the source, I asked them about adoptees. Imagine that Rosa had been adopted in infancy and raised white. What if she and her family believed she was white, even though her biological father was black? Can a person be black and not even know it? Most students agreed that Rosa would be white in that scenario. If so, does

that mean there is no connection between race and ancestry? Here students argued that ancestry does not always decide race identification -- skin tone matters a lot too.

Of course the color argument is also flawed. When students answered that black people are people with black skin, I asked them to define the exact range of tones. What about darkly tanned white people? Both Malcolm X and Frederick Douglass were light skinned, but everyone calls them black. And where does Michael Jackson figure into this? And what of the emancipated slaves in the pictures? Ultimately, students admitted that people with darker skin may live a "white" life, and people with very light skin may live a "black" life.

The third and final argument grounds race in culture, claiming it as a matter of behavior and speech. When students offered this argument, I had them explain to me how a white person "acts black." What are the behaviors? They described speaking Ebonics, blasting Hip Hop, and wearing low baggy pants. But why do they call that acting black? If culture is the defining quality, wouldn't that person just become black? What if a white person were also the adopted person discussed above, with direct African ancestry? Who would argue that a person with African ancestry is not in fact black just because they don't act black?

In my tenth grade English classes, I have followed up this session with narratives of freed people such as Douglass. His narrative suggests that he was his master's son -- students readily connected that fact to the one drop rule and its implications. I also found that the exercise makes a great basis for discussing Mark Twain's *Pudd'n Head Wilson*, Nella Larsen's *Passing*, James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, and many short stories that involve race ambiguity, such as Langston Hughes's "Who's Passing for Whom?"

Ultimately, the purpose of the lesson is not to give easy answers about race, but rather to deconstruct race, to reveal the contradictions and problems inherent in this socially constructed category. Ideally, this preliminary examination of the social construction of race will lead to continued searching and questioning, building the students' resistance to easy and simplistic answers.



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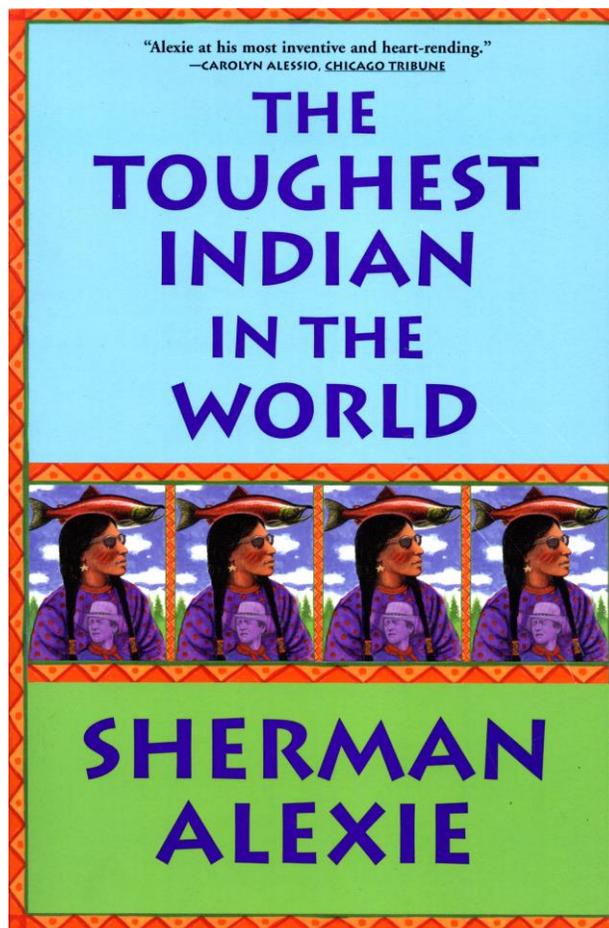
# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## The Toughest Indian in the World

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.72, 2005)

by Julie Bolt



THE TOUGHEST INDIAN IN THE WORLD. SHERMAN ALEXIE. (GROVE PRESS, 2001).

***The Toughest Indian in the World.* Sherman Alexie. Grove Press.**

The students in my required college literature classes are bright and highly diverse, yet they often fall into the trap of thinking about racial and sexual identity in stereotypical terms. A great tool for complicating the issue of identity is the second of Sherman Alexie's three short story collections, *The Toughest Indian in the World*. In the stories, Spokane Indian characters continually challenge students' media-formed assumptions. Here basketball takes predominance over the sweat lodge, a sexual encounter with a gay boxer connects a young man to a sacred collective past, and John Wayne is in touch with his feminine side.

Students easily identify with Alexie's accessible language, caustic humor, and pop-culture imagery. Resistant readers are almost always sucked in. However, students soon find themselves on shifting ground as they struggle with their own notions of "Indian-ness" by projecting stereotypes of alcoholism and mysticism. It is easy to question these projections through characters that do not have cookie-cutter responses to the racist and romantic constructions of Indian identity in millennium America. Instead, the characters surprise students through their self-deprecating discourse, conflicting loyalties, self-doubt, doubt of others, and unpredictable acts (large and small) of courage and love.

I find the title story from *The Toughest Indian in the World* especially interesting, as it takes on the homophobia of many of my students. In the story, a middle-class Spokane journalist picks up an Indian hitchhiker so as to feel closer to the very culture he has distanced himself from. The hitchhiker is a brawny street boxer and the protagonist idealizes him as a warrior. When their casual banter morphs into a sexual encounter, students must contend with its spiritual significance: the protagonist, from a salmon tribe, returns barefoot upriver to the reservation. Has he discovered his sexual identity? Has he inadvertently been given the gift of cultural reconnection? During discussion, students contrast their homophobic stereotyping with the striking symbolism in the story, and often find themselves rethinking their initial reactions.

Alexie also takes on academic appropriation of Indian identity. In the final story "One Good Man," a "Cherokee-Choctaw-Seminole-Irish-Russian" professor, who actually appears to be primarily of European descent, repeatedly asks his class the question, "What is an Indian!" The question is posed as if there is textbook response. The professor is challenged by a Spokane student's father who claims, "I can see a little bit of that aboriginal bone structure in your face, but you ain't Indian. No. You might even hang out with some Indians or get a little of the ha-ha when one of the women is feeling sorry for you. But you ain't Indian.

No. You might be Native American but you sure as hell ain't Indian."

When the professor counters that he was at the American Indian movement occupation at Alcatraz, the Spokane father says that on that day, "I took my wife and kids to the Pacific Ocean, just off Neah Bay. Most beautiful place in the world." The professor then counters with the Wounded Knee occupation: "Where were you?" The father replies, "I was teaching my son to ride his bike. Took forever. And when he finally did it, man, I cried like a baby, I was so proud." Here students encounter the contrast between a racially-constructed version of identity and a human one.

Over the course of reading the book, some of the questions that students raise are: Does Alexie want us to understand his culture? Why does he share some cultural and psychological insights, but not others? What audience are his stories written for? Does he hate white people? Why does sexual politics become a metaphor for identity politics?

Because of the nuance of the characters, students produce a diversity of interpretations. By drawing attention to the varied emotional and ideological responses, and examining them, a more layered view of identity is discovered. As Alexie makes students laugh, shocks them, and subverts their stereotypes, a fixed notion of identity is replaced with one that is hybrid and multidirectional. And, I believe, more humanizing.

What is an Indian? These stories critique the very question.



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# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Universal Declaration of Human Rights

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.73, 2005)

by Janet Zandy



ELEANOR ROOSEVELT HOLDING THE UDHR

"What is your greatest fear?"

"I fear leaving college and not being able to find a job and working at McDonald's the rest of my life."

The technologically-determined and career-focused private university where I teach has state of the arts programs in photography, computer science, new media, and many permutations of engineering, but no undergraduate or graduate degrees in English or history. The quarter system is unforgiving and, not unrelated, retention is a major concern. Art students hope for their big break and information technologists worry about finding required co-ops. Everyone knows that the real money these days -- for grants, research funding -- is in some manifestation of homeland security.

In this climate, teaching in the liberal arts is a refuge and a challenge. One of those challenges is a theme centered Senior Seminar course that all students must take if they wish to graduate. The present theme is Globalization, Human Rights, and Citizenship. I like teaching this course even though I know that many students dislike this requirement, and some are outright belligerent and hostile to it. I think of the course as taking students where they do not necessarily want to go and I assign a variety of texts, films, lectures, even comics to open dialogic spaces for perceiving the intersection of globalization, human rights, and citizenship. I want them to question how their training for jobs fits into a larger geo-political and humanistic space, but I have to find subtle ways to get there or they will stubbornly and predictably shut down. And, so, I practice a variant of samizdat pedagogy.

I always begin with a central, grounding document: the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Almost all students have never seen it before or heard of it. It is a useful pedagogical troublemaker. From the start, a vocal minority of students make it clear: human rights are not a given. At first glance, their response (invariably from highly technical, white, suburban males) highlights the distance between those protesting in anti-capitalist globalization demonstrations and those programming the security systems that sustain the Patriot Act, the prison system, as well as the more mundane slow passage through any airport. Some -- not all -- of these technologically sophisticated and outspoken students champion a social Darwinism of survival of the fittest, an ideology of choice without any consideration of circumstances. Or, in the words of one student, "people have a right to go after water, but no one is entitled to it."

Many students see the Declaration of Human Rights as an idealistic but meaningless document, well intentioned, but irrelevant. Some are quick to point out its inconsistencies, indeterminacies (their meaning, my term). At first, few recognize it as a heuristic for centering human actuality, for examining issues of contemporary slavery,

international labor conditions, rights of women and children, and the economic impact of undemocratic capitalist globalization -- until they start to apply it to their own lives and fears. I inform them that many non-Western members of the United Nations such as Iran, China, Egypt, and Lebanon participated in the drafting of this document, as well as nations in the Western and Soviet-Bloc countries, and I explain how it emerged with Eleanor Roosevelt's prodding out of the trauma of war and was viewed by her as a threshold document, an "international magna carta." What I don't say is that I offer it as an imaginary for another world.

This text -- 30 articles approved by the UN General Assembly -- is a catalyst for gathering and connecting the filaments of students' own experiences to the actualities of global capital. Each student must choose and respond to one article. For example, Article 9, "No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile," leads us to a discussion of Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib. Article 15, "Everyone has a right to a nationality," evokes a discussion of migration and exile, of literally existing in a condition "without papers." Article 29, "Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible," raises questions about the responsibilities of corporations and businesses to local communities. And Article 23, "Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment," speaks to them because they fear the outsourcing of their recently acquired technical skills and almost all know someone whose job succumbed to corporate downsizing.

Out of this modest exercise, patterns of concern emerge. Then we make a leap, and I ask them to write responses to three questions: What do you fear? What is the greatest global problem? What would you do if you were a citizen-activist? In the small drama of this brief ten-week course, their responses, read anonymously and aloud, reflect back to them the possibilities inherent in themselves. Large numbers name hunger and poverty as primary problems. They fear failure and loss and almost all recognize environmental perils. Some go further and speak to the "concentration of so much wealth and power in the hands of a few people; [and] the lengths to which these people go to protect their wealth and power and accumulate more." And, "money over humanity." One observes, "the greatest global problem: Lack of concern for global problems." No text can claim the power of progressive revolution these Orwellian days, but the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a critical reminder of new vision and hope after the trauma of war. Many students want alternatives to cynicism and political paralysis. And some, a very few, are ready to act.



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# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Grammar in the Student-Centered Composition Class

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.75, 2006)

by Scott Oldenburg

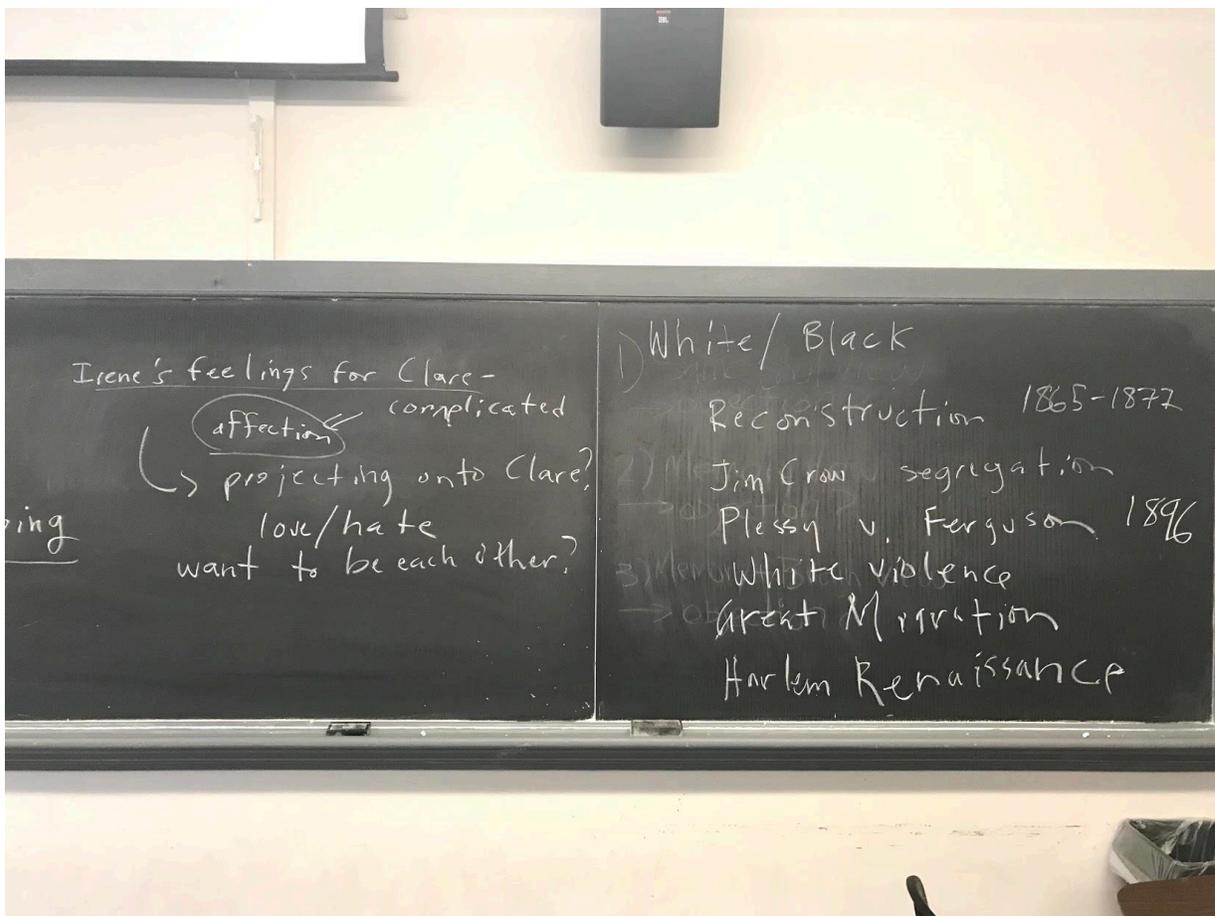


IMAGE COURTESY OF JOSEPH ENTIN

There are few things less exciting and more conservative than teaching grammar, yet even at the university level, instructors find students lacking the ability to consistently form complete sentences or to make pronouns agree with their referents. True, standard English changes over time and to insist on antiquated diction would be folly indeed, but public discourse has its rules, and to some degree it has become the composition instructor's responsibility to introduce students to those rules. Few want to teach the complexities of modifier placement and the beauty of correlative conjunctions, however. Most instructors of composition would rather lead students to engage in important debates, to learn about alternative points of view, to become critical thinkers and writers.

At the same time, we ought to recognize the injustice of allowing students to continue making basic mechanical errors that may prevent them from expressing themselves well in written assignments in our own or other classes or getting the job they want when they graduate. Many instructors order writing handbooks -- all of them pretty similar in content -- and hope that red marks on assignments will lead the bewildered student to open the handbook to figure out how to undangle, for example, dangling modifiers. Most students, unfortunately, are both intimidated and bored by these grammar texts.

Many teachers occasionally teach specific grammar points or quiz students on readings from their grammar handbooks with mixed success. These methods of teaching grammar reflect a teacher- rather than student- centered pedagogy, and I suspect most college-level students have already been taught in this way to no avail. For these reasons, I have developed a more student-centered way of integrating grammar in the composition classroom.

The students in my composition classes at SUNY Buffalo and Erie Community College teach the grammar. I have compiled a list of the twelve most common grammar problems that occur in student writing. I ask students to pair up with another student in the class and choose one of the grammar points. Students are asked to do the following: research the grammar point; prepare a handout including explanation, examples, and some activity for the class (a short, ungraded quiz, for example); and present the grammar point and handout to the class as a five-minute lesson. For four to six weeks we begin each class with one of these peer-taught grammar lessons.

If nothing else, students learn how to use their grammar handbooks. I have also found that students learn not only to research their own grammar point but to be less intimidated by the supposedly daunting writing handbook and to view the class as a community of learners who may not be able to change the rules of grammar but who can collaborate to master them. After handing back papers, I have seen students locate the "class expert" on a particular grammar

point and ask for clarification. I have also found that after going through six weeks of grammar presentations, students become more comfortable adding their opinions to class discussions.

Is this as politically urgent as discussing and writing about the WTO? As radical as eliminating grades from the curriculum? Maybe not, but taking grammar, an unfortunately necessary component of the composition class, and asking students to teach one another -- to become dependent on one another rather than on the know-it-all instructor, to be responsible for their own and others' education -- produces a community of learners who are gradually mastering the rules of public discourse through which they can effect change.



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# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Beyond Ageism: Teaching Feminist Gerontology

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.76, 2006)

by Margaret Cruikshank

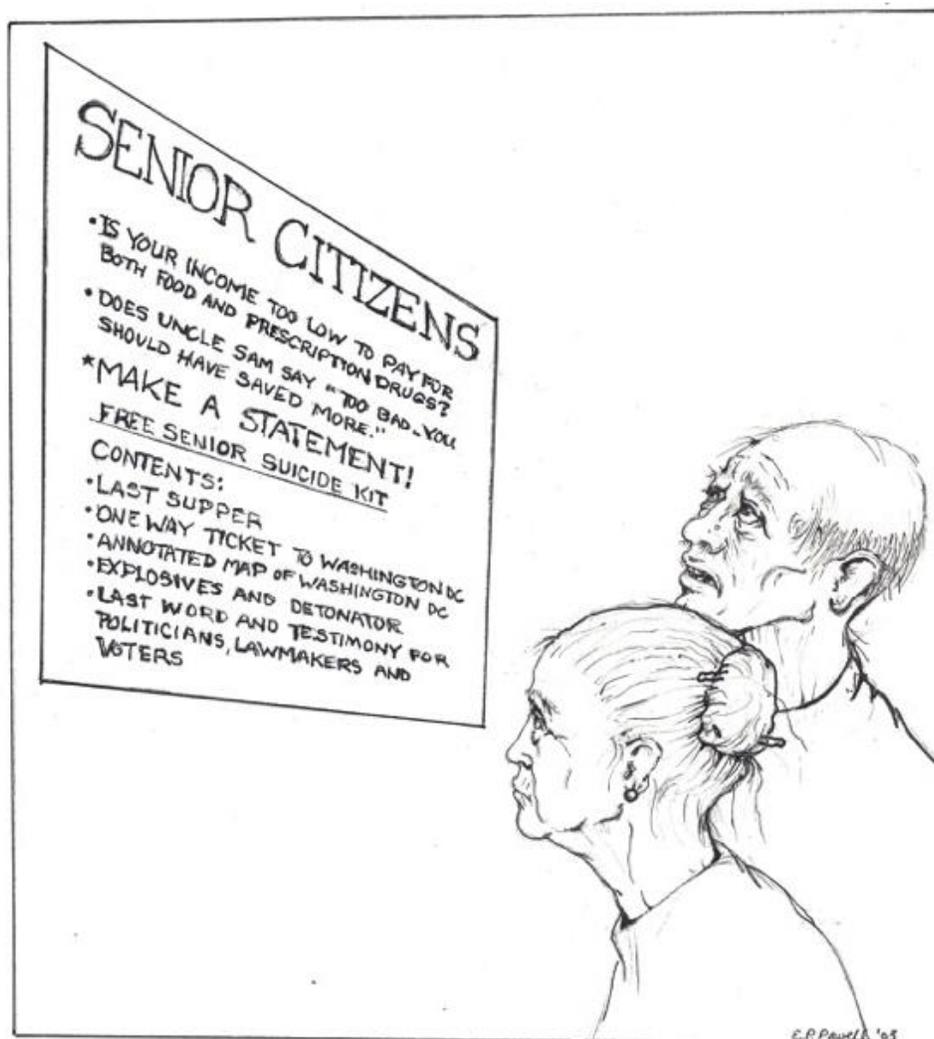


ILLUSTRATION BY LIZ POWELL

Few women's studies programs offer separate courses on aging. Scholars and teachers in the field have other interests; most students are under fifty; and the new field of age studies has yet to influence our thinking.

Internalized ageism may also play a role in deflecting attention from the subject of women's aging. At the National Women's Studies conference in Seattle in 1985, Barbara Macdonald excoriated feminist scholars and writers for overlooking aging and old age. Twenty years later, a plenary and two panels on aging were presented at NWSA. In 1985, feminist interest in aging focused on ageism. While that topic still deserves scrutiny, women's aging has become a subject of much broader scope.

Women and Aging, a course I have taught at the University of Maine and the University of Southern Maine, examines the social construction of age. Here I will describe methods for engaging students' interest, course goals, difficult issues for feminists to tackle in the class, and typical outcomes for students who complete the course.

First, since aging is an unfamiliar subject for nearly all students who choose the class, I use a technique called "clustering" from Gabriele Rico's book *Writing the Natural Way*. Students free associate around the nucleus word of "aging" or "old age." The exercise is done quickly to engage the right brain, and the circles we draw out from the nucleus insure that ideas are not ranked. Don't censor, I urge. At the end of the semester, we repeat the exercise so that students can gauge what differences mark their understandings of late life. I want them to be less frightened of aging than they were at the beginning of the class and to be much more aware of women's aging's many facets.

