

Radical Teacher 101  
Teaching Across Borders



ONE WORLD MANY PAPERS  
COURTESY OF JANE ALLEN INGRAM

Plus a mini-cluster:

Teaching about the 1%, the rich, the upper class, the ruling class...

# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Mini-Cluster on Teaching about the 1%, the Rich, the Upper Class, the Ruling Class

by Marcial González, Greg Meyerson, and Richard Ohmann

### Note

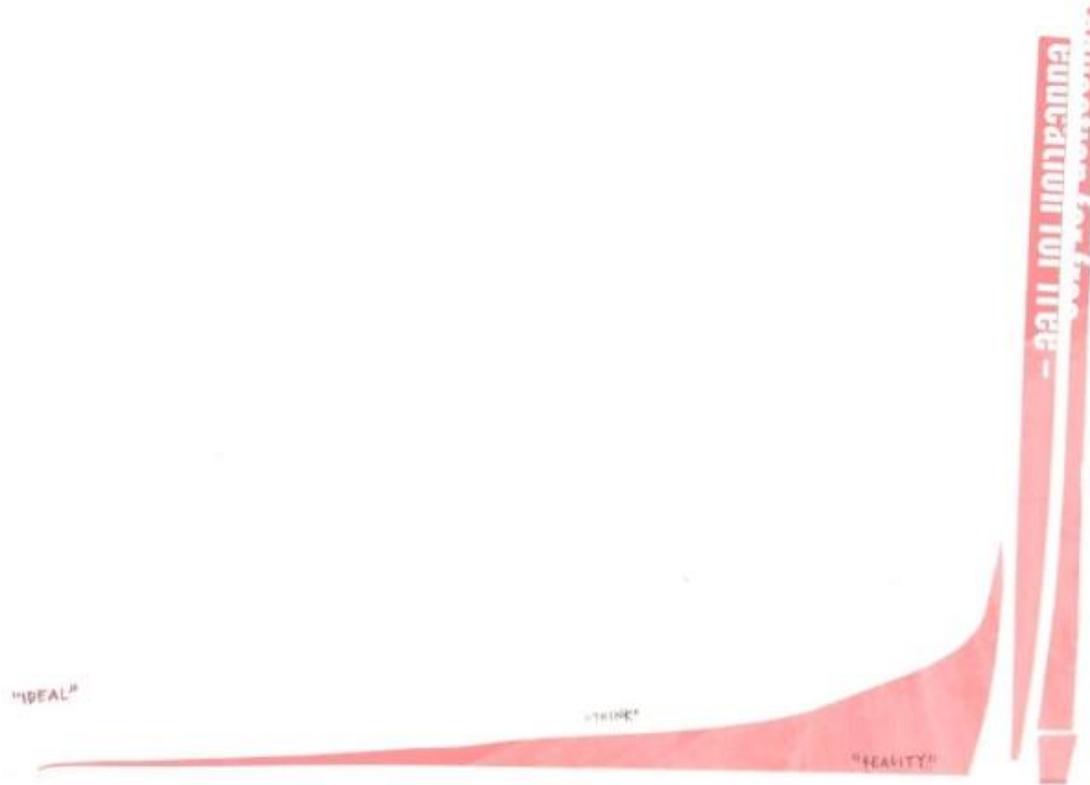
Marcial González, Greg Meyerson, and Richard Ohmann worked together on these three articles. We spoke on a panel organized by the Radical Caucus of the Modern Language Association for MLA's 2014 convention. Our topic was "Teaching About the 1%, the Rich, the Upper Class, the Ruling Class . . . ." As that list suggests, we meant to explore common ways of conceptualizing the wealthiest people in the U. S., and in capitalist society generally. We argued that the best way is to see them structurally, as integral to a class system. And we sketched out ways for teachers to do that.

*Radical Teacher* published a mini-cluster in issue #85 (Fall, 2009) on teaching about the upper class. The editors invite further discussion of this subject.

—MG, GM, RO



COURTESY OF AARON BURR SOCIETY  
JIM COSTANZA



"INEQUITY GRAPH" COURTESY OF SHINA YOON



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://www.library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://www.dscribe.com/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.library.pitt.edu/).

# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Different from Us: Teaching About the Rich After Occupy and the Great Recession

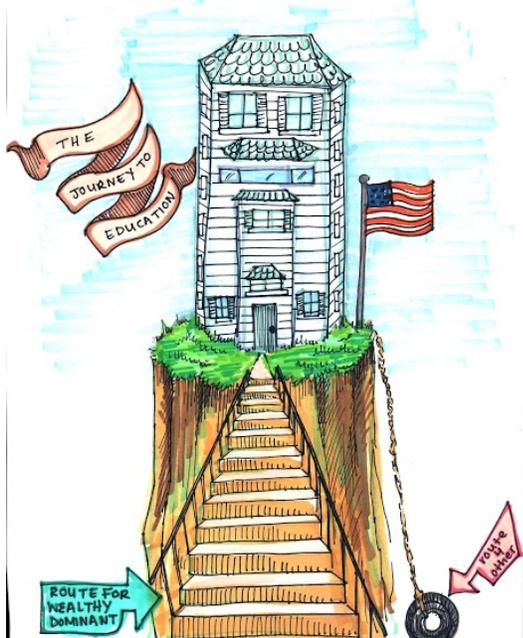
by Richard Ohmann



"IN THE SHADOW OF DEBT: PARTICIPATORY RELIEF"  
HEALTH SCHULTZ, WITH SELF-ORGANIZED SEMINAR COLLECTIVE

In a famous imaginary exchange, F. Scott Fitzgerald said, "The rich are different from us." Ernest Hemingway replied, "Yes, they have more money." Most critics have thought the epigram attributed to Fitzgerald more perceptive about class in the United States than the one attributed to Hemingway. But if we're looking for a wry take on how class has been **understood**, in the media and among college students, Hemingway's comment is pretty good.

To be sure, runs mainstream ideology, rich people have a lot of money. So what? They earned it, and in America anyone who works hard can do likewise, or has a fair chance of doing likewise, or at least has a fair chance at a chicken in the pot and a car in the garage (as Hoover's 1928 campaign flyer put it). Neither individuals nor families are stuck in place. And besides, there **are** no social places; anyone who carries on as if better than others is a snob. There is or should be no class culture. Certainly there is no class system—maybe in the old country, but not here. We have a pluralist social order, not one in which wealth is power. And so on.



"JOURNEY TO EDUCATION" BRITTANY SAUTA

When *Radical Teacher* published a mini-cluster on "Teaching About the Upper Class" a few years ago (issue 85), that powerful myth was our starting place. Our students knew there were rich people—some of them **were** rich people. Others resented rich people. Few knew how rich rich people are, and those few did not by a long shot see rich people as a class that ruled a society. Their blindness "was and is an impediment to understanding the world," said Frinde Maher and I in our introduction. To overcome that impediment was the aim of all three *Radical Teacher* authors, especially Richie Zweigenhaft, in his "Teaching an Interdisciplinary Course on the American Upper Class." He listed as his top three aims: (1) trying "to help students understand that there is a class system in this country and that it has worked in rather predictable ways throughout the last 110 years"; (2) showing students that "those in the upper class are clearly connected to, but

not the same as, those who run the institutions of power"; and (3) helping them "realize that those. . . who are at the bottom of the class structure are very much affected by the advantages that those in the upper class have and work to maintain" (6).

When Greg Meyerson, Marcial González, and I began working on this topic, I first suggested titling our MLA session, "Teaching About the Rich, After Occupy." I wondered if Occupy's emphasis on the 1% and the 99% had come out of a new awareness of inequality and had spread that awareness, along with a lot of anger, to ever-wider segments of the 99%, including, especially, young people. Occupy's highlighting of student debt certainly brought the theme of inequality alive as a reality in almost every classroom where progressive teachers work to demystify the social order. Most students probably know not only that most of their classmates will owe lots of money when they finish college, but also that a national economic crisis is intensifying around student debt (more than a trillion dollars now, larger than the total of credit card debt, and so on), and that a political movement for non-payment arose during Occupy and continues today. Among many examples, see the web sites of Student Debt Crisis and Strike Debt; the latter organization's free booklet, "The Debt Resisters' Operations Manual" would make an excellent text for a unit on this subject.

**1% lost a lot of their wealth before the turnaround in 2009, but bounced back quickly, while poor and working class people and most of those referred to as "middle class" lost ground at an even faster pace than they had during the previous three or four decades, and almost all the wealth that was recovered or newly created in the next five years went to the richest few per cent of Americans.**

More than Occupy brought rich people into the light: the practices of rich Wall Streeters had tripped off the crash of 2008 and the Great Recession that followed. The 1% lost a lot of their wealth before the turnaround in 2009, but bounced back quickly, while poor and working class people and most of those referred to as "middle class" lost ground at an even faster pace than they had during the previous three or four decades, and almost all the wealth that was recovered or newly created in the next five years went to the richest few per cent of Americans. The result was a massive redistribution of wealth—upward. Meanwhile our political leaders did little to help the unemployed by stimulating the economy, and nothing to undo the regressive tax reforms of the Bush era. It became more and more obvious, even in the mainstream media, that Congressional rule was engineered by rich people—most spectacularly by those like the Koch brothers who used their wealth to buy undemocratic redistricting, to write union-busting state laws, to fund the Tea Party and

other fronts for capitalist accumulation, and, incidentally, to advance the ruin of Earth as habitat for our species and many others. What a spectacular, extended lesson in the workings of class society these past six years have been—a vast, painful MOOC (Massive Open Online Course).

It seems that many voters and some political leaders understood the teachings of Occupy and the Great Recession. Take Bill de Blasio's mayoral campaign. When I came back to New York in November, 2013, just about the first thing I heard on the radio was an excerpt from his victory speech. In it, to my surprise, he called the division of society into rich and poor "the defining challenge of our times" (de Blasio). Had I been there through de Blasio's "tale of two cities" campaign, I wouldn't have been so surprised. I would have heard many times of his intention to raise taxes on "the wealthiest" New Yorkers to fund pre-kindergarten programs for poor kids. (And all the other kids, too, but then most from well-to-do families already have such programs.) This was a small step toward expropriating the expropriators, no doubt, but how strange to hear it proposed by a mayor of New York, after the Bloomberg years. And the new guy de Blasio had spoken more than once at Occupy Wall Street's first encampment. Was his "an Occupy victory?" asked a host on radio station WBAI. A promo for the Brian Lehrer show on the City's NPR station invited us to listen in and find out just how the new mayor would fight inequality. Of course New York is not Dallas or Tulsa. But it's bigger, and de Blasio had won three-fourths of the vote.

I sniffed something fresh in the political air. Maybe the air of the college classroom had freshened, too? A 2011 Pew Research Center poll found that a slight majority of people in the 18-29 age group rated capitalism unfavorably; 49% thought well of socialism, 43% of capitalism (Eichler). Might radical teachers teach differently about rich people now than they would have a few years ago because students have breathed the new air for a while? Will that majority of students who tell pollsters they are down on capitalism want to learn more about it, and be ready to learn from a more advanced starting point?

Let me grant that few students and few older members of the 99% will have learned with clarity or rigor, from Occupy and the Great Recession, that "there is a class system in America," the first item on



"RICHARD SERRA URGENT DEBT TOUR" CASSIE THORNTON

the precarious academic job market to the trillion dollars in student debt—needs a lot of dot-connecting analysis. Marcial González and Greg Meyerson shine their dialectical lights into that dark systemic place. I will mention some other, more specific places that need illumination, after Occupy.

"The 1%": I bet almost every student in your classrooms knows the meaning of that phrase, knows that it implies dominance over the 99%, and knows that "we are the 99%." Does that add up to more class consciousness than college and university teachers could count on among their students a few years ago, on the first day of a semester? I do think so; and for sure, just by placing the term into everyday circulation, Occupy made talk about the rich more natural, less impolite, than before. Good start.