Another strategy is to use changes in my own body to illustrate the physical process of aging. I come to class the first night in shorts and a tee shirt. I point out sagging upper arm skin, upper lip wrinkles, a thickening middle, stubby fat thighs, decreased manual dexterity, a small dowager's hump, easily bruised skin, slightly decreased hearing ability, and some loss of foot padding. I mention but do not show disappearing pubic hair and underarm hair. A colleague once asked, after the first class, "how did they like your cellulite?"

The aim here is to present aging changes as simple facts, to de-mystify them. I balance this display by noting that I no longer have to buy tampons, worry much about others' opinions of me, or pay \$3.50 to use Maine state parks and beaches. If I appear vigorous and athletic, that is all to the good, although I may delude myself in thinking that I do. Besides illuminating our cultural fear of aging, I encourage students to think about age in ways that counter mainstream attitudes. We discuss ways aging has been medicalized in the U.S. to an extreme degree, regarded as a burden, and subjected to questionable prescriptions such as "successful aging" and "productive aging." These terms insidiously embed aging with marketing and competition.

Who is equipped to do well in old age? Those with class privilege.

When aging is taught in women's studies, two difficult issues arise. The recent feminist concern with bodies ill suits our purpose because aging is largely culturally determined, and body emphasis can obscure that fact. On the other hand, it is crucial to consider bodies because old women's bodies are usually invisible. From a medical standpoint, old women's bodies are defined by illness and ailments, by unfixable problems. From the perspective of feminist gerontology, the obstacles to better health for women are not primarily biological but cultural. The heaviest penalty for Americans' lack of national health care is paid by old women.

A second difficult issue is that fostering self-acceptance and pride in being old is common among feminists but too much emphasis on age identity can be limiting. Since our culture overemphasizes chronological age, feminists may reinforce conventional thinking by making age a primary identity. It is more useful to see old age as a stage of the life course, to interweave old with other identities, or to highlight differences in the ways women experience aging.

If ever we have a movement of old women to empower ourselves/themselves, stressing a common or fixed identity may be good strategy, but it is not good ideology. Wrestling age stigma to the ground is a noble goal, but it is so pervasive in our culture that making age a primary identity carries the psychic risk of encasing us in angry victimhood. Invigorating anger at ageism will serve us well; corrosive anger will not.

By the end of the semester, students typically see old women not as frozen in old age but as having both a past and a future. Aware of the limits of the grandmother role, they are now more likely to see their own grandmothers outside of the prescribed role. Students understand the paradox that aging is both within their control and beyond their control. They understand, finally, that aging is far more than a personal, bodily, individual experience; it happens in a cultural context. The more clearly they see that context -- the inequalities structured into our current ways of aging, for example -- the less an irrational fear of aging will grip them.



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# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Reflections of a Transgender Medievalist

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.77, 2006)

by Angelique Davi



RADICAL TEACHER, ISSUE 66

I am a gender-bending lesbian who teaches Beowulf at a business university. In this piece, I reflect on an incident that reminds me I have little control over where and when my identity becomes more or less prominent for my students. Because the incident took me by surprise, I failed to capitalize on a teachable moment; this piece is my attempt at making sense of that failure.

The specific incident took place while I traveled through London with eleven students in my "Chaucer's World" course. One evening, as my students and I rode an escalator to the Tube, a man passed us and stared at me with a penetrating gaze. As he got closer, he yelled to the students, "Get away from this one who appears to be a man. He...she...it...will lead you all to damnation." I could feel his breath on me as he screamed. He implored the students to get away from me, screaming about hell and damnation and my appearing to be both "man and woman."

This was not the first time I was accosted for being transgender. I have been chased down the streets and have had people stare at me in anger as I enter public restrooms. A cab driver in Kalamazoo spent the entire thirty-minute ride to the airport preaching to me to redeem my sins lest I burn in the flames of hell for all eternity.

That evening on the escalator in London, my students did a noble thing. Before we landed at the bottom, five of them surrounded me on every side. By the time we reached the attacker who stood waiting for us, my students were acting as a shield protecting me from him. As we walked down the corridor to the next escalator, my students held their positions. The attacker continued to scream obscenities about my gender, but my students didn't budge. We traveled through the Tube system like this until my attacker eventually got frustrated enough to move on. As he headed down a different corridor, my students asked if I was OK and, when assured, continued toward the train platform. Briefly, before the train arrived, I talked to them about this being a somewhat typical occurrence in my life and apologized to them for their having to be witness to this. They were relatively short on words.

I felt tremendous guilt after the incident. As is the case with many victims of abuse, I blamed myself. I repeatedly asked myself what I could have done differently. My job was to lead my students through medieval sites in England; it was not to expose them to the hostility I experience, on a rather frequent basis, because of my gender bending. I blamed myself for making my students vulnerable to harm because of my choice of attire and hairstyle. After that brief conversation on the train platform, I never raised the topic with my students again. I regret that choice, and I continue to struggle to understand why I was unable to address the incident with them. But in terms of the personal, at the time, I could not articulate to my students fully who I am and why

I make the choices in my appearance that I do. I doubted I would have any good answers to their questions.

So much had passed between us in those brief moments in the London Underground, but it would go unprocessed by us as a group, as a class. I discovered, through one student, that the class came together in a pub and spent much of the evening discussing what had transpired. The discussion focused on what it felt like for each of them to be victims of abuse and what it felt like to hear me tell them that that was not an unusual occurrence in my life. Despite the absence of a formal reflection assignment, my students chose to process the incident in their own way -- together when I was not with them.

In surrounding me on the escalators, my students made a choice to put me before themselves. They let me know, with their body movements, that they respected me. In some ways, my gender bending created a moment of possibility which I could not control. And my students seized the opportunity. Many of them walked away from the course being able to recite in Middle English the opening to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. But I suspect they also took away a lesson that was equally important and one for which I couldn't have prepared.



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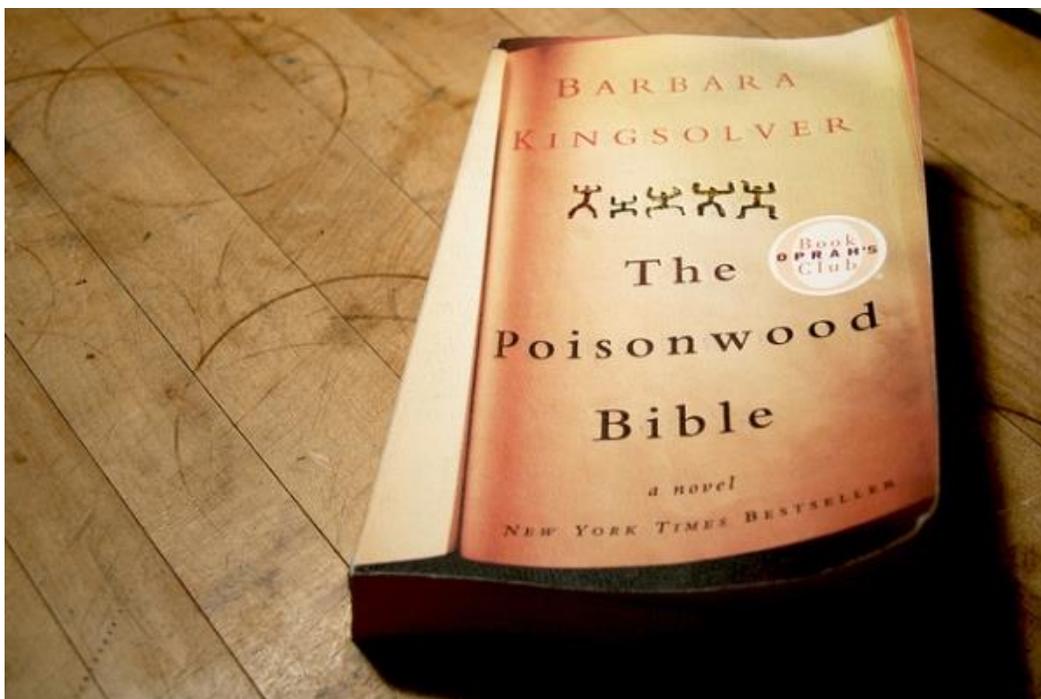
# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## The Poisonwood Bible, Lumumba and A Congo Chronicle: Patrice Lumumba in Urban Art

(RADICAL TEACHER NO. 78, 2007)

by Leonard Vogt



*THE POISONWOOD BIBLE.* BARBARA KINGSOLVER. HARPERTORCH.

**The Poisonwood Bible.** Barbara Kingsolver. Harpertorch.

**Lumumba.** Directed by Raoul Peck. 115 Minutes.

**A Congo Chronicle: Patrice Lumumba in Urban Art.** Museum of African Art.

I divide my Urban Study "Art, Politics and Protest" course into five units: an introductory unit of many art forms (posters, cartoons, t-shirts, poetry, Web sites) representing various political themes; a unit on AIDS, both domestic and international; a unit on political protest art of Latin America (see Teaching Note on Manlio Argueta's *One Day of Life* in RT #42); a unit on imperialism in Africa; and a final unit on Art Against War. I center my imperialism in Africa unit around Barbara Kingsolver's novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*.

When I first read the novel in 1998, I knew I had to teach it and "Art, Politics and Protest" seemed the perfect place. It is long, and the course already included a large amount of reading and writing, but I chanced it and, by and large, my students read it and loved it.

On a strictly narrative level, *The Poisonwood Bible* is about an American family from Georgia in the early 1960s that go to the Belgian Congo to Christianize the Africans. The firebrand behind this adventure is Nathan Price, the Baptist minister who brings along, with various degrees of reluctance, his wife Orleanna, and their four daughters, Rachel (the eldest), Leah and Adah (the twins), and May Ruth (the youngest). The narrative progresses from the points of view of the five females and the reader gets various perspectives on what their years in the Congo meant for each character.

Orleanna's chapters are set years later back in the States as she ruminates on Africa, religion, her husband, and her children. The daughters' chapters are set during their time in Africa and reveal very different approaches to the Congo missionary work, the children's reactions to both their father and his religion, and their impending political awareness of Patrice Lumumba's rise and fall from power. Rachel, the platinum blond teen-queen wannabe, hates and resents the trip from the beginning, but stays the longest and exploits Africa the most. The twins Leah and Ada, although initially intellectually and physically quite different, merge into close allies as they grow to maturity in their new homeland. May Ruth, the five year old, has the time of her life as she spontaneously and innocently responds to her new playground of the Congo. The first person voice of Baptist minister Nathan, as he attempts to spiritually conquer the Congo, is never directly heard, but rather dissected through the narratives of his wife and daughters.

Underneath these characters, to whom Kingsolver gives a superb richness, is the Congo itself, its years of torture by the Belgians, and its forthcoming betrayal by its former colony as well as by the United States. At its most overt level, *The Poisonwood Bible* is a novel about imperialism in Africa, but this level is only slowly revealed through, and indirectly compared to, Kingsolver's exploration of Nathan's "imperialism" over his family and the Congo through religion and patriarchy.

I create study questions for any literature I teach and, since there is never enough time to do this novel justice, these study questions become the medium through which my students understand and share their responses to the novel. I create questions that hopefully generate an interest in the relationships among the characters of the mother and her four daughters, their perceptions of the religious and patriarchal "imperialism" of their husband and father respectively, and the election and assassination of Patrice Lumumba as it unfolds through the narratives of the female characters. From the two or three class periods my students devote to discussing and sharing responses to these study questions, they get a fairly good overview of the multiple levels of politics running through *The Poisonwood Bible*.

To particularly emphasize and elucidate the very short independence of the Congo and its ultimate fall into years of dictatorship, I show the film *Lumumba* and the art book *A Congo Chronicle: Patrice Lumumba in Urban Art*, both of which greatly enhance the students' understanding and discussion of Patrice Lumumba and the politics of the Congo. The film is excellent and, in some instances, exactly parallels the novel's perceptions of Lumumba as narrated through one of the daughters, Leah. The DVD version of the film also has historical footage "extras" of Lumumba addressing his new nation and later being arrested at the airport for being a traitor. For even greater clarity of this moment of imperialism in the Congo, I take eight pieces of art work from *A Congo Chronicle: Patrice Lumumba in Urban Art*, showing specific moments of Lumumba's election and the events leading to his assassination: "Lumumba's Speech Causes Panic," "Cast Your Vote for Lumumba," "Belgian Congo 1885-1959," "Lumumba At a Very Serious Village Meeting," "Zaire Independence," "30th of June 1960 (Independence Day)," "Lumumba, Master of the World," and "Lumumba in Chains."

Since this Urban Study course "Art, Politics and Protest" explores the political protest of various art forms, I asked students at the end of this unit on imperialism in Africa to compare and contrast the three art forms we studied. For the final in-class exam, I asked them to explain what they had learned from *The Poisonwood Bible* about religion, patriarchy, and their ultimate connections with imperialism. *The Poisonwood Bible* has been one of my greatest teaching delights. It is a great piece of literature and political protest that challenged my students at every level.



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# RADICAL TEACHER

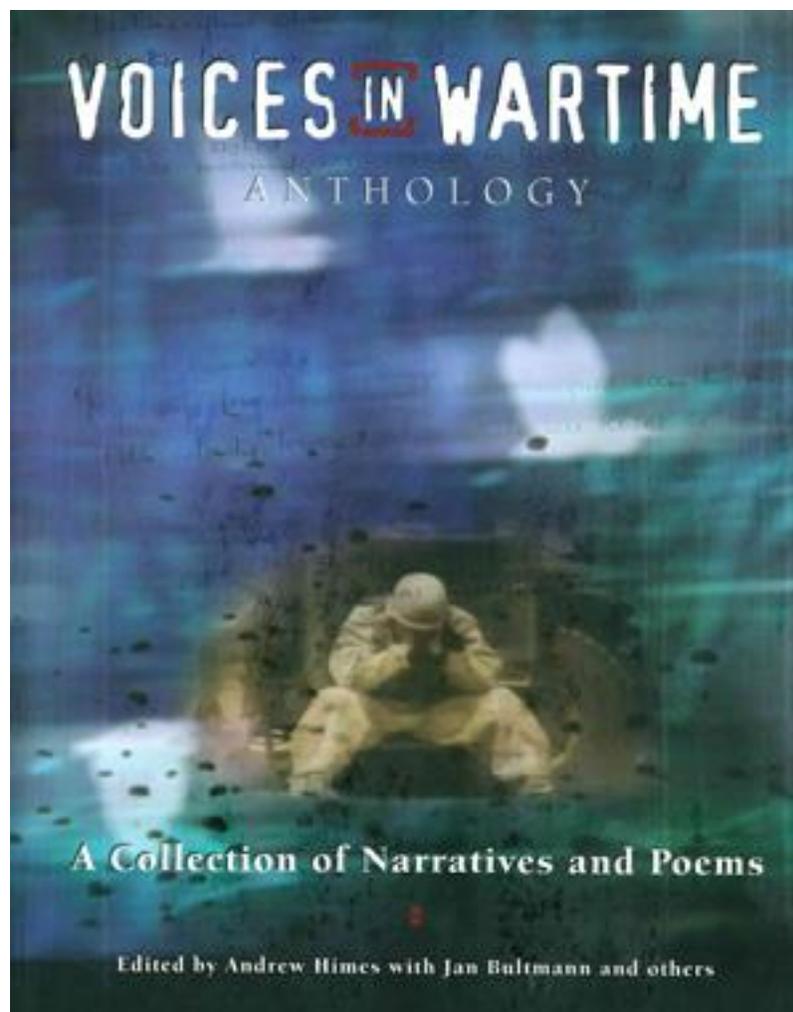
A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Raising Awareness of Social Justice and War Through

Film and Poetry

(*RADICAL TEACHER* NO.79, 2007)

by Veronica Gaylie



VOICES IN WARTIME, 2005

The Voices in Wartime Education project is a non-profit organization dedicated to exploring conflict through education and the arts. The 74-minute documentary *Voices in Wartime* juxtaposes images of war with the words of soldiers, poets, and others who experience armed conflict first hand. I ordered the DVD and decided to show the film to my student teachers at UBC Okanagan, a campus located in the predominantly suburban city of Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada.

After watching the film, my students were shaken to the core. Viewing the violent images in the context of poetry had a much greater impact than simply viewing distant photographs or films in the news or on news blogs. So far, our course topics had included teaching and learning around middle school methods, basic lesson planning, cooperative learning, integrating interdisciplinary coursework through technology, outdoor learning, and teacher professionalism.

I now invited the students to take a step towards developing empathetic, socially engaged classrooms. I wanted to incorporate public, community, mindful public action into my teacher education program. Spontaneity, and the unplanned aspects of lesson planning, was also part of the lesson. I knew the best way to get them thinking about empathy would be through poetry.

We watched relentless images from various wars and ravaged natural landscapes, many in developing world contexts. Afterwards, the students were dead silent, and troubled. The images of war were real; what they had seen and their reactions were important yet impossible to assess using a rubric; for the most part, they were not used to the classroom as a place that prompted such stark, emotional awareness. How does a teacher then respond to such a strong, unplanned response? The film comes with an extensive curriculum guide that includes debriefing activities intended to help students make sense of what they have seen. And yet, as the students experienced for themselves, the frustration of war is also its senselessness.

In the end, the film prompted us into spontaneous action. After giving the students a choice about de-briefing after the film -- whether we would write in journals, write poems, or form discussions in jigsaw groups -- the students decided on "the alternative option." They wanted to put their middle school teacher training into action with a hands-on, environment based, campus action. After some discussion, we decided to dedicate a "Peace Tree" on campus.

It was important for the students to gather and hold a symbolic ceremony based on acknowledging the existence of war while honoring the natural environment, right in our midst. It was unanimous: the tree in the courtyard at the Science building. As we went outside in the pouring rain, signed our names on a little "Peace Tree" sign, covered it in plastic, and tied it around the trunk, students were visible in

the science lab, walking around with test tubes and beakers. They did not even notice us.

The film, the poems, and the action allowed students to examine and channel their uncomfortable reactions, and perhaps encourage others to wonder about the Peace Tree. One of the students later told me that the day we watched the film everything changed; the student teachers moved from observers seeking information ... to participants constructing equitable, engaged, informed, globally inspired, peaceful interaction. The film *Voices in Wartime* comes with a teacher's guide with many excellent activities that could be used in middle or high school Humanities classes or in teacher training. We found that the best way to learn from the film is to let spontaneity, especially discomfort, be your guide. Taking up Wilfred Owen's poem from the film, the students learned how to engage in true, socially just action:

The poetry is in the pity.  
All a poet can do today  
is warn. That is why the  
true poet must be  
truthful.

[Information on ordering the film, the *Voices in Wartime Anthology*, and the curriculum guide can be found at: [www.voicesinwartime.org](http://www.voicesinwartime.org)]



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# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Can Critical Teaching Foster Activism in this Time of Repression?

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.79, 2007)

by Ira Shor



IMAGE COURTESY OF JOSEPH ENTIN

For my practice of critical teaching, questioning the status quo is the central goal while problem-posing dialogue is the central method. I prefer participatory approaches with subject matters that are local, contemporary, contentious, co-developed, and legible. A local subject matter offers concreteness and immediacy which can help counter the remoteness and abstractness many students assume is the nature of schooling, leading many to tune out as soon as the teacher starts doing education to them. A contemporary subject has the allure of something happening now, which similarly works for concreteness and against remoteness. Contemporary subjects embedded in controversy are also ongoing contentions which can be tracked in real time week to week through the class; some of these contentions are civic embroilments into which those who wish to intervene can choose to do so. In searching for themes that are local, contemporary, and contentious, my habit is to include students through a co-developed syllabus which gives preference to subjects nominated by students. If the remote, abstract nature of schooling involves academic teacher-talk about topics unilaterally chosen by authorities, then a critical-democratic process invites students to select materials for study. Finally, these subject matters, student-based but rigorously examined, need to be legible, in language hospitable to student understanding.

I attempt this method in a large, unpopular, required first-year writing course at my working-class college. With thirty or so students diverse in color, ethnicity, citizenship, and academic preparation, I begin the course with low-stakes writing, saying as little as I have to on the first day especially. Students begin with a "sign-in sheet" which asks for basic info (address, major, employment, etc.) plus answers to questions about what they want from college and from this course; what topics they most want to write and read about; what is good writing in their opinion and how someone becomes a good writer; and what "do's and don't's" for the teacher they would recommend to help them learn more in this course. Students then write a page describing their typical writing process from the moment they get an assignment to the moment they hand in their paper. The sequence moves on to a fifteen- to twenty-minute brainstorm about any topic that currently interests them. Some students say they

do not know what to write about, so I list nine topics as prompts (like the biggest problem now in the U.S. or in New York City, or what working families need to make life easier on them, or how this college can improve their education, etc.). I collect these brainstorms, take them home to read without grading them, and see which if any topics repeat as recurrent student concerns. For the next class, I put any recurring student topics on a ballot and ask students to vote their top choices.

As it happened, "Gay Marriage" and "The Iraq War" emerged as passionate student themes in a recent semester. Those subject matters were voted in as the first items on the syllabus for writing, reading, discussion, and research. I gathered and distributed background data, stats, and readings on marriage and homosexuality, and on the Iraq War, asking students to undertake a sequential research process: identify a topic you want to study, ask what you already know about it, gather new material about the subject, study this new material and prioritize it from most to least valuable for reporting on the topic (explaining in writing how you judged good and bad sources), and choose from each selected source several excerpts to quote in your report, indicating why you chose those excerpts and how to use them in a report.

In class, I began discussion of gay marriage with two editorial cartoons published in local papers, asking students to write a comparison of the meaning in the two texts. After a writing period in class, they first read comparisons in groups of two for peer discussion, then reported to the class as a whole on which cartoon was pro- or anti-gay marriage, how they knew, and which they agreed or disagreed with. For the Iraq War theme, I began with an anonymous student questionnaire about what each currently knew and felt about this war, costs in human life and in money, why it began, how it's going, etc., then provided various data bases and background readings on these issues. Of course, such themes led to some discomfort in class because of the strong views held on different sides. Several weeks of reading, writing, discussion, and drafting papers occurred for each theme, which led into the final disturbing topic of "Jobs, Social Class, and the Economy," clued into their identities as working-class students in college to improve their financial status in an age of runaway globalization and raging increases in inequality.

On the whole, I'd say that this method is a demanding introduction to writing, reading, and discussion at the college level. Students chose the topics for the syllabus and the research process which did NOT include polemical lectures from me about what things mean. Rather, I let the data bases, charts, stats, and articles speak to students as the students struggled to make life-sense of numbers and trend lines and in-depth stories on what is happening to the economy. "Research" here was not an abstract or ritual schmooze through steps but a disturbing process of provocative questions raised by virtually any topic in our society.



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# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Mad at History

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.85, 2009)

by Robyn C. Spencer



DEMONSTRATION IN BALTIMORE (JANUARY 15, 2015) IMAGE BY DORRET

I was unsure what to expect from Lehman College's Freshman Year Initiative (FYI) Program. FYI was designed to bridge the transition from high school to college by providing reinforced academic support, mentorship opportunities, and integrated courses. While many described it as a very rewarding experience, others warned that classroom dynamics could be challenging and student evaluations were often low.

My course (African American Heritage) hit a major bump in the road by the third week of the semester. The catalyst was Hakim\*, a student whom I had noticed on the first day of class due to his buoyant personality and who had become a disruptive force. At first I did not understand why. When I spoke to him individually he was respectful in a way that let me know that I was one of the few black teachers he had ever encountered. Although his work had structural issues, the content was thoughtful and sincere. I did not "get it" until the day he raised his hand and asked: "Now that 'we' have the chance, should Obama enslave white people?"

I would like to think that I have an unflappable demeanor, but his provocative question threw me for a loop. I can only imagine my facial expression. I asked how his question was related to the discussion topic: the Stono Rebellion. His response was blunt: "All that slavery stuff just makes me mad." Hands immediately shot up. Hakim's initial question was summarily dismissed by his peers and the conversation turned to the real issue -- managing the emotions involved in learning about brutal episodes in history. Most students started their comments with President Obama. To them, Obama's victory was a text to be read backwards. It was a salve on the deep and gaping wounds of the past -- it was hope in its most raw form. They believed that although African Americans had suffered brutality and injustice, the present was filled with possibility.

Although the question had resulted in a teachable moment, I made a mental note to ask Hakim to stay after class. I could now connect the dots between his loudly whispered comments during lectures, his extended bathroom breaks during videos, and his passive attempts to derail discussions during group work. What I initially thought of as immaturity and lack of discipline was actually resistance. He was resisting the knowledge about the sheer horror of everything that people of African descent had suffered. He did not want to see the black bodies kidnapped and shackled naked during the Middle Passage. He was outraged at what happened to John Punch, the black indentured servant sentenced to lifetime indenture in 1640 for running away while his two white co-conspirators simply received longer sentences. He was disgusted at the bitter injustice of 17-year-old Frances Driggs, brought to court twice by her master/rapist -- once for fornication and the other for having a child outside of wedlock. Her punishment was 30 lashes and more time added on to her work contract. This bloody history, albeit carefully packaged in a narrative of agency, survival, and resistance, was drowning him. Hakim was stuck somewhere between horror, anger, and a

desire for revenge. And we had not even gotten to the American Revolution yet.

After class the first thing he did was apologize for the disruption. Then he said: "You don't understand. I can't learn about this stuff. Obama or not, nothing has changed for me. I still get stopped by those same white cops on my block all the time." Our eyes locked. I saw just how upset this man-child was, underneath the swag. All of a sudden my classroom was the front lines. I saw Tupac, Fred Hampton, and the guys on the corner. In that moment, Hakim became the embodiment of all of the young men who chose college despite the fact that society told them that statistically they should be in jail.

I began by sharing the pains in my heart that I carry around for those many victims of historical injustices. Historians go beyond the familiar narratives. We see the nameless and faceless people who have been forgotten -- those who remain buried under what poet Alice Walker has called "the mud of oblivion" (374). We are trained to make the horrors less graphic and equip students to analyze with some measure of dispassion. Yet sometimes isn't the appropriate human(e) reaction shock, horror, and anger? Historian Nell Painter has written: "Any sojourn in southern archives covers the researcher in blood, and slavery, particularly, throws buckets of blood in the historian's face. Yet violence and pain seldom appear in historical writings, for professionalism prompts historians to clean up the mess. . . . The mopping up of blood occurs between the historian's research in primary documents and publication" (6). Hakim was reminding me not to "mop the blood" so thoroughly.

I reminded him not to let his emotions become a stumbling block. History had the potential to empower. James Baldwin wrote that to "accept one's . . . history is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it" (95). Hakim had the ability to think outside of the box and an innate sense of intellectual curiosity. He could either refine these gifts or become a loose cannon that few would take seriously. I suspected that he had been content to be the latter for most of his academic life, but I hoped that he would see that he had too much potential to settle for being the "class clown."

At the end of our discussion I asked him if he was going to meet the requirements for the class, including civility and classroom comportment, or drop. He seemed surprised. I reminded him that dropping was an option and I waited. I wanted to work with him but I also had 19 other students to tend to. Hakim would have to take ownership of the process. Somewhat begrudgingly, he informed me that he was going to "have to figure out a way to make it in this class." In turn, I promised him that black history was not an unceasing parade of oppression. And so we parted. I daresay we both learned something.

## Note

\* Name changed.

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# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Transnational Feminism, Islam, and the Other Woman: How to Teach

(RADICAL TEACHER NO. 86, 2009)

by Perin Gurel



MAYA AND PINTO. PHOTOGRAPHS TAKEN AT THE AUDRE LORDE EXHIBIT OPENING AT TUFTS UNIVERSITY BY PEARL EMMONS

Let's admit it: feminism is always confronted by the other woman. No, not the "Other" woman, not the women of color, poor women, women of the Third World: to those, even the most traditional liberal feminist gives a sympathetic nod, a phenomenon Audre Lorde described as "the special Third World Women's Issue."<sup>1</sup> The other woman is the individual who seems to come out of the woodwork and to whom The Man suddenly begins to pay attention. If she is a Muslim woman, she denounces Islam with indignation. If she is a woman of color, she denounces her "culture" as a thoroughly patriarchal, oppressive, and static entity. Making a name for herself as the voice of freedom and feminism in the process, the other woman finds a willing and widespread audience in the United States, from Midwestern housewives in book clubs to men in policy think tanks.

All the complex and contextualized discourses transnational feminists have built around women and Islam seem to crumble when an aunt asks us during Thanksgiving dinner, with quasi-feminist indignation, whether we have read *The Infidel* or *The Caged Virgin* by Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Here is what we want to say: "Yes, I did, and I was amazed that Ali ignores the work of Leila Ahmad, Fatima Mernissi, Lila Abu-Lughod, or anyone who has done extensive research on Muslim women, and writes as if nuanced criticisms of political Islam by Muslim women do not exist." For my part, I only said "Yes, I did" last Thanksgiving, and let Aunt Sally give me the glowing look of a comrade-in-arms against "Islamofascism." This was a delicate moment, and one in which I believe I failed as a teacher.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty criticized the construction of "The Third World Woman" as a victim of her culture years ago.<sup>2</sup> More recently, Inderpal Grewal revealed how U. S . refugee practices require women of color to represent themselves as victims and their cultures as pathological.<sup>3</sup> Yet, as transnational feminists, we still feel uncomfortable criticizing vocal, politically active women of color, whose monolithic denigrations of Islam and un-nuanced adoration of Western liberal feminism go against everything our movement and work represents. Like Ali, I am of Muslim extraction and I live in the West. As an academic feminist, I do not really want to silence an intelligent woman from a marginalized background who is denouncing practices I also criticize in my work. I cannot, in good faith, say that a woman who serves neo-cons has "false consciousness." To me, such moments reveal that transnational feminism is still an offshoot of Western feminism, and that modern western feminism was built upon the activism fault line between busting structures and aiding individuals. According to Nancy Cott, the successes of the American "woman movement" by the 1920s and the dissolution of gender-segregated "separate spheres" brought to the fore contradictions inherent in a movement that called for women's unity while trying to recognize the diversity among women.<sup>4</sup> Of course women of color and working class women had long before questioned what it meant to base a politics exclusively on sex.<sup>5</sup> The "globalization" of feminism, beginning officially with the 1975-1985 UN Decade of

Women, made these fault lines even more acute. So how do we teach about women and Islam to our Azar Nafisi-reading students and our Ayaan Hirsi Ali-reading Aunt Sallys, given this complex grounding of modern and, yes, transnational, feminism?

Here are a few preliminary suggestions, based on my experience co-teaching an upper-level/graduate seminar called "Women, Religion, and Representation in an Age of Globalization" with two influential feminist scholars, Laura Wexler and Sally Promey, in the spring of 2009.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of other pedagogical aims, I believe the progressive scholar engaging women's issues in the Muslim world must strive to do three things: historicize feminism, historicize Islam, and highlight the complexities of representation.

## Historicize Feminism

Historicizing feminism involves sharing not just the triumphs but also the crises of western feminism with our students. Beginning with the so-called First Wave of feminism, women of color like Frances Harper and Anna Julia Cooper challenged white feminist assumptions on the primacy of "sex."<sup>7</sup> The internationalization and institutionalization of feminism with the Second Wave and the declaration of the first UN Decade of Women (1975-1985) accentuated the divides between Western and non-Western feminisms. Latin American feminists questioned Western visions of "a global sisterhood" devoid of materialist analysis as early as 1975. In 1978, a group of Third World feminists, including Fatima Mernissi from Morocco and Nawal El Sadaawi from Egypt, wrote an open letter to explode "the myth that the mere fact of being women can unite us."<sup>8</sup> Transnational feminism developed out of these cathartic crises as a feminism that strives to organize around issues, encourage complex analyses of how gender and sexuality intersect with other sites of power, and support local actors. However, students must not forget that feminism continues to be non-monolithic, contentious, and in flux. Amrita Basu's concise introduction to *The Challenge of Local Feminisms: Women's Movements in Global Perspective* (1995), read in opposition to Robin Morgan's introduction to *Sisterhood is Global* (1984), is an excellent starting point for such a project.<sup>9</sup> Historicizing feminism also requires us to consider the long-standing connections between Feminism and Imperialism. Casting the "Third World Woman" as a victim to be saved by the white man has been a common rhetorical ploy of Western imperialism; feminists have all too often been complicit in the violence wreaked by colonial maneuvers predicated on "saving brown women from brown men."<sup>10</sup> As Katharine Viner pointed out in *The Guardian* in 2002, U.S. President George W. Bush perfected the utilization of liberal feminist rhetoric in the service of neoliberalism when mobilizing Americans for war against Afghanistan and Iraq. Listing the fact that "the repression of women [is] everywhere and always wrong" as a central reason to attack Iraq, Bush tied orthodox feminist rhetoric directly to militarism and indirectly to oil-driven expansionism.<sup>11</sup> Acknowledging how certain feminisms have

historically aided and continue to aid Empire is an important part of historicizing feminism. On this front, Chandra Talpede Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes" and Abu-Lughod's "Do Muslim Women Need Saving? Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others" have rightly become classic transnational feminist texts.<sup>12</sup> Reading Azer Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* alongside John Carlos Rowe's refreshing and enlightening "Reading *Reading Lolita in Tehran* in Idaho" similarly allows us to place the former text within the sociopolitical context of U.S. designs on the Middle East.<sup>13</sup>

## Historicize Islam

As Edward Said showed in his ground breaking *Orientalism*, the tendency in Western scholarship has been to depict the so-called Muslim world as an ahistorical moral landscape, where time has stood still since Biblical times.<sup>14</sup> Works like Ayaan Hirsi Ali's *The Caged Virgin* often reproduce that dynamic, assuming a monolithic and eternally oppressive Islam. It is a testimony to Said's perceptiveness about the entrenched schemata of Western Orientalism that, even in the twenty-first century, most popular texts refuse to acknowledge the impressive body of work on Islamic feminism and get away with it. Among the many excellent feminist histories of Islam are the works of Fatima Mernissi and Leila Ahmad, both of whom provide alternative historiographies of Islam as a moral code involving gender justice.<sup>15</sup> Complex ethnographies like Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* and Yesim Arat's *Rethinking Islam and Liberal Democracy* also do great work in examining the role women play in contemporary Islamic movements.<sup>16</sup> In fact, the early twenty-first century has seen a veritable boom of work on gender, women, and Islam -- a fact the mainstream media's persistence in being shocked at anything that smacks of Muslim feminism belies.<sup>17</sup> Still, few essays theorize the post-1970 transnational politics of Feminism and Islamism as strikingly as Mino Moallem's "Feminism and Fundamentalism," in which the author skillfully deconstructs the binary oppositions set up between (Western) feminism and (Eastern) fundamentalism.<sup>18</sup>

## Foreground Representation

Historicizing feminism and Islam requires the de-naturalization of the meanings and symbols associated with both concepts. Therefore, from Said's *Orientalism* on, the best texts on these subjects necessarily critique certain politics of representation. *The Colonial Harem* by Malek Alloula and Melanie McAlister's *Epic Encounters*, for example, self-consciously further and complicate Edward Said's project of deconstructing gendered representations of "the Orient."<sup>19</sup> However, art and fiction are also necessary to provide positive examples of representational praxes that transcend Orientalism. As the practice of veiling never escapes Western eyes, the transnational feminist syllabus should include *Veil: Veiling, Representations, and Contemporary Art*, an edited collection of thought-provoking artwork by Muslim women, and several important essays, which counter simplistic equations of the veil with oppression.<sup>20</sup> Marjane Satrapi's graphic memoir *Persepolis* is a similarly nuanced text that does not give Western

colonialism a free pass, even though it powerfully narrates the tragic consequences of extremism in post-revolutionary Iran.<sup>21</sup> The Turkish documentary, *The Play (Oyun)*, about a group of village women who decide to put on a play about their own lives, will also generate lively discussions in class without demonizing Muslim men or invoking nothing but pity for Muslim women.<sup>22</sup>

Allowing the students to interpret, historicize, and critique all texts, including neo-con bestsellers, is perhaps the best strategy in countering "the other woman." Given the entrenched Orientalist modes of thinking, it is not surprising that complex and contextualized texts by transnational feminists have not yet reached the broad audiences of *The Caged Virgin* or *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. There is, however, no reason why they cannot do so. The texts suggested above are not necessarily more difficult or less striking than those our aunts cherish. Sure, many American women will continue to get giddy with self-righteousness upon reading *The Infidel*; our transnational feminist pedagogy will succeed in so far as we can turn that response itself into an object of inquiry.

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# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Web 2.0 and Critical Globalization Studies

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.87, 2010)

by Mark Graham



IMAGE COURTESY OF JOSEPH ENTIN

I asked all of my students this year to raise their hands if they knew which country their shoes, trousers, or shirts came from. Very few hands came up. I then asked if any of them had ever been to a farm that produces food that they regularly eat. Again, only one or two hands were raised. Finally, I asked the students if any of them had ever been to a factory that produces a commodity that they have purchased. Only one hand was raised in the air.

A central paradox of contemporary capitalism is the fact that while the production of commodities has been globalized at a staggering pace, our knowledge about the production of those same commodities has shrunk. Consumers are usually only able to see commodities in the here and now of time and space, and rarely have any opportunities to gaze backwards through the chains of production in order to gain knowledge about the sites of production, transformation, and distribution.

While the opacity of commodity chains is deeply troubling, it does present university-level geography students with interesting hands-on opportunities to test out their research skills. In the introductory human geography course that I taught at Trinity College Dublin, I asked groups of students to research and then represent a global commodity chain from the points of production in the Global South to the points of consumption in the Global North.

The assignments were graded in traditional paper form. However, all students were then encouraged to upload their work to a wiki website that I created ([wikichains.com](http://wikichains.com)). The purpose of the website is twofold. First, as a wiki, it enables their represented knowledge to take on a fluid and changeable form. Second, it allows the students to share their findings with the rest of the world and thus, through their research, actively shape patterns of consumption and production.

Students were tasked with not just finding out where all of the elements that make up any one commodity come from, but also the environmental, economic, cultural, and political effects of the chain. They would ask questions like, "What are the pay levels at the headquarters versus at the sites of production?" "What are the environmental effects of the production processes?" and "Has the shape of the commodity chain shifted over time (and if so, why)?" I wanted students to represent their chain with not only published secondary textual sources, but also primary interviews, photographs, and sounds.

It was initially difficult to encourage the students to move beyond easily accessible sources of information. The first drafts inevitably contained far too many references to corporate websites and press releases. Indeed, the companies that control global commodity chains, in many ways, rely on being able to selectively make available

information that presents their activities in a positive light. However, after much hard work, telephone calls, emails, and even site visits, every one of the student groups was able to uncover facts about a commodity chain that did not correspond to the corporate representations of those same chains.

Although this has been a time-consuming and difficult exercise (for both students and teacher), I will not hesitate to run it again in future classes. Students benefit by being able to reflect on the complexities of global connections, by engaging in practical hands-on research, and above all by thinking critically about the sources of seemingly mundane knowledge. By uploading their results to the Internet, the students are having effects outside of the classroom and are enabling consumers to make informed economic decisions and be more aware of their economic, social, political, and environmental impacts.



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# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Problematizing Sex/Gender with Transgender Marriage Law

(*RADICAL TEACHER* NO.88, 2010)

by Daniel Farr

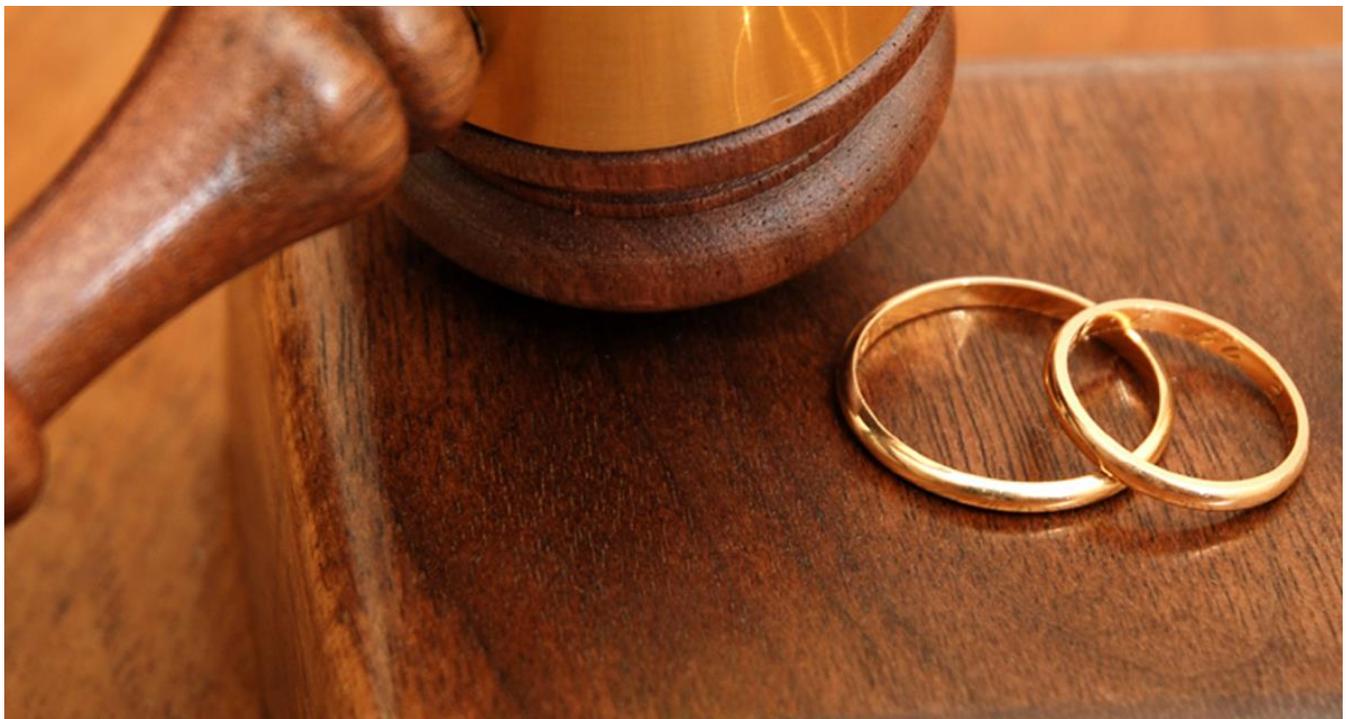


IMAGE: LAMBDA LEGAL

Legally, can one be both a man and a woman? Legally, can one have no "opposite sex"? Are the definitions of gender, sex, and marriage confusing in the United States? The answer to all is a resounding "Yes." While undoubtedly the recent debates and legal changes surrounding the issue of "same-sex" marriage offer significant opportunity for classroom debate about lesbian and gay rights, an investigation of transgender marriage and divorce cases offers even more opportunity for critical discussion about sex and gender in the United States.

Teaching at primarily small, private liberal arts colleges, I have found that one can readily initiate a discussion on the conflation of sex and gender by asking what defines "sex" and "gender." Most often students will respond with a dichotomous system -- male/female or man/ woman -- and include associated secondary sex characteristics, chromosomes, and gender stereotypes in their definitions. (This activity can be particularly valuable if students work in small groups to create definitions and then discuss them as a class.) I problematize their definitions with the introduction of intersex, transgender, and transsexual identities, but students often manipulate these to fit their dichotomous understanding of sex and gender. However, the introduction of legal cases relating to transgender marriage encourages recognition of the obstacles and limitations that dichotomous definitions bring, and of the difficulties faced by those who are regarded as blending or changing sex and/or gender; it also provides an opportunity to note the complexities of a legal system poorly equipped to deal with "non-traditional" persons.

Since state marriage laws vary in their use of terms such as "man" and "woman," "male" and "female," and "opposite sex," I encourage students to consider how courts make such determinations. Students generally return to their prior definitions, but begin to include material they consider legally defining, such as a birth certificate, driver's license, and passport. Most students do not realize that in many states a person, post-transition, may contest and modify their birth certificate to reflect a changed sex. I ask students if the birth certificate then reflects their "real" sex, and what it might mean to be legally defined as male or female and still possess the sex organs affiliated with the "opposite" sex.

While there are a number of court cases one may use, I will briefly mention two cases found in Robson (2007). The legal precariousness trans-persons may face concerning their sex/gender is particularly highlighted by "In re Estate of Gardiner." In this case the courts recognized that J'Noel Gardiner's sex/gender had changed from her male birth-sex, but she was determined to not be female either. The courts asserted that her sex was "transsexual." As such, given that marriage in Kansas was limited to two parties of

"opposite sex," Gardiner could not be legally married to a man, or to anyone else, as there was no "opposite" to a transsexual. In the eyes of Kansas she may have been a woman, but she was neither male nor female.

While many cases demonstrate the legal restrictions on trans-persons wanting to marry, the case of "M. T. v. J. T." helps students recover some optimism about social equity. In this case the marriage of a male-born man and a male-born transgender woman was upheld based on the understanding of sexual capacity. Possession of the appropriately heterosexual sex organs (i.e., a penis and a vagina), that is, the capacity for "sexual intercourse," determined the legality of this union. I find students respond to this in a predominately positive manner, noting the progressive stance of this court case, yet the heteronormativity of this determination is often left unquestioned. I encourage a more critical read of this court decision by asking if marriage should be legal for anyone who is disabled and incapable of sexual intercourse. This often results in a more meaningful discussion about the definition of marriage and the issues of gender and sex, as well as the heteronormative reliance upon a stable binary sex/gender system.

The very basis of what many students regard as stable binary categories of sex/ gender, and even heteronormativity, are increasingly challenged by trans-persons seeking legal equity and marital recognition. The use of court cases in class highlights not only the problematic definitions and approaches when defining a person and the rights of marriage, but the social obstacles faced by those who challenge traditional conceptions of sex and gender. While one can readily draw comparisons to same-sex marriage issues, transgender marriage issues demonstrate particularly well the sexist and gender discriminatory nature of our culture.

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# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Teaching the Ordinary: What's in a Chair

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.89, 2010)

by J. Progler



IMAGE COURTESY OF JOSEPH ENTIN

While working in teacher education at an inner city university in New York, I implemented a method that used daily life experiences of the ordinary in a subversive way. On a typical afternoon, some students would arrive directly from their teaching internships and sit around the classroom excitedly trading stories of their classroom experiences. Other students would shuffle in with large cups of coffee, taking seats in the back, clearly exhausted from the day's work, and not appearing energized for a three-hour session on "Teaching Methods in Secondary Social Studies." Most students were already acclimated to the schooling routine, donning the "been there, done that" kind of survival attitude that many teachers wear as a form of passive resistance, not exactly the best audience with which to begin lectures on teaching methods, the finer points of constructivist theory versus behaviorism, the latest lesson plan format, new strategies for exam preparation, or whatever else the methods textbook offered.

Many professors might begin a session by calling the class to order and proceeding with the topic of the day. I had been thinking about the absence of the ordinary in academic discourse, and found inspiration in re-reading Ira Shor's *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*, particularly the chapter in which he deconstructs a hamburger. Looking for a change of pace, I struck upon an idea. As the class of about thirty students chattered on and the clock ticked twenty minutes past the designated start time, I picked up one of those plastic and tube metal institutional seats with a pressboard side desk and slammed it down hard on top of the teacher's desk (itself made of heavy industrial steel). This made a very loud booming noise that echoed around the concrete walls of the classroom, and the students were stunned, immediately turning toward me, transfixed for a moment in utter silence.

With most students probably expecting to be scolded for talking too much, perhaps already thinking up snappy comebacks, I caught the class off guard by asking, without missing a beat, "What's this?" There were looks of confusion. I pointed at the chair, and asked again, "Come on, what's this?" After deciding some clever game was in progress, one student retorted, "It's a work of art!" I said, "Really? Does anyone else see a work of art?" Some laughed, most looked puzzled, and it took a while for the class to realize that there was no trick question. I really wanted them to tell me what it was: a chair.

Finally, someone "got it" and, following Shor, I proceeded to describe how an ordinary object contained within it an array of social and political relations, teaching them a method by enacting it, deconstructing the chair, what it was made of, turning it over and examining it for clues as to where it was made and who assembled it and brought it to market. After a while, I expanded the

discussion by tracing chairs as signifiers of gender and class relations, from student chairs to teacher chairs (Why were they different? What did that mean?), to thrones and pews and even no chairs, systematically unpacking the meanings of what most took for granted as a part of daily life.

Some students resisted, perhaps holding to the belief that this was not "knowledge." But the class was savvy enough that they could respond to each other and I could concentrate on revealing the social matrix embedded in that one chair, its political economy, but also the way in which it normalized the human experiences of teaching and learning. To achieve the latter, I asked someone to demonstrate the right way -- and the wrong way -- to use this object called a chair, which I had hoped would lead us on to observations about uniformity, conformity, and the politics of the body in school classrooms.

Then something unexpected happened. A female student was demonstrating the "wrong way" to sit in a school chair, slouching down in the seat, resting her legs on the table part, and taking notes in a notebook resting on her lap. "Why do you sit that way?" I asked, and she said, "The correct way is really not comfortable for me." This young woman was full figured and short, and so I asked, "Are you uncomfortable because of your body shape?" I knew I was going out on a limb with such a question, as another student quickly jumped in: "Hey now, Proglar, that's discrimination!" I said, "Perhaps, but is it not possible that the chair is discriminating, not me?" Everyone laughed in disbelief. One asked, "How can this inanimate object discriminate?" Another insisted, "Only people discriminate; this is an ordinary object." "But if we just showed that a whole array of people and social relations are involved in bringing this chair into the classroom," I asked, "then do you mean to say that it was not possible that they may have built some of those relations into this chair?" There was silence.

The student sitting "incorrectly" in the chair agreed with me, and others began to talk about not being able to find a left-handed desk, and eventually we had a meaningful discussion about how social relations get embedded in objects. It was a truly teachable moment, and even the cynical students thanked me. I continued to develop methods that focused on revealing the social relations and politics of the ordinary, although I was breaking the institutional rules by so doing. However, while some students seemed resistant -- asking "Where's the textbook?" -- many came to accept what I was trying to do. Eventually, I sent students out to fast food restaurants, shopping malls, museums, and other sites of cultural pedagogy, helping them to grasp ordinary life as a teaching tool.



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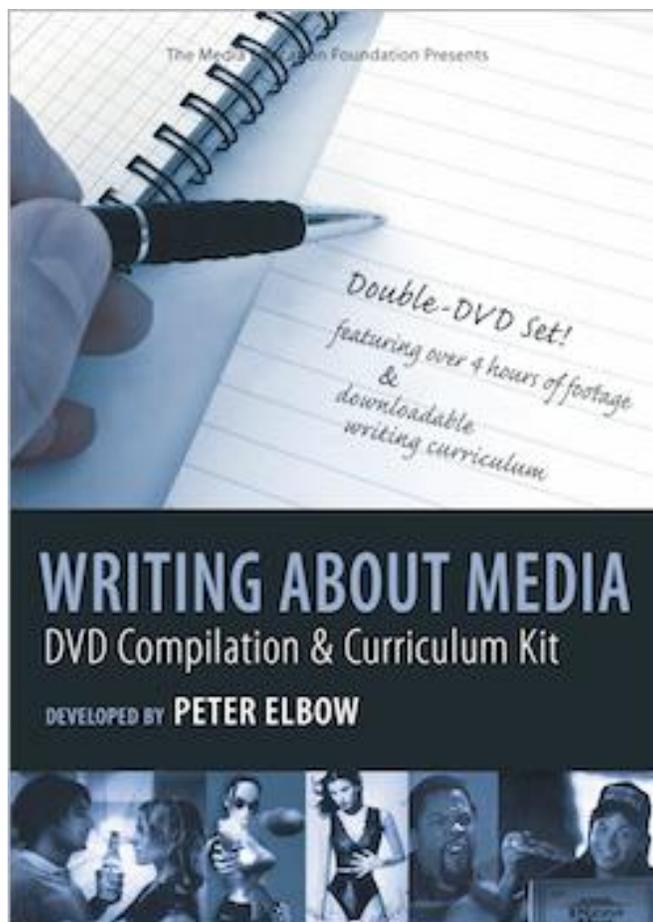
# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Teaching with *Writing About Media*

(RADICAL TEACHER NO. 92, 2011)

by Michael Bennett



WRITING ABOUT MEDIA WITH PETER ELBOW (2007, 120 MIN, DVD)

A couple of years ago at the Left Forum, I picked up a copy of the DVD compilation *Writing About Media*, produced by the Media Education Foundation (MEF). In addition to clips from mainstream media grouped into four categories (Consumerism, Gender and Sexuality, Race and Class, and Media and Politics), the DVD also contains clips from MEF documentaries in each of these categories and a related writing curriculum developed by Peter Elbow. The curriculum materials are designed for various classes (Basic Writing, Composition, Media Studies); I have used them over the last two academic years for a second semester Basic Writing class I teach at Long Island University's Brooklyn campus.

In general, *Writing About Media* has been a useful and interesting teaching tool. However, as with most curricula, I have done some tweaking over time. I find Peter Elbow's suggested writing assignments to be a little too unfocused and process-oriented for my taste, so I have melded them with my own assignments that correspond to the categories into which the DVDs are grouped, and with each assignment emphasizing a certain form and skill:

Essay 1 (Autobiography):

Skill: Sentence

Subject: Consumerism

Essay 2 (Review):

Skill: Thesis

Subject: Gender & Sexuality

Essay 3 (Editorial):

Skill: Structure

Subject: Race & Class

Essay 4 (Research):

Skill: Style/Tone

Subject: Media & Politics

In addition to the formal writing assignments, informal writing assignment (journal entries) ask students to compare stories from a mainstream media source of their choice (they sign up during the first week) with an alternative media source (the first semester, we got a class subscription to *The Nation*, a process which proved to be rather cumbersome, so subsequent semesters I have asked students to use Portside.org).

My initial teaching experience also convinced me that the DVDs definitely need to be supplemented with a variety of written texts (though students are very savvy at consuming visual texts, they are often not as careful at

producing detailed writing based on what they have seen). So the first unit includes Michael Parenti's essay "Methods of Media Manipulation," Noam Chomsky's *Media Control*, and two webpages: Media Reform Information Center and "The National Entertainment State," originally published in *The Nation*. The second and third units are supplemented with Suzanne Pharr's essay "Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism"; various essays from the no-longer-in-print *American Culture and the Media*; and *The Communist Manifesto*. And my favorite unit, the last one, features Howard Zinn's autobiography. We also use *A Writer's Reference* as our grammar book.

The final assignment is the most difficult because it asks for a shorter version (4-5 pages) of the kind of research essays students will be expected to write in Freshman Composition and beyond. However, it has also produced some of their best writing. The assignment asks them to focus on a topic that is mentioned in Howard Zinn's autobiography and/ or in the film clips we viewed in class. Three topics are pre-approved: the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, and the Iraq War. Other topics can be negotiated. Once students have picked a topic, they are asked to narrow it down to something that happened on a particular date. I then schedule a library visit during which students learn to find primary sources (chiefly through Proquest Historical Newspapers). They are asked to compare and contrast mainstream media coverage of the event at that time with subsequent alternative media coverage (Zinn, film clips, etc.). Students have produced wonderful essays on the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, George Bush's "Mission Accomplished" speech, the March on Washington, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Stonewall Rebellion, the bombing of Hiroshima, and other topics.

Though some of the media clips in *Writing About Media* are growing a little dated, and I do not feel the curriculum would be successful without modifications similar to those I have described, the DVD has produced some interesting discussions, strong writing, and political awareness. What more could one ask as a radical teacher?

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# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Homophobia in the Classroom: One Teacher's Response

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.92, 2011)

by Cynthia Peters



IMAGE COURTESY FRINDE MAHER

"If one of my kids turned out to be gay, I would kill him," said one of my adult ESOL students.

"But you might not want to kill him," replied another, "because that would be murder, and they could put you in jail for that."

There was nodding all around.

I sat down, stunned. What had I prepared for class that day? A game for learning fractions? Reviewing the past tense? I couldn't remember. None of it seemed to matter. I didn't feel like a teacher at that moment. I felt angry, shocked, sad and personally vulnerable even though my own life partner is of the opposite sex and so for that reason, according to my students, I should be allowed to live.

I did not try to mask my feelings. I felt too much respect for the members of my class. We were friendly and affectionate with each other. I cared a great deal for each of them. They had consistently impressed me with their finely tuned sense of justice and fairness, and their understanding of how power reveals itself in U.S. institutions -- in the workplace, in the school system, in the home, in how U.S. foreign policy impacts their countries of origin.

But here they were advocating killing their own children in the event they should be gay, and the only argument against doing so was a practical one ("you'll go to jail"), not a moral one.

"My sister is a lesbian," I told them. The classroom was silent. "It hurts me to hear what you are saying." I know I showed what I was feeling -- my face had probably gone pale and my hands may have been shaking -- and it affected them. Because of the trust and affection we had

built up over many hours in the classroom, they had no desire to cause me pain. And their faces showed what they were feeling -- conflict between their hatred of homosexuality and their curiosity about what it could mean that someone they thought they knew and respected could be close to a gay person. I felt that the students were looking at me completely differently.

"My sister is a wonderful person. I love her. My parents love her. If they had rejected her because she is a lesbian, we all would have lost so much. Our family would have been divided. I am so thankful that they loved their daughter even though it was hard for them to understand her."

When issues arise in the classroom, most teachers respond as teachers. We look for what can be learned from the moment; we see it as an opportunity for critical thinking, debate, and English language practice. In a flexible classroom, such moments might lead to a writing project or some research. Maybe we mine the conversation for vocabulary and create a lesson plan around related themes for the next class. I have done that kind of thing many times. But in this case, I reacted not as a teacher, but as an individual who was clearly affected by what the students

were saying. The students experienced an immediate consequence to their words and sentiments. I didn't absorb what they said in a neutral way. Instead, I let it bounce back to them, and thus they got a second look at it in a different light.

Not that they changed their minds. "It's against the Bible," they argued. "It's against nature, and a crime against God."

"The Bible also says not to have children out of wedlock," I replied. There was no need to point out that most of the people in the class had gone against the Bible on that score.

We all looked at each other, feeling unnerved, and I didn't rescue the situation from uneasiness -- the way I usually might in difficult situations. We sat in this strange stillness. The charged feeling hung in the air. I had no particular strategy about where to take the class, but I had a strong sense that I didn't want to be less than honest about my reactions. This felt like the more respectful -- if more potentially treacherous -- path.

"Next class," I offered, "let's all bring in pictures of our family." We returned to the lesson plan of the day, but something had been opened up between us. It felt raw but honest.

For the next class, I brought in pictures of my sister. "She looks just like you," the students said, still seeming to study me with new eyes.

I showed them pictures of her sons. I showed them pictures of my parents and siblings and numerous cousins and nieces and nephews -- my parents proudly in the center of it all. Ours is a mixed race family as well.

While we passed around everyone's photo albums, delighted over baby pictures, noted the family resemblances, and teased each other about the changes that are apparent over time, we talked about family. The students wrote about family being important because it offered unconditional love and because it was a source of comfort in a difficult world. We noted that this was something we had in common despite our diverse families. One student began to speak up about the importance of accepting people who are different from you. She talked about tolerance. She argued that people should mind their own business. "No one's asking you to be a homosexual," she said.

I did not attempt to steer the class toward any kind of resolution on the matter of homosexuality. But I hope I opened up a space for people to think about it differently, and for at least one student to voice her own argument against homophobia. As teachers, we often confront moments that challenge us to decide how to handle our own (sometimes very strongly held) political positions. There are various ways to take on these moments. In this particular experience, I learned that being personally honest but not didactic had some value. It was possible for me to pursue

this course partly because, being straight, I did not have to take an enormous personal risk. It was also possible because I felt enough respect for my students to give them an honest reaction. This confluence of factors may not always be present in the classroom, but when it is, it presents a way forward. Teachers can draw off of it to find their way, respectfully and honestly, towards greater understanding.

## Note

<sup>1</sup>This originally appeared in *The Change Agent* in September 2004.



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# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Side by Side: Israeli and Palestinian Cinema

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.95, 2012)

by Linda Dittmar



"REMEMBERING OUR VILLAGE" BY BASHIR SINWAR, 1985

A short six-week course about Israeli and Palestinian film is a trying experience for many reasons. Americans mainly have a distorted, media-generated notion of the histories, politics, and cultures that inform these films. Standard class time does not accommodate screening whole films in class, which is important as a shared basis for feelings and discussion. A "side by side" pattern that puts the two national cinemas in dialogue with one another invites difficult comparisons that expose inequalities in the funding, professional training, critical visibility, and distribution that mirror the political, military, and economical inequalities afflicting the region. And finally, depending on the people taking such a course, emotions can run high.

Though this version of the course focuses on fiction films because of their combined emotional and analytic power, other versions can focus on documentaries or a mix of the two genres. The course outlined below provides just one option. It does not concern the most spectacular aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that leap to the Western mind -- war, occupation, and terrorism. Instead, it addresses these issues through narratives that mostly take place inside Israel's 1967 "green line" border. As such, they invite reflection about the relation between Palestinian and Jewish life inside Israel and the political consequences of these realities for the conflict that now extends well beyond that "green line" border.

Below is the skeletal syllabus I designed, with three films for each "side," including the directors' names and dates of production, followed by brief explanatory comments.

Week 1: Gila Almagor, *The Summer of Aviya* (1988)

Week 2: Michel Khleifi, *Wedding in the Gallilee* (1987)

Week 3: Joseph Cedar, *Beaufort* (2007)

Week 4: Scandar Copti and Yaron Shani, *Ajami* (2009)

Week 5: Elia Suleiman, *The Time that Remains* (2009)

Week 6: Eran Kolirin, *The Band 's Visit* (2007)

Weeks 1 and 2 provide our springboard: Almagor's film probes the aftershocks of the holocaust while Khleifi's shows an early phase in Jewish control of Palestinian society. Both are set in a quasi-pastoral setting but show the dysfunction invading both groups during the early years of Israel's statehood as a prelude for what follows.

Weeks 3 and 4 focus on the military and civilian violence as a complex tangle of hate, fear, and social

disenfranchisements (economic, ethnic, religious, and gendered) that strain against the claims of social conformity within and across Israeli and Palestinian societies. Each concerns a standstill, a dead end.

Weeks 5 and 6 consider themes and strategies that use the protective devices of humor and irony to relax some of the tension. Kolirin spins a fantasy of Egyptian/Jewish encounter that charms viewers with its warmth and humanism. However, the film's "Egyptians" are stand-ins for the generic "Arabs," diverting viewers from the key issue of peace with the Palestinians. In contrast, Suleiman reviews six decades of Palestinian history through his alter ego's child's eyes traced through to his adulthood. The film's laconic episodic structure and bitter irony use suppressed expression to convey barely contained frustration and anger.

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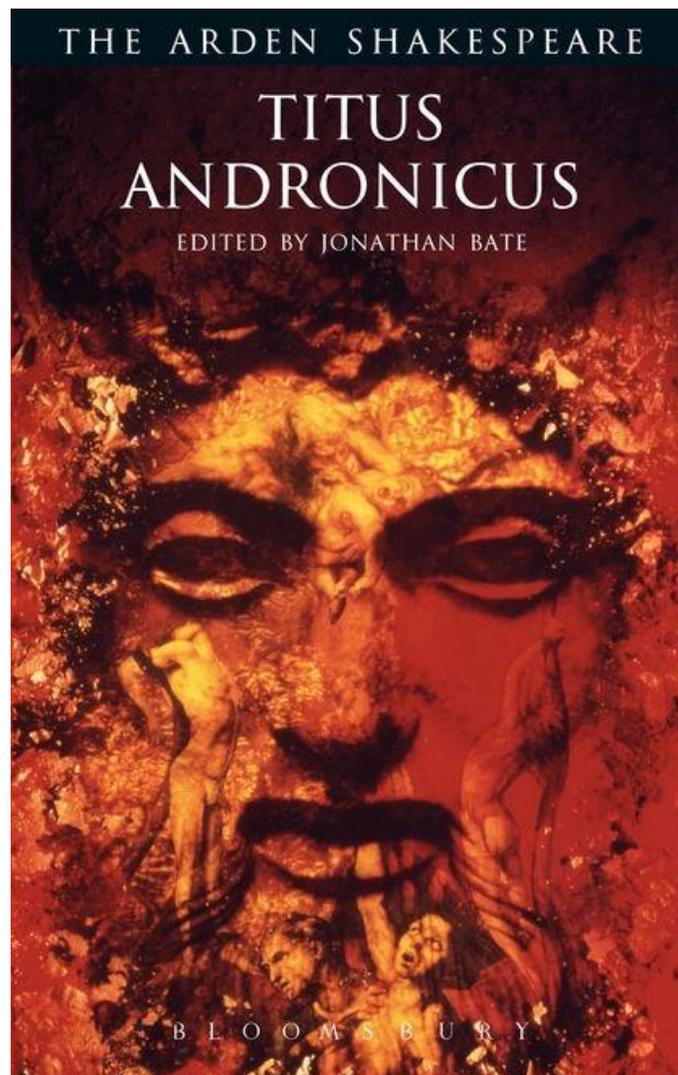
# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Teaching Titus Andronicus in Contemporary India

(RADICAL TEACHER NO. 97, 2013)

by Anna Kurian



TITUS ANDRONICUS, BLOOMSBURY 1995

Reading *Titus Andronicus* (1594) as the first text in a course on Shakespeare's tragedies, starting in January 2013, most of the M.A (English) students at the University of Hyderabad (a public university deemed to be among the elite higher education institutions of India but with a very mixed student demographic from rural, urban, and semi-urban areas), found the violence over-the-top, the characterization slim, and the lines themselves insipid.

It was only as we "read" Lavinia and the way women were narrated into and out of being that students began to see interesting parallels between a late 16th century text and 21st century India. My effort in classes was directed at pointing to the strange relevance of Early Modern ideas regarding gender and femininity, albeit refracted via imperial Rome, to present-day India. I used as the immediate context the brutal gang-rape in India's capital in December 2012 -- the victim died of her injuries. Three thematic parallels stood out in our discussions.

## The Objectification of Woman and the Woman as Property

Beginning with Lavinia's epithet -- "Rome's rich ornament" (I.i) -- we examined her passage from hand to hand, in a show of gendered legitimate ownership. Her father, brothers, and betrothed all move her around like a chess piece, her desires irrelevant, her opinion unsought. Reduced by the Emperor Saturninus to "this changing piece," Lavinia remains largely silent. Then female students from conservative Indian backgrounds (irrespective of religious affiliation) saw the connection: their opinions regarding their futures were often ignored in the face of overwhelming societal and familial pressures that determined a suitable time for marriage and the choice of husband.

## Women's Bodies: Sites of Honor and Enactments of Power

In the scene which precedes Lavinia's rape (II.iii), she articulates her fear of being dishonored, and to avert it, pleads for death at the hands of Tamora and her sons. My students perceived the internalization of the patriarchal code of honor which governs the lives of women in India's still largely traditional societies: an honor that is mapped on the body of the woman. We then spoke of India's long history of communal riots with its ignoble tradition of rape and mutilation, and also the use of rape in war. An understanding of rape as being not so much about sexual gratification as a demonstration and claiming of power by those who experience themselves as powerless resulted from a discussion of the ambiguous status of Lavinia's rapists in

Roman society. Their actions revealed to my students how in wartime and times of civil troubles women become "soft targets" for the vicious rage of men who perceive themselves as disempowered and seek to thus demonstrate their masculine superiority.

## Women, Family-Honor, Honor-Killing

Reading the final scene, where Titus kills Lavinia, citing a noble precedent and approved by the Emperor, we discovered that 21st century India had not moved very far from Shakespeare's time (or Roman times as seen in the play). The "zinda laash" (literally a "live corpse," taken to symbolize death-in-life) argument often cited in our news reports and articulated by politicians in the aftermath of the December 2012 rape, characterizes the rape victim as a someone who would be better off dead, thus sparing herself and, more importantly, her family shame and sorrow. The same views are articulated by the Emperor: "Because the girl should not survive her shame,/ And by her presence still renew his sorrows" (V.iii). In India where women are commonly killed (if they marry "outside" their caste/community) to "preserve" family honor, students immediately recognized Lavinia/the Indian woman as a place-holder of family prestige.

Lavinia's life, rape, and eventual murder by her father consequently became a theme which resonated with beliefs and values that remain deeply entrenched in contemporary India.



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# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Ask More Questions?

(RADICAL TEACHER NO. 97, 2013)

by Allison Ricket



IMAGE COURTESY OF JOSEPH ENTIN

Last year I had a real spitfire in my eleventh-grade English class. He was the most ready to challenge majority views, push his classmates to support their ideas with credible facts, or listen seriously about the need to tackle clichés in his writing.

Then, in January, I made a critical mistake that cost me the vitality of this student.

The class writes research papers in January, and I wanted to invite the students to research a social justice issue they knew nearly nothing about. We watched TED talks and read articles on the failings of abstinence only education, plastic in the ocean's gyres, the Bechdel test, and the crushing standardization of public schools. Their assignment was to research a problem and then argue for a solution or a set of solutions to fix the problem.

What I didn't want was another pro-life diatribe, anti-marriage equality tirade, or pro-assault weapon essay that, although properly reflecting the majority beliefs of the community, would not allow enough serious inquiry into the unknown.

To facilitate the choosing of a topic, I assigned the students the task of randomly selecting three TED talks or articles and using those texts to generate questions for further research. As each student brought their three texts to me and we discussed their questions and potential for research papers, I made suggestions, offering what I knew on the topic with the intention that the students would have somewhere to start.

My conversation with the spitfire went like this:

Student rushes up to me in the hall, breathless with indignation. "Ms. Ricket, I just watched the most disgusting thing I've ever seen in my life." No pause for me to react. "In Canada, there is a lake the size of Manhattan filled with waste from the tar sands. One man can't even feed his family now because the water is so polluted. It's so crazy disgusting. You have to watch it."

At once I was filled with pride, disgust, and excitement because I thought we were on the verge of a "teachable moment." This is where I made that fatal mistake. I stepped out of the process of inquiry and into the sage-on-the-stage role.

"You know," I said, with a conspiratorial grin and an air of insider authority, "something just like the tar sands is happening right here in our town. It's called Fracking. Natural gas companies contaminate huge amounts of water and then dump it back into the ground where it's contaminating people's drinking water, hurting agriculture, and even causing earthquakes. Some people can now literally light water coming out of their faucets on fire because of Fracking."

Everything I said was 100% true. Fracking -- the process of extracting natural gas from the shale in the mountains -- is devastating many areas of Appalachia. Companies drill here and inject their dirty, radioactive water

in the poorest counties -- they would never conceive of putting an injection well in their communities -- yet they tell us all it's "safe."

I wanted my student to know what was happening to his community. In an informal poll at the beginning of the year, I found out that only two students in all my classes knew what Fracking was -- which is a desperate situation considering people in the county, their parents, are leasing their land left and right to the gas companies.

I wanted to show him the injustice of the entire process, for him to be just as inflamed about Fracking as he was about the tar sands waste. But my intentions -- however noble -- were lost.

He did do his research paper on the detrimental effects of Fracking. Not because he had a burning desire to know and learn, but because he wanted to do what I suggested. He completed the additional assignment for the paper of interviewing a primary source. In fact, he did better than I assigned. He got himself invited to a Fracking well in a neighboring county.

He came back from this encounter pumped up by the heavy machinery and the machismo of the men operating it. He burst into my room announcing in his enthusiastic way, "My paper is all lies." Fracking, he concluded, is wonderful, fascinating, and safe. He did ask questions to the gas company representative present on site, and they fed him many of the public answers I've seen in the papers. He has since decided to pursue petroleum engineering in college.

A veteran teacher told me, after I'd relayed this story as a dismal failure of my teaching ability, that our job as teachers is to help students learn to think -- not tell them what to think.

What I've been able to take away from this situation is that I would have furthered the cause of Environmental Justice much more had I simply asked more questions. I could have followed my student's lead, asked questions such as, "What do you feel is most unjust about the tar sands situation?" "What could be done about this injustice?" or "Are there more situations in which people are losing homes and resources to the tar sands mining?"

As a teacher interested in social action, I wonder if critical thinking -- teaching "how" to think -- is more important than presenting the students with a situation and declaring it unjust. I wonder how I leave room for the students to refuse to see injustice even after a full, successful inquiry process. Perhaps I was right to alert him to the issue of Fracking in his hometown, to assign it the status of "unjust" outright. Perhaps, as teachers of social justice, we have to be willing to stand quietly in truth sometimes, to let the wandering wander and let them figure it out themselves -- but I also wonder if as a society, as a planet -- we can afford the time that takes.



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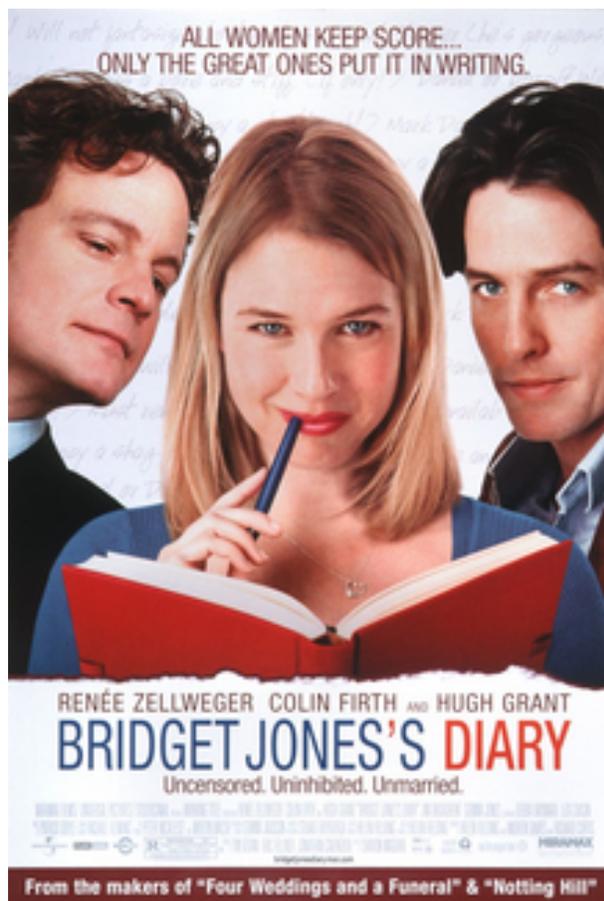
# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Deconstructing "Real" Love in the Classroom

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.100, 2014)

by Erin Hurt



BRIDGET JONES'S DIARY. MIRAMAX, 2001

Though less than twenty years old, the genre of chick lit, first popularized by Helen Fielding's novel *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996), has embedded itself in our cultural consciousness. By now, the tropes are familiar: a young, single woman in a big city searches for happily-ever-after, which includes but is not limited to a loving and lasting relationship, career success, and real friendship. In spite of the genre's relative newness, scholars have found strong pedagogical justifications for teaching chick lit.<sup>1</sup> These novels offer students opportunities to assess an emerging cultural phenomenon, consider feminism's place in popular culture, and analyze a text that engages us not just intellectually but also affectively.

Though chick lit allows for new conversations, this body of work also brings with it several challenges. In my upper-division American literature seminar on chick lit at West Chester University, part of the Pennsylvania state system, I ask students to question how these novels construct cultural meanings for romantic love, intimacy, and success. Though excited to read the books, students often struggle to detach emotionally from these novels' romantic tropes. The romantic relationship tropes that appear in these works often reflect those narratives found in wider popular culture, such as "Love at First Sight. Always a Bridesmaid. The One That Got Away. The Love of My Life" (Mamont). Having internalized these ideas about romantic love, students often identify with these "big stories." Thus, they struggle to analyze them as socially constructed fantasies. They are not the only ones. Though intellectually aware of the cultural work these tropes do, I cannot easily dispel my own lingering attachments.

After teaching this course multiple times, I have created several approaches that help students disengage from these texts, or, when they feel emotionally invested in the novels we read, to better articulate why. Modeling my own experiences with these tropes is my first tool for defamiliarizing the "realness" of intimacy found within these novels. I explain to students the difficulties I face when unpacking my emotional investment in these narratives, and name for them those stories I want to believe rather than analyze. Framing the course with my own imperfections, and a willingness to co-investigate, encourages students to do the same.

In addition to teaching strategies, I use readings to destabilize students' attachments to chick lit novels and the romantic narratives they profess. In Liz Mamont and Amanda Hess's short essay, "How to Ditch Happily-Ever-After and Build Your Own Romantic Narrative," the authors explain how US culture's fixation on what the authors term "stock romantic narratives" exerts enormous influence on all U.S. cultural citizens. This piece offers students an accessible model of how to name the romantic narratives that they see in the novels we read. Furthermore, this article suggests that even if we know these stock narratives are "sexist, boring or alienating" they can also be emotionally clarifying and satisfying (Mamont). Mamont and Hess's

willingness to reflect on their beliefs about relationships also helps students to identify their own relationship clichés.

Another piece, by Lauren Berlant, lays the groundwork for a class discussion that analyzes how the romantic fantasies found in chick lit, or those held by students, normalize certain desires, practices, and lives while making other lives and forms of intimacy invisible.

In her introduction to *Critical Inquiry's* special issue on intimacy, Berlant's heavily theoretical piece ruminates on many aspects of intimacy, touching on concepts such as attachment, normativity, intelligibility, and the public-private divide. She speaks about world-building, and the need to imagine and allow for many different forms of intimacy. I use this piece to help students move from uncovering chick lit constructions of intimacy to deconstructing how U.S. popular culture more broadly has naturalized particular versions of love and intimacy. Berlant's piece prepares students to engage in more difficult conversations about more complicated, convoluted forms of intimacy such as singlehood, monogamy, and legal marriage.

When I last taught this course in spring of 2013, the Supreme Court was in the midst of hearing arguments about Prop 8 and DOMA, legislation that sought to institutionalize particular forms of intimacy at state and federal levels.

During class, I challenged students to apply Berlant's ideas to the arguments made in support of and against gay marriage. How did this national debate define intimacy? Was the push to legalize gay marriage a queering of chick lit romantic love? Or, was it a normalizing of something alternative and queer? Though we drew no definite conclusions, students were able to see the very real ways tropes of romance function in the world around them.

That students often begin the semester believing, and believing in, these romantic narratives, is exactly why they should be taught. I offer these approaches as a means to disrupt their uncritical consumption of these novels.

Through their investigations, students begin to see that "real" love is, in fact, a constructed thing.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> For example, see Callahan and Low; Love and Helmbrecht; Rowntree, Bryant, and Moulding; Scott; and Wilson.

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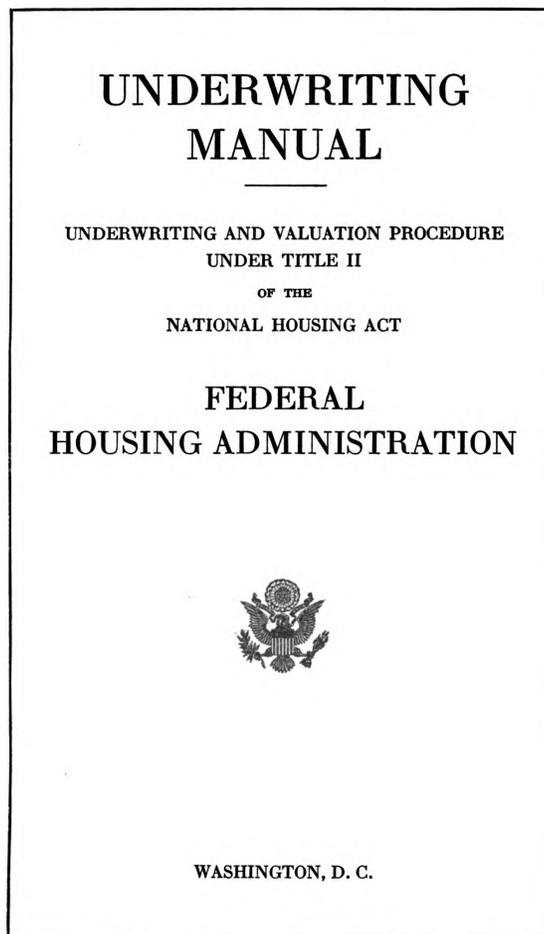
# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Race, Housing, and the Federal Government: Black Lives on the Margins of the American

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.106, 2016)

by Richard Hughes



**A**s a historian at Illinois State University, I teach an undergraduate class to predominantly white middle-class students that uses the history of race and American culture to teach historical methods. Despite substantial coursework in U.S. history and the social sciences and a general interest in the Black Lives Matter movement, history majors often know remarkably little about the historical issues that lay behind the movement. When specifically asked to describe the "relevant issues, origins, images, and larger implications" of the phrase "Black Lives Matter," their written answers rarely include information beyond the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012 or incidents of police brutality in places such as Ferguson, Baltimore, and New York City.

As a result, I introduce my students to the *Federal Housing Authority's (FHA) Underwriting Manual* (1938) as a small window through which to examine the underappreciated role of the United States government in creating and sustaining a racialized version of the American Dream.<sup>1</sup> Used by federal officials since the 1930s to determine the value of neighborhoods and crucial access to the federal mortgage programs that fueled the housing boom of the mid twentieth century, the lengthy manual's most important section is on page 1412. Buried deep in the seemingly innocuous bureaucratic manual, the section on the "Valuation of Amenity Income Dwelling" reveals the federal government's critical commitment to a racial separation in 1938:<sup>2</sup>

**d. The degree of social and racial compatibility of the inhabitants of the neighborhood. The presence of socially or racially inharmonious groups in a neighborhood tends to lessen or destroy owner-occupancy appeal.**

I ask students to examine a brief excerpt from the *Manual* that includes the document's Preface for larger context and the section mentioned above as well as some additional sources related to race and housing in U.S. history to contextualize and corroborate the *Manual*. The sources include historical and recent statistics on race, wealth, and housing; a 1937 photograph by Margaret Bourke-White juxtaposing African American flood victims and a billboard proclaiming "There's No Way Like the American Way"; and brief excerpts from David Freund's *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (2007), Ta-Nehisi Coates's "The Case for Reparations" (2014), and Richard Rothstein's "The Making of Ferguson: Public Policies at the Root of Its Troubles" (2014).<sup>3</sup>

The following includes the questions students used to analyze the *Manual* and aforementioned related sources as well as summaries of their answers to the larger question: "To what extent does the history of race relations and housing in the nation help Americans understand contemporary issues surrounding the phrase, 'Black Lives Matter'?"

**A. Sourcing.** Who wrote this? What is the author's perspective? Why, when, and where was it written? It is reliable? Students recognized the role of the Federal Housing Authority in representing the federal government's official policy on housing and race as well as how the agency reflected the intersection of American political culture and aspects of structural racism that led to profound and lasting inequities in numerous areas such as housing, employment, wealth, and education.

**B. Close Reading.** What claims does the author make? What evidence and language does the author use and how do they indicate the author's perspective? Students identified the use of specific language such as "racially inharmonious groups," "evidence," and "detractions" in highlighting how federal officials relied on seemingly neutral bureaucratic language to create, as Freund argued, "a racialized vision of the market for housing" that equated the American Dream of home ownership with separation from the economic threat of racial minorities.<sup>4</sup>

**C. Contextualization.** When and where was the document created and how might the circumstances affect its content? Students situated the *Manual* within a larger narrative that includes the history of racial segregation, violence, economic inequality, the federal policies of the New Deal during the Great Depression, and the tremendous growth of suburbia after World War II.

**D. Corroboration.** What do other documents say and do they agree? What documents are most reliable? What are other possible documents? Students concluded that housing policies beginning in the 1930s and reflected in recent economic data such as median household wealth and homeownership according to race illustrate the links between the historic role of the federal government in fostering the birth of American suburbia, the expansion of the white middle class, and the persistence of racial inequities today.<sup>5</sup>

After a careful analysis and class discussion on the *FHA's Manual*, my students returned to the original question about the "relevant issues, origins, images, and larger implications" of the phrase "Black Lives Matter." In addition to references to the specific incidents mentioned previously, students identified the importance of a federal "system" of "white privilege" and "institutionalized racism" that reinforced racial segregation in housing and the political, legal, and social realities of racial economic inequality. Referencing "a broader sense of racial discrimination," one student wrote, "Even after their emancipation after the Civil War, African Americans have faced many forces preventing them from living the 'American Dream.'" Students understood that the ongoing struggle for black lives occurs within a cultural and physical landscape that is hardly accidental or some sort of natural state. Nor is it the product of extremism simply destined to be defeated by a story of unfolding American progress.

Instead, the *Federal Housing Authority's Underwriting Manual* of 1938 provided students with the historical lens to

reframe more recent conflicts over race and the criminal justice system as part of a larger more complicated narrative that has long defined the "American Dream" in ways that directly or indirectly marginalized black lives.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Federal Housing Administration, Underwriting Manual: Underwriting and Valuation Procedure Under Title II of the National Housing Act, Washington, D.C., February 1938 (available in the public domain via [www.hathitrust.org](http://www.hathitrust.org)).

<sup>2</sup> Underwriting Manual, p 1412.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Bourke-White, "The Louisville Flood," 1937, <http://collection.whitney.org/object/8061>; David Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Ta-Nehsi Coates, "The Case for Reparations: The Atlantic Monthly, June 2014, 55-71; Richard Rothstein, "The Making of Ferguson: Public Policies at the Root of Its Troubles" Economic Policy Institute, October 15, 2014, <http://www.epi.org/publication/making-ferguson/>.

<sup>4</sup> Freund, 141.

<sup>5</sup> "Reading Like a Historian," Stanford History Education Group, <https://sheg.stanford.edu/rlh>



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# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Black Lives Matter in Information Literacy

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.106, 2016)

by Angela Pashia



BLACK LIVES MATTER PROTEST AT UNION SQUARE, MANHATTAN - THE ALL-NITE IMAGES

For many academic librarians, teaching information literacy is a core component of librarianship. Depending on one's institutional context, this can happen in one-on-one interactions at a reference desk, in course-integrated instruction sessions (in which a librarian visits a class to teach students about finding credible sources for a term paper), and/or in a credit-bearing course.

Most people think of librarians teaching students to access books or articles, but information literacy involves much more. The Association for College & Research Libraries (ACRL) defines it as "the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning" (ACRL 2015). This can be taught as a "neutral" practice. For example, we can teach students to evaluate information sources according to a simple checklist, usually including the authority (often focused on formal credentials) of the author, publication date, and purpose of the piece, without having to examine the power structures that enabled that author to become an authority or the ideological biases represented in the piece.

Critical information literacy (CIL) pushes us to raise the questions that get left out of that "neutral" approach. CIL asks practitioners to acknowledge that the range of information available, the learners, and those teaching information literacy are all socially situated entities. It is important to teach the ways in which "the existing information system mirrors the larger social and political order, which is characterized by a radically asymmetrical distribution of power, and is shot through, systematically and structurally, by racism, sexism, homophobia, militarism, and class oppression" (Beilin 2015). From this perspective, teaching Black Lives Matter should be a component of information literacy.

At the University of West Georgia, I teach a course titled "Information Literacy and Research." The course is not required, but it is included as one of the electives students may take to fill a core curriculum requirement. It covers a range of topics related to library-based research, including how to find, access, and evaluate appropriate information sources and how to use that information ethically. I employ CIL by encouraging students to examine the power structures involved in all of the concepts we discuss. I set the stage for this on the second day of class with a lesson that asks students to think critically about the university itself, and how that affects everything else that we will discuss throughout the semester.

We begin by watching a video posted on the University College of London's YouTube channel: "Why is my curriculum white?" (UCLTV 2014). This 20-minute video features students questioning the whiteness of the established canon in their respective fields, asking why more non-white and non-Western scholars are not included in the

curriculum, and discussing the effects of that exclusion on themselves and their perceptions of academia.

After we watch this video, I ask students to search online for the demographic profile of students and faculty at our university. Our student body is 53.2% white and 36.0% black/African American, while our faculty are 81.4% white and only 6.6% black/African American (UWG 2016). Most very quickly find data reported on various websites. After the students have a few minutes to search, I ask for a volunteer to share the website they found on the instructor computer. This opens a range of discussion topics for the remainder of the session: evaluating the reliability of the sites they found, asking where those sites are pulling their data from, and discussing why any of this matters in a class about library research.

Drawing connections between this video, the demographics of our university, and information literacy leads to questions about how we construct authority and what information gets left out of those constructions. Examining the authority of the creator of an information source is generally an important part in determining whether a source is credible. This makes sense, given that we do not want students citing just anyone who posts to the internet with a lot of opinions but no real expertise to support those opinions. Training students to seek out scholarly experts means that they will find information that is well grounded in published research. However, these markers of authority are socially constructed within the context of structures of oppression, including racism and sexism.

Discussions of scholarly authority, especially in the context of topics like the Black Lives Matter movement, need to also address the structures of racism and sexism that have been deeply woven into the foundations of academia and scholarly publications. When we examine the traits that distinguish a scholarly publication from a non-academic source, students learn that scholarly sources are generally written by people who hold the terminal degree in their field and have university affiliations. What does it then mean for the students' evaluation of those scholarly sources if they also consider that, based on data from fall 2013, 79% of "all full-time faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions" were white (NCES 2015)? When students rely entirely on scholarly sources to analyze the Black Lives Matter movement, what voices and perspectives are excluded? This can be countered by seeking out those scholars who intentionally give voice to marginalized informants, but budding researchers do not all inherently recognize the need to look for this. We return to the issues raised in this lesson repeatedly throughout the semester.

I encourage students to critically evaluate all of the information they receive, whether they plan to use it for a term paper or their own personal interests. Though students have received many dismissive messages about the value of social media, it can be a powerful tool for counter-narratives to the hegemonic discourse. As students learn about the information cycle -- differences in the way different types of sources are produced, and the consequent time it takes for

them to be published -- we discuss how students may research a current topic in the weeks and months after an event. Scholarly sources should be used to provide a foundation for scholarly analysis, but will not yet have been published about that specific event, so the researcher must turn to news reports. The most common way of constructing authority in this instance is to rely on the reputation of established news media sources for reports about the recent event. However, most news organizations are beholden to their parent companies, their advertisers, and the audience those advertisers speak to. This introduces a range of power dynamics that influence the way those news organizations frame a story.

One example I use to illustrate this is a series of tweets from August 11, 2014. At that point, local news networks had begun to report on the "unrest" and "riots" in Ferguson, Missouri, portraying a narrative of unruly mobs getting out of control. And then, a set of tweets re-framed that narrative. One protester posted a series of tweets alleging that the local news crew was filming selectively: not filming calm protests, not filming a car of white teens who rolled through the location shouting racist slurs, but then filming the angry reaction from the predominantly black crowd and broadcasting that as representative of the crowd's behavior. This leads to a discussion of framing, how the details selected for inclusion or exclusion can affect the implicit message of a news report, and how social media can either fill gaps or poke holes in news reports. Of course, selecting credible sources from the flood of tweets on a trending topic is challenging, so we discuss ways to evaluate the credibility of an individual twitter account. This is more work than simply accepting the account posted on CNN based on the authority of an established news network, but it is important for students who want to begin to question the hegemonic narrative. This work of questioning the biases and power dynamics inherent in the production of information is challenging for students. My impression has been that very few of the students I work with have ever been invited to examine or criticize their educations in this way. As you may imagine, some are resistant and others flourish.

I ask students to examine and reflect on these issues through various assignments over the course of the semester. By the end of the course, students are able to describe some of the ways power structures limit the information easily available to them and how they can seek out alternate perspectives. The danger in this, of course, is that questioning these structures may lead some to lend credence to perspectives that lack solid evidence, which is why it is important to emphasize the need to evaluate the evidence and context for those claims. However, encouraging students to be mindful of ways racism influences the production of information, to question dominant narratives, and to include a wider range of perspectives in their research is a small step toward challenging implicit biases and structures of oppression, in order to make sure that Black Lives -- including experiences, stories, and scholarship -- Matter.

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# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## "A Practice Of Freedom": Self-Grading For Liberatory Learning

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.107, 2017)

by Vicki Reitenauer



ADRIENNE RICH AND AUDRE LORDE

From my earliest days as a university instructor, I have been troubled by the grading system and its demands on both students as producers of knowledge and instructors as arbiters of the value of that production. It is a personal, professional, and pedagogical necessity for me as an instructor in gender studies to be preoccupied with issues of power, and a great part of my distress as a person interested in serving as a catalyst for students' breakthroughs in thinking, feeling, and acting in the interest of social justice stemmed from my discomfort wielding the institutional power that has been vested in me through my assigning of grades to their work.

If ever there was a time when we need mechanisms through which students may be activated to "claim an education" (Rich) and to operationalize "education as the practice of freedom" (Freire; hooks), that time is now, given the social, political, and economic injustice and instability that shape our students' lives. I work to catalyze this claiming through a comprehensive self-grading model. With this strategy, I mean to disrupt the ways that students "get" a grade and, instead, to inspire them to claim every aspect of their learning -- their thinking, their feeling, their doing, and their reflecting on doing -- through grading themselves for their efforts and the results of their efforts within our learning community.

What follows is an articulation of the current form of this self-grading process. I make no claim here as to "best practices" but, rather, offer this snapshot as a jumping-off point for the reader's reflection on their own "best practices" in grading.

In the earliest days of a course, we begin with introductory activities highlighting the philosophical, political, and pedagogical foundation for the class: that this is a co-created space in which all of us will be actively learning from and teaching each other. This includes sharing power over the choosing of course content (with students directly bringing content into the course in a variety of ways) and the facilitation of class time (with students individually and/or collectively leading sessions). I then introduce students to the concept of self-grading. We talk about how most, if not all, of us in the room have been thoroughly socialized to appeal to the purported expert in the room to prove the worth of our academic output. Dislocating that dynamic requires each of us individually to assume a different set of responsibilities and a strategy for becoming accountable to ourselves and each other. Far from being an "easy" way to complete a class, self-grading and the processes associated with it will challenge them to assume an active role in their learning that they may have experienced rarely, if ever, before. What's exciting about self-grading is also what is terrifying about it: to truly engage in it with integrity, we've each got to reflect deeply and honestly on who and how we are, what we've brought to bear on our learning, and what the meaning and value of that effort has been for us.

My role, I say, will be to provide in-depth learner-centered feedback on every aspect of their work in the

course. Self-grading does not mean that I take a vacation from the effort of building and holding the space within which we will engage, nor that I remove myself from the responsibility to respond to their work. Rather, it means I, as their instructor, will experience the freedom to respond authentically and directly to the efforts they put forward precisely because I am not reducing that response to a letter grade. Self-grading means that I can and will focus my efforts where I believe I may bring the most value to them: in getting to know each of them individually, so that I might illuminate what I see going on in their work and identify possibilities for taking it further.

Through my writing about self-grading in the syllabus and our talking about it in class, I outline the processes we'll engage in throughout the term to support their final determination of their grade. Students begin the term by reading Adrienne Rich's essay "Claiming an Education" and Audre Lorde's "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" and completing an introductory reflective essay that requires them to name, among other things, their personal learning goals, linked to the course learning objectives; the grade they intend to earn in the course; the criteria through which they will determine what grade they have earned; the actions they will take to meet their goals; how others in the class, including me, can best support their learning; and how they will actively support the learning of others. I respond to these assignments with what I think of as a "noticing" feedback, in which I reflect back to students what I perceive through this reflective essay, their perceiving of themselves.

Throughout the term, I offer more of the "noticing" feedback on student work products. This feedback follows the direction they offer in a note to me as their reader, in which they identify what I should focus on to assist them in moving their work forward. My feedback reflects my critical engagement with their work, viewed through my understanding of the field, and framed to address their genuine questions about the impact of their work on a reader/viewer.

A required 1:1 meeting happens at the midpoint of the term. For many of my students, who have come to expect that their instructor's interest in them is predicated solely upon telling them what they're doing wrong, this meeting can be a revelation, as it serves to build genuine relationship between each student and me, through and beyond our course. I call these *no-agenda* meetings, meaning that we can talk about anything at all, including but not limited to their coursework. To signal the importance of these meetings (and to make meetings accessible for students who are unable to come to campus early or stay late), I preserve a week's worth of class time for this activity, with students cycling through 10-minute meetings with me during individual or group work time. I schedule additional appointment slots outside of class, beyond office hours, for students who would like a longer meeting.

These 1:1s are enormously valuable for me. There is a decided shift after these meetings occur, on both the

interpersonal and group level. The ways we can engage in the second half of our term on the basis of the student-instructor relationships that have been built -- and the fact that these relationships have been enhanced throughout the course at essentially the same moment in the term -- deepen profoundly the quality of our interactions and the integrity of the work students continue to make.

A rigorous reflective self-evaluation is students' final assignment, in which they respond to a judgment-free report-out of their efforts and a set of prompts requiring them to consider the work they produced, the impacts they made (or failed to make) in our learning community, what they learned through both their individual and their collaborative work, and how they will take and apply that learning in new settings. Within this essay, students claim their grade for the course within the context of the aspirational writing from their orienting reflection. The one caveat to this self-grading practice -- the way that I may choose to exert the power with which I've been vested by the institution, made repeatedly transparent to them from our first class forward -- is that I may require students to discuss their grade with me if I find that their determination doesn't align with my own experiences of them in the course and, more importantly, with their own self-reporting in this reflection about their engagement throughout the term. I will not demand that students change their self-determined grade, I tell them, but I may choose to require a conversation with them about the disconnects I perceive between their activity within the course, their reflective writing in this final assignment, and the grade they have claimed.

Having come to the very end of our time together, I again share with students the foundation for self-grading and how I understand this foundation to be connected both to course content and to the dynamic processes we've engaged in together throughout the term. I tell students that I don't care at all about their grades (and I mean this wholeheartedly), but that I do care deeply about the integrity with which they reflect on their work and determine their grade. I suggest that this process is not about guessing what grade I think they have earned and then writing a reflection to make the case for it. I encourage them, in fact, not to start with the grade at all, but to write their way into the reflection first. In another reversal of the advice they usually receive about completing assignments, I urge them to sit with the prompts for a good long while, waiting as long as they possibly can before writing. I suggest that they start with the work of deep reflection, with the prompts echoing in their heads and hearts and bodies -- and only then, after the words have formed themselves around their experience, the meaning of that experience, and where it's pointing them next, to settle down into their claiming of a grade.

This conversation brings us full circle to the start of the term, when we first discussed self-grading. We revisit our term-long conversation about power, and I again expose the

fact (and the paradox) that, while this self-grading process does require them to empower themselves to name their own grade, I retain access to power that they do not have simply by virtue of my position relative to theirs within this institution. What I *can* and do choose to do with that power, however, is to use it to negotiate this terrain with them in ways that are fundamentally relational, rather than bureaucratic and transactional. Because we've been talking, directly and indirectly, formally and informally, about power all term long, this conversation often serves to tether our considerations of the uses and abuses of power to this micro-act of grading, reminding us that in most situations (save, perhaps, the most oppressive ones), we all have access to some form of power, and we can choose intentionally to operate from an agency that grounds our use of it.

The responsibility I bear in our classroom has not diminished through this practice. Rather, it has shifted away from my using power to issue a summative statement of value to situating myself as mentor, guide, and sharer of my particular knowledges in a learning community that expects students to share theirs, too. Self-grading allows me to experience "education as the practice of freedom" from the position of instructor, as it allows students to claim their educations and to shoulder the responsibilities to self and others that the exercising of such a right demands.

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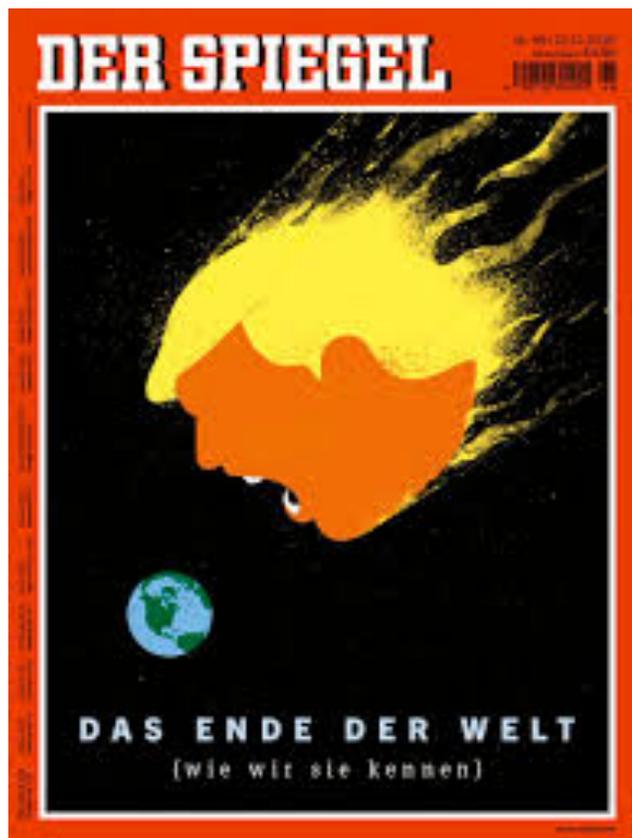
# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Overcoming Being Overwhelmed in the Trump Era

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.108, 2017)

by Navyug Gill



DER SPIEGEL DEPICTING TRUMP AS AN ASTEROID HEADING FOR EARTH

Over the past several months, I have noticed a growing sense among undergraduate students of being overwhelmed by mainstream electoral politics. From the long, vitriolic primary campaigns, to the scandal-plagued lead-up to the vote, the disbelief after November 8th, the confusion during the transition period, and the ongoing turbulence since the inauguration, it seems their sensibilities and expectations have been under repeated assault. What started out for many as a joke and then an embarrassment turned into a circus and then a threat, and then, finally, a disturbing reality.

At the same time, students have been inundated with various commentaries that seek to give coherence to all that has happened during the election cycle and its aftermath. Dozens of articles appear almost every day dissecting one or another aspect of Trump's victory and what it means for different groups of people, the country as a whole and the wider world. The attempt to ban Muslims from several countries, the push to end subsidized private healthcare and the renewed targeting of undocumented migrants are only the most recent measures compounding their sense of uncertainty and anxiety.

One way to overcome this feeling of being overwhelmed is by teaching the current conjuncture in a broader historical context yet with a sharper analytical focus. At William Paterson University, a mid-sized public institution located in northern New Jersey, my students come from mostly working-class families with a remarkable degree of ethnic and religious diversity. In my introductory Modern Global History course, I have adopted a three-pronged strategy to encourage them to think through the Trump presidency without succumbing to the pitfalls of exaggeration, conflation and exceptionality.

At the outset, I emphasize the need to attend to the specificity of Trump. It is critical to avoid generalization and hyperbole, no matter how cathartic. Students ought to understand Trump not as a crazed tycoon or a ridiculous imbecile, or even an ominous fascist-in-the-making. Instead, I ask them to choose appropriate adjectives: he is erratic and opportunistic, no doubt, but plainly right-wing, with regressive positions on a host of fiscal, social and environmental issues. Just as we would not accept students characterizing, say, Southern slave-owners, Napoleon or East India Company officers as "crazy," "stupid" or "evil," we should prevent Trump from being merely ridiculed in our classrooms. Only when we lack faith in the acuity of our analysis do we resort to caricature.

Beyond the careful use of language, I ask students to divide the Trump presidency into two categories. On the one hand, we identify as rhetoric the content of all of the statements he and his spokespersons have made over the past year. This entails overt expressions of racism, xenophobia, sexism and war-mongering, as well as convoluted claims about American greatness amid an ever-growing assortment of falsehoods. On the other hand, we list as policy all of his actionable positions, the concrete decisions he has already implemented or seeks to do so. This

includes building a wall along the Mexican border, reducing taxes on the wealthy, restricting immigration and refugee resettlement, and eliminating a range of government programs, subsidies and regulations. Perhaps less conventionally, it also encompasses plans to increase infrastructure spending, cancelling "free" trade agreements and withdrawing from the NATO military alliance.

In reality, of course, there is no simple separation between rhetoric and policy. The two are inextricable, and serve to inform and justify each other. Calling Mexicans "rapists" underpins the building of the wall, just as defunding Planned Parenthood exemplifies a routine degradation of women. The reason for the artificial divide, however, is to encourage students to focus on the material effects of policy rather than be distracted by the bombast of rhetoric. Too often the aspects of Trump's presidency that garner the most attention -- and thereby generate the most impassioned responses -- are his ignorant and offensive utterances. Yet outrage over his call to kill the families of suspected militants can quickly descend into outrage over his angry tweets about "Saturday Night Live" or the supposed size of the crowd at his inauguration. While issues of tone and temperament are important, they cannot overshadow confronting the tangible consequences of exercising presidential power.

In order to comparatively analyze Trump's policy positions, I next ask students to map out the current political spectrum in the United States. We start by drawing a horizontal line, with the left-end identified by students as Liberal and the right-end as Conservative. Leaving party affiliations aside, I ask how one would determine if a person was a liberal or a conservative? Usually, they answer with issues such as abortion access, gun control, same-sex marriage, the death penalty and military spending. Less frequently, students mention taxation rates, environmental protections and raising the minimum wage. I then ask them to locate certain politicians along the spectrum. We plot the position of George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, Ronald Regan, George W. Bush and Jimmy Carter, before moving on to Hilary Clinton, Ted Cruz, Barack Obama, Chris Christie and Bernie Sanders.

And then I ask them to place Trump along this spectrum. The mention of his name usually elicits hoots, with calls for placing him at the extreme right-end, or even off the line altogether. I remind them that they constructed this spectrum on their own, without any limitations, and therefore no one can be outside of its bounds. But why, I probe, do we think Trump is the furthest, most extreme type of conservative? We then go through each of the issues in the criterion, identifying his position and contrasting it to Clinton, Cruz and Sanders. Quite strikingly, students realize the need to adjust the location of these figures along the spectrum. It turns out Trump is not an arch-conservative, that Obama is far from the most leftward, and that Clinton ends up in the middle on many issues. From corporate bailouts to trade deals and criminal justice reform, the initial distance between these politicians shrinks considerably. By

focusing on Trump's actual policies instead of his rhetoric, students are better able to evaluate the meaning of his presidency.

At this point, I shift gears to discuss a different kind of political spectrum, that of nineteenth century Europe. We construct the same horizontal line, but now locate various groups of Reactionaries, Liberals and Radicals from right to left. I again ask how one would identify the political orientation of a person in this era? Based on previous discussions of assigned readings, students know the key issue at that time was what was to be done about the growing inequalities generated by industrial capitalism. For reactionaries, inequality was either natural or divine, while liberals believed it to be unfortunate but unavoidable. Only radicals sought to abolish it, even as different factions disagreed on how best to accomplish this task and what society would look like in the future. More importantly, the radical desire to transcend capitalism is what brought reactionaries and liberals closer together, united in a common fear of revolution to broadly defend the status quo.

Juxtaposing the political spectrum of twenty-first century America with nineteenth century Europe brings to the fore a few key observations. First, students realize the bulk of seemingly polarized Liberal-Conservative politics in the United States today largely falls within a rather narrow realm of Liberal politics from two centuries earlier in Europe. What appears at opposite ends of the current political spectrum was, in another context, merely what different groups of liberals disagreed on among themselves. Students also recognize that the issues that animate politics today are mostly social and cultural -- from abortion to gun control and same-sex marriage -- with far less attention paid to worker rights, universal healthcare and public ownership of industries. In an earlier period, however, the problem of economic inequality was paramount. This is what generated the sharpest divide between various political orientations, and from which the majority of other divisions followed. Finally, this exercise reveals to students a much larger, more open world of politics than what they presently imagine. The narrowness of the current spectrum, and the limited scope of disagreement within it, points to the need to extend the boundaries of contestation, to more fundamentally question the parameters of political life in the United States.

A final point to the comparison is to collapse the space of historical difference. I tell my students that in most of the world today, the political spectrum is akin to nineteenth century Europe rather than contemporary America. That is, most countries have a much more diverse terrain of politics, with a far larger number of parties contesting a vastly broader range of issues. Throughout Africa, Asia and Latin America, as well as Europe, there are an assortment of right-wing nationalists and fiscal and religious conservatives along with left-wing social-democrats and militant communists and anarchists among different strands of liberals, all using parliamentary and extra-parliamentary means to further

their respective agendas. While each of these groups has a specific position on various social and cultural issues, they usually do not confine themselves to debating within that sphere alone. Instead, they struggle more capaciously to define the kind of society they want to live in and the way it should be achieved.

At the end of this exercise, students begin to see Trump and the country he leads in a different light. No longer is he simply a fool or villain, but a representative of a kind of politics that requires patient, detailed analysis to understand. At the same time, the current political binary ceases to appear natural and inevitable as compared to earlier and elsewhere in the world. Perhaps most importantly, students are able to overcome the sense of being overwhelmed by opening up possibilities to imagine and engage in a new kind of politics for today, and tomorrow.



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# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Dear Solitary Black Student

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.109, 2017)

by Mychel L. Estevez



COURTESY OF HUFFPOST.COM

Dear Solitary Black Student,

Some days I worry that I'm harming you. As I speak about society's negative stereotypes of African Americans and how our culture is built on racism my mind is on you and how what I'm saying may be impacting you.

I'm very sorry that you are a visible minority in our class. In a way, your aloneness makes you the visible representation of all that is wrong in our society: a society where 34-38% of the "correctional population" is Black in spite of Blacks making up roughly 13% of the overall population (NAACP, The Sentencing Project). I'm sorry your sister is no longer in class with us; I wish she hadn't been taken by the criminal injustice system. But I know that as much as I wish, the impact is hitting you so much harder and it must be harder still coming to a class where these systems are talked about, a class where the majority have no idea about these things that are an everyday part of your life.

I'm writing this because I've come to a point where my fears about hurting you and my commitments to you and to all of my students seem to be colliding and I'm questioning myself about whether what I'm doing is right. I know it's not for you to reassure and teach me; in a way, that's actually part of the problem. I don't know how long ago it was, but I made myself a promise consisting of my commitments to my students of color. Namely,

- I would not tokenize, asking students of color to speak as if they are the representation of their race.
- I would not ask certain students questions that I don't ask others. For example, when students are from different parts of the world, I won't ask where they are from unless they bring it up and want to talk about it.
- I would say the hard things first, meaning I wouldn't leave it to marginalized students, or any students for that matter, to bring up difficult topics around racism, classism, etc. and systems like criminal (in)justice, education, economics.

While I recognize that there is always more work I can do, I think I do a pretty good job. But it's that last commitment that I'm having trouble with right now. I'm not questioning my commitment or the need for it. I think the Trump era we are living through is making me think about it more and more as this administration makes race and other marginalized statuses ever more salient and life ever more a struggle.

I'm stuck between not wanting to make you have to deal with these issues in my class because I know that they are literally your life and my need to bring awareness to the rest of the class ensuring that students know, undeniably, that these issues exist. That they understand that these issues are not as they appear in mainstream media, that they learn how to recognize privilege and oppression, that they learn to recognize and move beyond stereotypes and to question themselves, their beliefs, and their attitudes along with those of the institutions they are embedded in, and the larger culture itself. I cannot, in good faith, allow students to leave without at least attempting to foster these understandings.

But I believe that as I do this work I may be hurting you, which violates my general belief in doing no harm and working to mitigate harm that I may inadvertently cause. I don't know how to mitigate the harm in your case and in the cases of my other marginalized students. Sometimes, as I'm speaking, I feel your eyes on me. I always try to be careful and to question how I'm phrasing things. But now, with these thoughts in my head, I'm starting to stumble as I try to search for the right words to teach and impact some and mitigate harm for others. I'm afraid these stumbles reflect poorly on me and that students won't take my words as seriously, that I'm less affective. I need to do better but I hope you know that I'm doing the best I can every moment, that I never want the burden of educating others placed on you in class, and that I do what I can to not let it be. And that I'm regularly working to improve myself and how I teach.

Sincerely,

Your Instructor

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# RADICAL TEACHER

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

Poetry

## If I Were Not Afraid and It Was Snowing: A Choral Birth Poem

by Jessica Ann Vooris

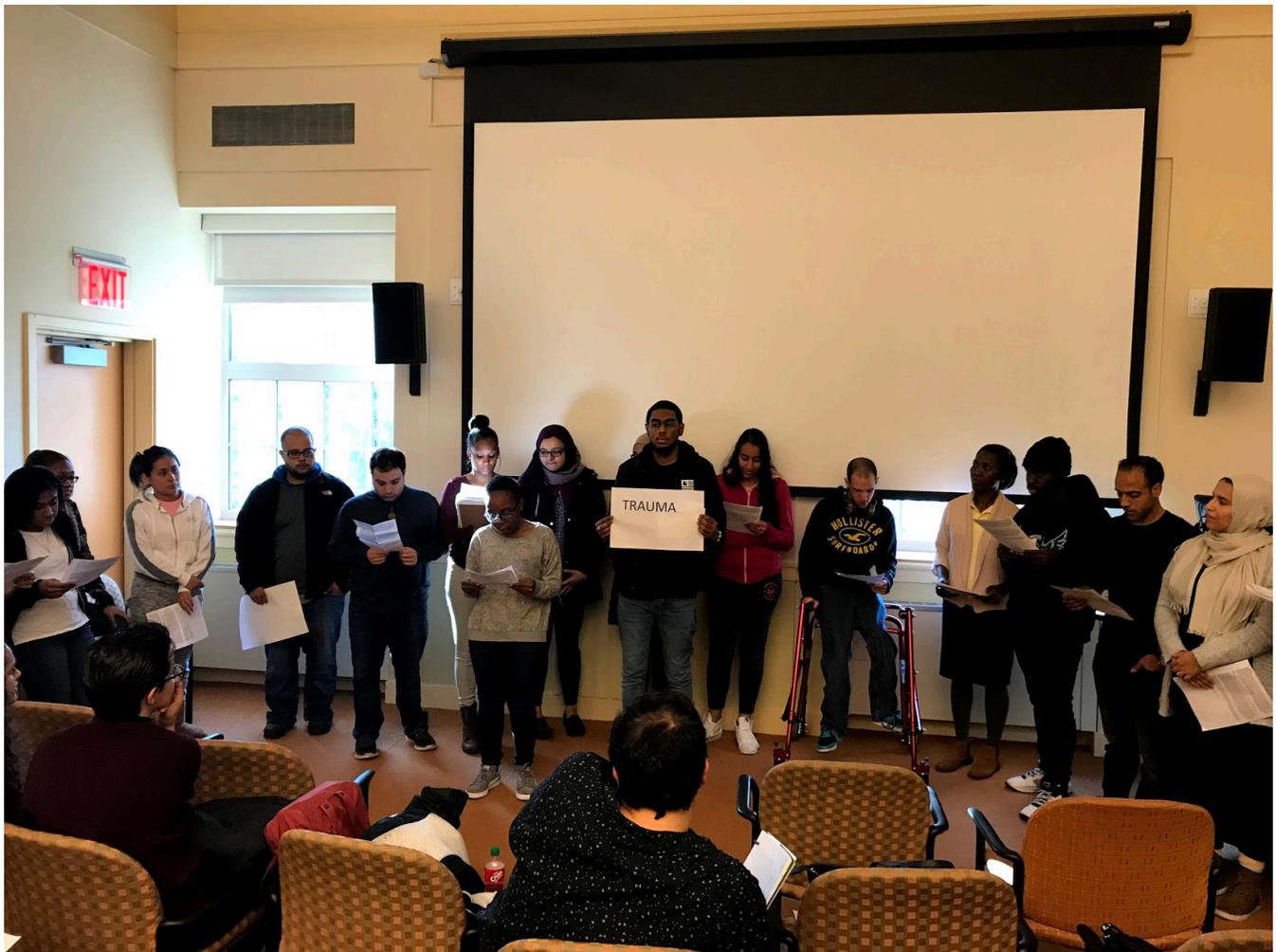


IMAGE COURTESY OF JOSEPH ENTIN

In my *International Women's Perspectives* course at Towson University I began every class with a prompt or question that students answered on an index card that I collected. Sometimes this was a content question based on the reading, sometimes it was a prompt to draw a self-portrait (based on Lynda Barry's pedagogical practice of self-portraits), and sometimes it was an open question about the subject that we would be discussing. This exercise functioned as a way to keep attendance, and to get a sense of how they were engaging with class material. It was also fun to see their self-portraits and the moment of sketching together (I drew on the board too whenever the prompt was for a self-portrait) helped ground us in the classroom together.

Although I had not intended to create poetry from these exercises, I found students' responses to some of the questions to be poignant, powerful, and lyrical, and I felt that they would fit well into a poem format. Thus began my unexpected creative collaboration with my students, springing from a daily attendance exercise. The poems that were created from student work reflect some of the key themes discussed in the course, which was one of Towson's Introduction to Women's Studies courses, and they have made me think more deeply about the ways that my students and I might engage with class material and with the act of writing together.

To create the poems, I combined the responses to the attendance prompt from both sections of my class—70 students in total. I then edited, re-arranged, and curated the pieces into poems. I purposely combined both of my course sections together so that it would be harder to connect any particular stanza to a student in the class, thus giving a sense of anonymity. And this also gave me a wider variety of material to work with.

Although students did not know ahead of time that I would do this, when I presented the finished poems to the class, students were all given the opportunity to remove their section if they didn't want it included. I also asked for and was granted permission by all of my students to share the poems publicly. Together, we read the poems out-loud in a chorus—I projected the poem up on the projector screen, and then we went around the room, each of them reading a stanza or a few lines. Students were excited about the "It Was Snowing" poem, and seemed to enjoy it when I produced a second poem from their words as well.

The poem "It was Snowing" came from the week that we studied birth practices and reproductive justice. Students had read "The Medicalization of Birth and Midwifery as Resistance" (JC Shaw, 2013), and the index card question was "What do you know about your birth?" Their responses captured a lot of the themes we discussed in class that week related to reproductive justice, especially in regard to birth experiences in the US and the stories about birth that are part of the public imagination. I was struck by how much information was contained in just a few lines or words, and the vivid nature of their stories, and it was these index cards

that prompted my first attempt at creating a poem from their responses.

The poem is a mosaic of the different pieces of birth--time, birth weight, length of labor, expectations of the doctors or nurses, medical details, fears that mother or child might not survive, the medicalization of women's bodies. Two students wrote that it was snowing when they were born--two lines that worked well to open and close the poem. I arranged the poem by combining similar information like dates, weight at birth, reasons for induction, the process of labor itself, reactions after they were born. I focused on strong images, as well as narrative flow.

The second poem "If I Were Not Afraid" was written during our violence against women unit where we talked about street harassment, sexual assault and the ways that women's bodies are policed in public. The index card prompt was, "What would you do if you were not afraid?" Students were told their answers could be related to the class or could be more general. Given the discussions we had been having in class, many of the responses reflect the topic of street harassment and student's fears about moving around in public, but they also reflect larger ideas about societal constraints and ideas about what is a proper life. They describe their dreams of travel, and the ways they would break free of expectations in regards to relationships, careers, school, and their bodies. Three students said they would sky-dive. Again, I was struck by the vivid imagery, the breadth and depth of their answers—from adventurous desires like swimming with sharks, to the wish to feel comfortable enough to walk outside without make-up. For this poem, I included more repetition, and arranged students' answers thematically. This poem, like "It Was Snowing," captures the sexism that shapes our lives and experiences.

My students seemed to enjoy the poems that were created, and several asked for copies to share with others. In the future I hope to do this exercise again, and I have been thinking about how to involve my students more in the process. While I called it a "collaborative" exercise, in this version of the exercise, I was the curator of my students' work/words. It would be great to give students the opportunity to write their own poems, perhaps by collecting all of the index card responses, combining them in a random list, and giving them to students to create poems. It would be fascinating to see all of the different versions of poems that might come from that, and which snippets and images students would choose to highlight. The lesson could also include a discussion of found poetry and erasure poetry, as these are two poem forms that students might use to engage with the index card material.

For folks seeking to conduct a similar exercise in your classes, I would encourage you to pick questions/prompts that are connected to the material and topics of class, but are also broad enough to solicit a variety of responses. I think this is an ideal exercise for a Women's Studies classroom where students are frequently asked to think about the way that the personal is political, and learn about

the importance of poetry, fiction, and narrative in the creation of feminist theory. However, I think that it would also fit well into a variety of other classes, including but not limited to Anthropology, Sociology, English Literature, History, American Studies, and of course creative writing courses as well.

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## It was Snowing: A Choral Birth Poem

It was snowing that night.  
My aunt drove my mom to the hospital.

I was born in June;  
Ash Wednesday;  
October 30th  
and my brother visited me  
in his costume and got candy from the nurses.

I believe I was born at night.

I was born in a hospital around 4 am. #gemini  
On a Wednesday, in the afternoon, around 3 pm, I believe.  
December 21st, there was a blizzard.  
Monday morning at 7 am.  
El Salvador, at the military hospital.

I don't know much  
except the same doctor delivered me and my 3 siblings,  
except I was 6 lbs and 7 ounces,  
except I was feet first and needed to be flipped.

Dad was a mess.

I was 5 lbs and my mom didn't have time for an epidural.  
It was the day before Mother's Day.

Things I know about my birth:  
I took a long time to come,  
my mom was in a lot of pain.  
I was born between two miscarriages.

All I know is I was born at 4:37 pm,  
or maybe it was 3:47 pm.

I was a surprise baby, she thought I was the flu.

I was 10 lbs,  
I was 7 lbs 11 ounces,  
I was 7 lbs 5 oz.  
I was 6 lbs even.

My mother had gestational diabetes.

I tried to come out at 4 months,  
a week early, first-born,  
2 weeks late.

They broke my mother's water.

She was induced because I stopped breathing;  
because my mom had super short labors,  
because she didn't want me born on Christmas,  
because I was getting too big,  
because of high blood pressure,  
because my doctor wanted to leave on vacation.

She was in labor for 17 hours,  
for 36 hours, 8 hours, not for long,  
didn't have time for an epidural,  
didn't know her rights,  
she was young so no one took her seriously.

No medication; a hard labor.  
Too much of the epidural,  
she could barely push me out.  
I wasn't coming, they had to use the vacuum.  
I had the umbilical cord wrapped around my neck.

Emergency C-Section.

The doctors didn't believe her when she told them  
I had stopped moving. If they had waited another hour,  
I wouldn't have been born alive.

I got stuck and turned blue, but I survived.  
First girl in my house after 16 years.  
I was born natural and came very fast.

They think I was supposed to be a twin  
but there was a rip in the placenta,  
the doctors took it away, said "we must study this."

I don't really know how to feel about my birth:  
I'm just here really,  
but my birth was interesting,  
because I was born with a birth defect.

In one of the sonograms of me,  
it looks like I am blowing bubbles.

My mom had 2 epidurals because I refused to be born.

My mom almost died because the nurses forgot  
about the placenta left inside.

My mom was in the middle of eating cheese-cake  
when her water broke and I love cheese-cake.

I came out not crying, but laughing.

I have seen pictures of my own birth:  
I was fat, covered in liquids, and a full head of hair,  
still attached to my mother through the cord.

My grandparents adopted me and the doctors  
tried to take me away from my mom,  
although we lived in the same house.

My dad said I looked like a lizard  
'cause I was purple.

Out of all of my sisters  
I have the lightest complexion.

I was born on October 7th,  
in hospital, a lot of people were in the room.

As soon as I was old enough to ride on a plane,  
we went back home.

I had a lot of hair, I had no hair,  
It was snowing.

## If I Were Not Afraid

If I were not afraid I would  
say how I feel, speak my mind,  
talk more about my opinions,  
tell my story,  
speak back to men in power.

I would be more resilient  
I would not doubt myself,  
I would not be limited,  
I would go out anywhere, anytime,  
I would be more at ease,  
I would take more risks.

I would sky-dive,  
sky-dive,  
sky-dive,  
and swim with sharks.

I would travel the world for a year,  
I would study abroad.  
I would move to Colorado or New Zealand or California,  
move away as soon as I graduate.  
I would buy a ticket to Budapest and never come back.  
Quit school and travel the world,  
travel the world after school.

I am afraid to fail, it keeps me going.

I would do things alone,  
walk alone at night,  
travel by myself,  
make new friends.

I don't know, I have never experienced a lack of fear.

Change my major or not continue college, change my future.  
I would become a politician, be on city council,  
be a game tester, be an artist for a living,  
join the navy, spend 6 months with my family  
in Jamaica every year.

I would try new foods, wear bright colors,  
get married to my fiancé and finish college where he is stationed,  
organize huge movements in places like Pakistan  
and raise awareness about sexual assault.

I would learn to fly an airplane,  
I wouldn't wear make-up every day,  
I would make the first move, be proud  
to wear clothing that makes me feel sexy.

I would go after my dreams,  
have adventures at night.

I would walk away from everything that makes me second guess myself.

I would be bold in my interactions, participate more, be fearless.  
I would not hesitate, I would take more chances,  
be independent.

I would be confident of who I really am,  
and embrace my femininity rather than hiding it.

I wouldn't be a people pleaser,  
I would ask for a raise.  
I would get an industrial piercing,  
wear whatever I want, whenever I want.

I would smile at men,  
I would be more outgoing and make connections,  
I would major in music,  
try to become a musician,  
and ask the girl I'm talking to to be my girlfriend.

I wouldn't carry pepper spray,  
I could walk by myself alone at night,  
I'd leave my apartment more, I wouldn't feel anxious  
and unsafe all the time.

I would be able to walk with my headphones in  
without looking over my shoulder.  
I would enjoy the little things.  
I would travel the world and go on dangerous adventures,  
no worrying about making something of myself  
or about financial troubles.

If I were unafraid, I would have let him go before he had the chance to hurt me.  
If I weren't afraid, I wouldn't mind being lonely.  
If I weren't afraid of certain animals, I would be a vet.  
If I hadn't been afraid, high-school could have been different for me.

If you conquer fear, then you conquer death.  
I used to be afraid of everything,  
now I try to live without fear.  
Not without caution, but without fear.

I would walk to the woods alone at night  
and sit in the beauty of darkness.



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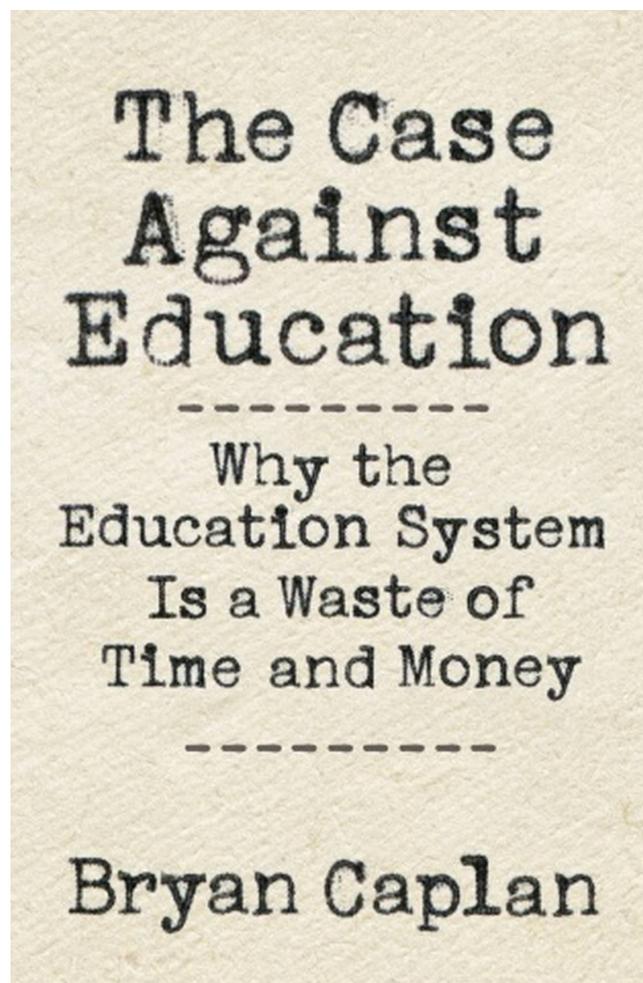
# RADICAL TEACHER

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

*Review*

*The Case Against Education* by Bryan Caplan

Reviewed by James Davis



THE CASE AGAINST EDUCATION (PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2018)

***The Case Against Education: Why The Education System Is A Waste Of Time And Money* by Bryan Caplan (Princeton University Press, 2018)**

This book's supposedly scandalous claim is that education serves primarily to "signal" certain qualities to employers, not to prepare people for life and work. The qualities that education signals, according to Bryan Caplan, professor of economics at George Mason University, are intelligence, diligence, and conformity. The more years of schooling, the stronger the signal, the more likely someone is to land a well-paying job and have a fulfilling career. Signaling is not the only function of education, Caplan concedes, but it has been drastically understated. "Human capital" proponents have instead advanced the idea that education prepares people for the world of work, that it not only helps them to *get* a job but also to *do* a job. A data whiz, Caplan's contention is that education is eighty percent signaling and only twenty percent human capital development. Pursued over the first several chapters, buttressed by statistics from the General Social Survey, College Board, and Bureau of Labor Statistics, his argument is that students don't learn as much as we'd like to think; what they do learn is irrelevant to their jobs; and colleges and universities – and even high schools – are primarily useful for certifying students' pre-existing qualities, not cultivating them further.

However, the book's genuinely scandalous claim is not that education is primarily about signaling. After all, a similar critique of American education has been formulated by the radical Left, who have long argued that schooling is largely a matter of sorting young people into the laboring or professional-managerial class, their learning an incidental artifact of the sorting procedure. Radical educators already believe, as Caplan ruefully asserts, that schooling is as much about "warehousing" kids so their parents can work, as it is about "enlightenment," so there's no audible gasp for his demonstration. What is breathtaking, rather, is the ease with which *The Case Against Education* equates education with job training, which is also to say, it reduces human beings to workers. We are apparently nothing more and nothing less. It is not enough for Caplan to show how little of what we are taught stays with us or is transferable to other situations, he contends that it doesn't matter anyway because the only truly valuable skills are basic literacy and numeracy. Everything else – from the arguably useful fields of history, science, foreign language, and mathematics to the self-evidently useless fields of fine arts, literature, and social sciences – fails to equip anyone to perform a "real job." That is, unless one seeks to teach these subjects, the likelihood of which is vanishingly small in relation to their prominence in the curriculum.

Sure, a few students enjoy learning a broad, multi-disciplinary academic curriculum, says Caplan, and some will even go on to "use" the skills it imparts, but they are the rare exceptions. And given the vast majority who make no "use" of academic training, indeed given the large number

who resist it and report loathing the experience, why continue to spend so much money – public taxpayer funds and private individual tuition – propping up this credentialing machine? It may improve the incomes of those who get through college; there's no disputing the data on the higher salaries of graduates, the "selfish return" to education. But the "social return" to education, the overall impact of increasing numbers of students enduring an increased number of years in school, is not a net gain in Caplan's view. Amid rampant credential inflation, the response of those who would distinguish themselves – and those demanding distinctions – is simply to move the goalposts further.

It's one thing to diagnose credential inflation and another to cure it. If you believe that there's a social benefit to more people staying in school longer, acquiring more degrees along the way, then credential inflation probably seems like a mild problem – an unfortunate, unintended consequence of the democratization of education. You may not have needed a bachelor's degree in actuarial mathematics to get an entry-level insurance job a generation ago, but well, now you do, and aren't you – and your company – the better for it? However, if you believe, as Caplan does, that there's little benefit and great cost to all this degree accumulation, then credential inflation is a dire, urgent problem. The second half of *The Case Against Education* advises students and parents to be circumspect about investing in a degree and makes the case for cutting government spending on education. Not just cutting, gutting. And not just public higher education, K-12 too. Since education is mostly useless, unless one is a strong student and unless one majors in a "real" subject like engineering or pre-med, Caplan argues, government funding should be slashed at the federal, state, and local level and low-interest student loans replaced by standard market-rate loans. Fewer people will go to college, but that's good policy because it's the only way to put the brakes on credential inflation. So goes the argument, which Caplan calls the doctrine of "separation of school and state."

Two aspects of this odious book may be overlooked even by outraged liberals but will concern radical educators. The argument is intended to provoke, as its title suggests, and Caplan anticipates outrage, but he is also sincere in his policy recommendations, calling himself a "whistle-blower." He feels he's telling an unpopular truth, the only one the data support, even if the American public resists it, afflicted as we are by "Social Desirability Bias." So, it's not enough to dismiss his analyses reflexively as the intellectual underpinnings of the far Right: music to the ears of Grover Norquist, Paul Ryan, and other deregulators. Certainly it is all that, as indicated by Caplan's George Mason University appointment, his affiliation with the Mercatus Project, and his reliance on anti-government arguments from Kenneth Arrow to F.A. Hayek. If you know *Democracy in Chains*, Nancy MacLean's recent history of the free-market fundamentalist economist James Buchanan's crusade to save Americans from their own democratic impulses, you will recognize that economics departments and institutes – and George Mason and the Mercatus Project in particular –

have been intellectual incubators for the policy vision that the Koch brothers fund and their flunkies, like Scott Walker, draft into legislation. Caplan can be derided as a mean libertarian – libertarian he owns, mean he is at pains to disavow – or a shill for the policy wonks pushing the national deregulation agenda. But what radical educators will find more disturbing still are the myopic, even dangerous, assumptions on which Caplan’s argument rests. It’s especially urgent to name these assumptions because the author is an adept rhetorician, dodging and parrying, challenging himself to avoid strawman arguments and go boldly where the data take him.

Aspect one: There is nothing except the market in Caplan’s vision. Not only can every policy decision be made with a cost-benefit analysis, not only can every action and desire be quantified and assigned a dollar value – all hallmarks of utilitarian economic thought – but also, the job market (and only the job market) should dictate our education system. It’s not just that vocational training should be revived and rehabilitated, every kind of education – even the academics we cast as the alternative to vocational training – is cast as vocational training. This agnosticism toward education’s content is troubling because it doesn’t make the case for or against a particular curriculum, it says only that the curriculum should be subordinated in every instance to occupational prospects. If growth sectors are in internet pornography, geriatric nursing, and offshore oil drilling (my examples, not Caplan’s), our obligation is to train people for those fields. We can moralize about their relative virtue, we can quibble that people typically change jobs many times, but what right do we have to subject future job-seekers to (at least) four years of English, three years of History, and two years of a foreign language, to say nothing of other frippery, like art and trigonometry? Who retains any of it? And of what is retained, how much is “used” at work? Precious little, Caplan concludes. So, he urges us to discard the comforting fictions that school teaches useful, transferable skills and that education is socially useful or ennobling to our humanity.

The problem that this narrow construction fails to confront – and it’s an obdurate problem – is that there is more to life than work. But even if life *were* only work, our working selves are more than our productivity and salary, Caplan’s sole measures of value. Can you imagine anyone in any occupation in another country who would content themselves with abysmal ignorance of even the rudimentary history of that country (to say nothing of others), possess little to no familiarity with its system of government (to say nothing of others), speak no language other than that spoken at home? In most countries, these are ordinary expectations, widely realized. In the U.S., however, knowledge is what helps one get a job or keep a job; everything else is expensive window-dressing.

Aspect two: Caplan surveys our country’s “useless” curriculum, lousy teaching, and indifferent students and finds a system that has been far too protected from market considerations. His remedy is to withhold education from a much wider segment of the population and tailor everyone else’s education to the market. These adjustments will make students more interested in learning, he contends, and non-students happier and better compensated, once credential inflation declines. However, one can accept Caplan’s data and reach a different conclusion. It’s not that the education system is insufficiently market-aligned but rather that market fundamentalism is already *so pervasive* that many Americans feel that education is just going through the motions. If students feel that school is basically “useless,” this may not indicate that the curriculum should be more “useful” but that we have accepted the free market doctrine that the only “useful” skills and experiences are those directly convertible into income. So thoroughly have we accepted this doctrine that our students can’t help but internalize it, notwithstanding the fine words we utter about well-rounded citizens, full human beings, or discipline-specific ways of framing the world. In other words, the indifference Caplan identifies may be a symptom not of the failure of free market fundamentalism to influence American education but of its baleful success.

Credential inflation is real. It leads students to resent their time in school and threatens to turn institutions into diploma mills. But a way must be found to address it other than the prescriptions Caplan recommends. If education primarily serves a “signaling” function, as Caplan and the radical Left agree it does, we should recognize the pervasive fear that drives the signalers, especially in the post-industrial era. As occupations are transformed or eliminated, as regular paychecks, healthcare, and retirement benefits are increasingly a luxury, young people signal out of desperation as much as aspiration. We cannot accede to a vision that calls, as Caplan does, for twelve-year-olds to declare their intention either to pursue an academic curriculum, a vocational curriculum, or drop out of school immediately to begin earning income. *The Case Against Education* presents itself as a sober reckoning with inconvenient truths about U.S. education, employing systematic methods to reach unflinching policy proposals. But these methods only make sense if one accepts a set of deeply troubling assumptions that remain unstated and unchallenged in Caplan’s propulsive narrative.



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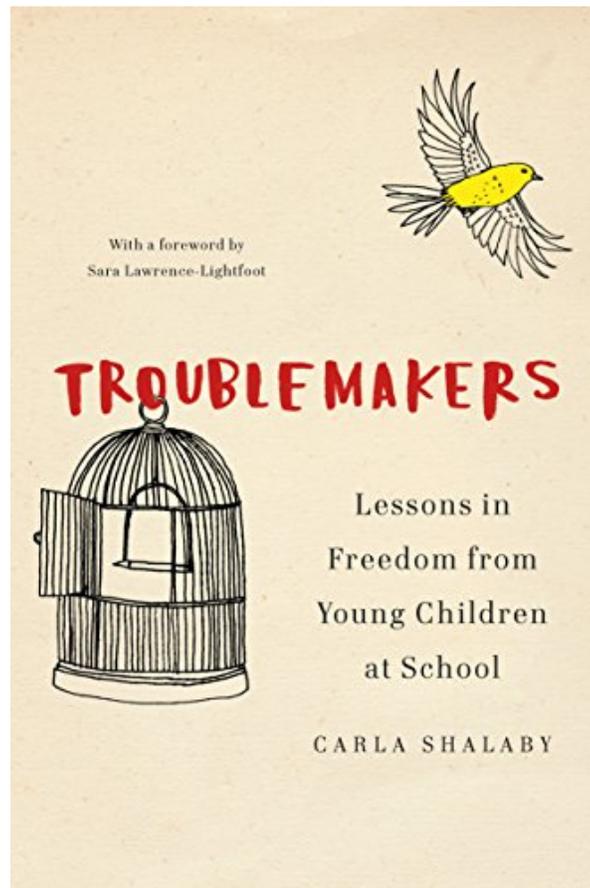
# RADICAL TEACHER

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

*Review*

## Troublemakers: Lessons in Freedom From Young Children In School

Reviewed by Kendra Kelley



TROUBLEMAKERS: LESSONS IN FREEDOM FROM YOUNG CHILDREN IN SCHOOL BY CARLA SHALABY (THE NEW PRESS, 2017)

***Troublemakers: Lessons in Freedom from Young Children in School* by Carla Shalaby (The New Press, 2017)**

Carla Shalaby's *Troublemakers: Lessons in Freedom from Young Children at School* provides needed perspective to the school discipline reform conversation. Shalaby, a former classroom teacher and university elementary education program director studies first and second-grade "troublemakers." They call out, question, and disrupt their classrooms. At an age when children are first learning about their roles and relationships, these children are frequently punished and ostracized. Shalaby's thesis is that "these troublemakers--rejected and criminalized--are the children from whom we can learn the most about freedom" (p.xx). In Shalaby's analysis, classroom practices of public reprimand, contingent acceptance, and reinforced conformity impede free expression and socialization and diminish loving acceptance and community. Ultimately, she offers deep portraits of "troublemakers" to advocate for a collective response from teachers against the oppressive discipline practices widely institutionalized in schools.

In *Troublemakers*, Shalaby (now a research fellow at the University of Michigan School of Education) spends a year or more following each of four 6-7 year-olds identified by their teachers for their challenging behavior. Shalaby selects well-regarded teachers in two respected schools: Zora and Lucas's suburban school is "relatively wealthy, predominantly white," and Sean and Marcus's urban school is "uniquely racially and socioeconomically diverse" (p. xxxii). Shalaby wants to understand "how children struggle even in these schools because it demonstrates the systematic, cultural, and often invisible workings of *school*, as an institution" (p. 153). The children themselves encompass a diversity of demographic descriptors: gender, race, economic conditions, ethnicity, parental circumstance, and influence of multilingual family. This reveals the unique interplay of personal factors for each child, while at the same time suggesting common threads.

By including children in varying circumstances and schools across socioeconomic contexts, Shalaby provides needed complexity to the intersectional race/class/gender paradigm. She is explicit in identifying racialized inequality in schools broadly and in the individual experiences of the children and families. Of Marcus, a young, black male from a working-class family, and his teacher who is white and female, Shalaby writes that "subordination takes on a particular meaning when it intersects with race, gender, and class... It cannot be ignored, even if the black male is barely seven years old" (p. 148). Individual stories of racial inequality are underscored by the author's inclusion of preschool expulsion statistics from the U.S. Department of Education: Shalaby cites rates as much as 3.8 times higher for black preschoolers than white ones (p. xix).

Shalaby identifies suspension, expulsion, and high rates of challenging behavior as symptoms of systemic problems. In stories about children, teachers, and parents, Shalaby observes how the interaction between school institutions

and children works to erode values of love, freedom, and social justice. Shalby conducts qualitative "portraiture" research, curious where these children are doing well, as she asks "What is good here?," leading her to observe across settings and engage directly with families (p. xxxi). She presents her findings in classroom and home vignettes, embeds quotations from family and teacher interviews, and includes conversations with children. *Troublemaker* is written for a public audience. The weight of her research and expertise is present, but she writes in accessible language and format. Such a choice is deliberate for Shalaby. It reflects a personal commitment to the children she followed and embodies her democratic concerns.

There is a section of *Troublemakers* devoted to each child and arranged around an organizing element of his or her story, such as Zora's inspirational quotes at home and Lucas's favorite book. Shalaby observes children's activities across settings, their relationships, and family circumstances (including single-parenting and incarceration) as well as wider historical, social, and political factors. To illuminate and synthesize, she also incorporates a wide range of companion thinkers: W.E.B. Dubois, Maya Angelou, illustrator Mo Williams, and "Hidden Curriculum" educational researcher Phillip Jackson, among others in her reflections.

With restraint and impact, the author connects the children's stories to national discipline policy debates. She writes of the Los Angeles Unified School District's 2013 decision to stop suspending and expelling students for "willful defiance," broadly interpreted to cover talking back to a teacher, causing a classroom disturbance, and "refusing to take off a hat" (p.109-110). In California, willful defiance charges accounted for over half of all suspensions and a quarter of expulsions, with students of color vastly overrepresented. Shalaby explains that such "[p]unishment for willful defiance does not only violate the individual civil rights of young people. It also threatens democracy more broadly" (p. 110). This is a recurring theme in *Troublemakers*: as Shalaby unpacks the interplay of power, truth, and dignity, the classroom concerns of young children echo larger social justice conversations.

Throughout the book, Shalaby explores the idea of *trouble-making* and the *troublemakers*, passionately revealing how these children are resisting a system that rejects their full selfhood and makes community membership contingent. This is particularly poignant for Zora, a spirited young girl, unintimidated by authority, with a vibrant family life, who is the only brown-skinned child in her classroom. In Shalaby's candid conversation with Zora's teacher, Mrs. Beverly, the educator describes her own internal conflict: a resistance to perpetuate racial power dynamics and a drive to prepare Zora through discipline and conformity (p. 26, 34).

In revealing moments--and there is at least one with each child--Shalaby describes an interaction where a child's response prompts Shalaby to reflect on her own actions and assumptions. For instance, in planning to meet with Lucas, Shalaby believes she will need some tangible prize to coerce

his participation. She makes him some pictures of his favorite character, Sonic. When she invites him to meet with her, however, he goes willingly without the rewards. At the end of their meeting, she gives him the pictures anyway. He says: "You made these just for me?...You really care about me because you know I love Sonic!...Thank you so much!" (p. 65). Shalaby explains: "I required his cooperation and I was trying, in a mild way, to coerce his participation...But Lucas assumed the best of me, and he humbled me" (p. 65). In Sean's story, Shalaby resists her own "teacher" training and permits Sean extended time at the park: "I was trained in consistency, in following through... Was all well that ended well?" (p. 93). Teachers reading *Troublemakers* may recognize these moments. Often young students, least empowered by circumstances but also least indoctrinated, can cut through stances of obedience and authority and inadvertently end up becoming our teachers if we let them.

Shalaby candidly includes moments that serve as profound, and troubling, instances of "the wisdom of children." Insights from Marcus may be the most troubling in this respect. He values personal relationship but his connections are chronically curtailed. For instance, Shalaby's computer becomes a tangible point of conversation. One day, Shalaby sees Marcus is "ramped up;" he has been to see his brother and teenage sister in a nearby classroom and his sister was crying. (Later Shalaby learns they will be going to visit their father in prison that evening.) Shalaby describes their exchange:

"Its my brother's birthday," he tells me when I sit.

"I know," I reply, short because I don't want to be caught chatting him up.

"Did you type a lot today?" He asks. I don't respond. I am trying so hard to respect [the teacher's] authority that I resort to ignoring him. I deny my own knowledge that he needs to be authentically heard (p. 132-133).

The children's desire for social connection with adults and peers manifests in calling out, refusing to obey, responding bluntly, and cracking jokes. They struggle to make friends. Sean's attempts with his classmate, Ilan, are frequently rebuked. Sean defies group assignments to be with Ilan. Sean's bids are reinforced when the boys share a rare moment of laughter--even if it is calling each other names to the teacher's disapproval. As Shalaby concludes: "These children risked punishment, risked their relationships with the teacher, to carve out a thread of belonging in the social fabric of the classroom" (p. 161).

Shalaby's "portraiture" approach also brings needed engagement with the children's family life and avoids deficit analysis related to school behavior. Rather than seeing family as adjacent to school, or reporting home life second-hand, Shalaby talks to families, visits homes, and sees parents and children in relation. Her conversations with parents are touching and illuminating, situating the children's behavior patterns in context. This is particularly helpful in the story of Sean. Shalaby sees his consistent objections, the source of power-struggle in the classroom, are met with greater acceptance and accommodation by his mother. Marcus is the only child that Shalaby does not visit at home. In describing the circumstances that prevent the

visit, including parental hesitation and family demands, Shalaby acknowledges an understandable lack of trust and reflects on the constellation of factors for Marcus, including parental incarceration, behavioral challenges, demands of family responsibilities under one parent, as well as race and class, which may have prevented the visit. This consideration itself is an important moment in *Troublemakers*, reflecting with humility the circumstances surrounding teacher and family engagement.

Throughout *Troublemakers*, Shalaby notes Zora, Lucas, Sean, and Marcus's determination to be authentically seen. Instead, they alternate between being *invisible* or *hypervisible*, objects of attention and ridicule, nuisances to be ignored and marginalized (p. 165). Shalaby finds that the children spent a significant portion of their time segregated from their class due to disciplinary and social ostracization: "...the more they misbehaved to earn a place in community, the more they were excluded from the community" (p. 161). By the end of book, the reader has seen all four children prescribed medicine for ADHD or anger. Shalaby does not make individual judgements but describes the complex factors for the families in making decisions about medication. Broadly, however, the author is concerned. She calls for a moral account of "the extent of our willingness to change children, coupled with the extent of our unwillingness to change schools" (p. 159-160).

Concluding *Troublemakers*, Shalaby makes specific calls for open-hearted teaching and engagement in social activism. While it is hard to arrive at the final section unmoved, teachers may wonder how to accomplish these changes with the pressures of school norms and high-stakes assessments. In a final section, "A Letter to Teachers," she rejects the notion of a set of tips and strategic accommodations. Shalaby evokes freedom and love as qualities of practice and ways of being. She seeks understanding of these qualities not in abstract definition but by first wondering what they might look and feel like in the classroom. This wondering, often in the form of questioning, allows Shalaby to draw out an intuitive response from readers, which she extends using examples from her case studies.

Speaking directly to teachers, Shalaby contrasts "The Regular Way" with "Towards a Loving Way" of teaching. Typical practices like posting "classroom rules and norms" are juxtaposed with conversations about "the meaning of freedom, and the rights and responsibilities of free people" (p. 175). She suggests an alternative to exclusionary discipline: Considering "a human need that the behavior may be signaling, and decide together on a way you will try to meet it. Revisit, over time, whether this attempt has been successful. Are people suffering less?" (p. 176). Shalaby provides guiding questions for classroom practices: *Can we wonder, together, how the problem we are seeing in our classroom might be related to a problem we see in the world?* (p. 178). Having familiarized the reader with the stories of Zora, Lucas, Sean, and Marcus, Shalaby takes up Marcus's story specifically and invites the reader to consider how working "Towards a Loving Way" might offer an alternative classroom experience.

While Shalaby's focus on love and freedom might seem overly abstract or unrealistic, it indicates her stance, which asserts the full humanity of young children at the same time that it interrogates the instrumentalization of schooling. Early in *Troublemakers*, Shalaby emphasizes "institutional and state-sanctioned violence—historic and ongoing genocide and terror; criminalization and mass incarceration; segregation and poverty; patriarchy, homophobia, and sexual violence; colonialization and imperialism; xenophobia, racism, and the enduring supremacy of whiteness" (p. xvii). She wonders about the extent to which the schooling experience promotes and perpetrates such violence. By the conclusion of her book, Shalaby has built a compelling case for the reader, even one unfamiliar with early childhood education, that these concerns about violence, power, and agency are manifest in the elementary classroom.

In contrast to the violence of the American education system, Shalaby refuses to pathologize the children whom she studies. Instead the author seeks to understand the children's behavior as indicators of systemic problems, and she does not evoke behavior and mental health diagnosis for classroom defiance. Rather, Shalaby advances a vision for children free *from* subjection, abuse, and ostracization, as well as free *to* express, exercise autonomy, and form relationships in the classroom.

She calls on teachers to look to children's imaginative capacity to envision a way forward, pointing out that children may be keenly able to see alternative paths. She further suggests bringing whole classroom communities into conversation about their interactions. These conversations should be entered into not with the intent of finding a consequence or answer. Rather, the intention is to model inclusion, recognize behavior as social not individual, and "invite curiosity, understanding, forgiveness, transformation" (p. 177-178). Shalaby uses the language of activist thinker Grace Lee Boggs, suggesting that students may become "solutionaries", revolutionary problem solvers with audacious imaginations" (p. 179). In this vision, the classroom becomes a site where "problems of power" are collectively explored in order to learn how to enact change together.

Shalaby ends *Troublemakers* on the topic of collective action. While Shalaby finds individual work necessary, she also points to organized change. She lists resources and references for reading, teaching, and organizing. (All royalties from *Troublemakers* go towards supporting Education for Liberation Network, for which Shalaby co-edits an annual social justice lesson plan publication: *Planning for Social Justice*.) Shalaby's concludes with "A Note to All Readers" from the 2016 Michigan teachers' strike, which reads as a kind of field report addendum. This provides a needed connection between classroom resistance and social and political change. The final message of *Troublemakers* is one of solidarity. Shalaby writes: "The visible activism of

organized educators in cities across the country is an invitation to all of us--educators and non-educators alike--to participate in their lessons" (p. 187). It is work that requires courage, humility, and love and which the stories of Zora, Lucas, Sean, and Marcus inspire.



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# RADICAL TEACHER

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

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IMAGE COURTESY OF FRINDE MAHER

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