But in itself, the term "1%" is almost without descriptive content—itsself a new mystification that needs radical puncturing. That could be a teaching challenge and opportunity. For instance, citizens (including students) do need to know how rich the rich actually are. Taxpayers at the lower edge of the top 1% earn in the neighborhood of \$400,000. That's not my neighborhood or yours, but if you teach in an ivied college or university, quite a few of the students in your classes have parents with incomes in that range—leaving them a couple of orders of magnitude downscale from Mark Zuckerberg's neighborhood. The 1% with the highest incomes straddle an important class line, with doctors and lawyers on one side and top brass at Goldman Sachs almost out of sight on the other. Furthermore, **income** is not nearly so important a guide as **wealth**, to an understanding of the upper class. Both the Occupy slogan and most analysis in mainstream media have fudged the distinction between wealth and income—a critical one, because inequality in wealth is much more severe than inequality in income: roughly 0.8 compared to a figure between



"COMMUNAL SOUND OF DEBT" CASSIE THORNTON

0.4 and 0.5, on the gini index, in which 0.0 would be perfect equality and 1.0 perfect inequality—i.e., a single person would have all the income, or all the wealth (for a clear account, see Inequality.org Staff. The Wikipedia articles on "List of Countries by Distribution of Wealth" and "List of Countries by Income Inequality" include charts ranking the countries of the world on inequality in income and wealth. See G. William Domhoff for an excellent overview and student resource).

***In fact, it would be interesting to teach about the rule of the upper class as owing in good measure to their generosity, not greed—to their giving away lots of money.***

Piles of individual wealth mass together, where the eccentricity of entrepreneurs and the upper-class chumminess of commercial bankers lose signs of the personal differences that generated them, and dissolve into the structure of capital. Learning about that would be an antidote to the implied theory that attributes success to individual greed and big profits to corporate greed. Critical understanding of capitalism can't rely on moral indignation. Greed is structural; it is produced by wealth, and vice versa.

In fact, it would be interesting to teach about the rule of the upper class as owing in good measure to their generosity, not greed—to their giving away lots of money. To be sure, students also need to appreciate how little it hurts the rich to give away millions. Mark Zuckerberg did not wince when he gave \$100 million to the Newark school system, in 2010. With a net worth of \$20 billion (much more, now), he could make gifts like that every year and not notice the hole in his pocket (Severns). Look behind a bare fact such as that Sheldon Adelson's net worth is \$35 billion, and see how painless it is for him to pay \$50 million, give or take a few, to oppose Obama's reelection; a similar amount to pay off a libel suit against an organization that said his casino in Macao was among other things a prostitution business; another fifty as a fine for money laundering; more than that to support Israel in various expensive ways; and so on. His wealth is around 10,000 times that of people toward the low end of the 1%, in whose company you can even find a few of the highest paid college professors.

The new billionaires have outrun the possibilities of luxury consumption. Recall Ken Lay's ten mansions and retreats, back in 2001, when the Enron scandal broke. Now, billionaires buy \$50 million penthouses as *pieds a terre* in Manhattan. Some buy personal, \$2 million submarines to add to their yacht collections. Space travel vacations, maybe immortality: it's fun to expose the follies of this new Gilded Age (ask students to check out the website Too Much for gaudy details as well as charts and figures). But the political point should not be the decadence or "greed" of the top few hundred families (not the 1% but more like the top 0.002 %), who have about as much wealth as the bottom half of the population taken together. The point

should be that the billionaires are pretty much driven into philanthropy, so-called. And that means using the social surplus—most of which is landing in their laps—to shape the future in ways that answer to their values and preferences.

Whether those preferences ostensibly serve the interests of all, or manipulatively advance the interests of the rich, including further accumulation and rule by their heirs and successors, may be a distinction without a difference. Kindly Bill and Melinda Gates may be trying to leave no child behind, while mean Charles and David Koch try to crush unions and immiserate working people, and while unphilanthropic, hyperactive Jeff Bezos, of Amazon.com, has to be "talked into" buying the *Washington Post* for \$250 million (Bercovici). Whatever their intentions and politics, activist philanthropists use piles of money to substitute their benevolent or scoundrelly wishes for the wishes of the 99%. For a critical example, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (bolstered now by a \$2.5 million gift from Warren Buffett, and working alongside the Broad, Walton family, and Lumina foundations) is now in effect the U. S. Department of Education, in collaboration with its nominal boss, Arne Duncan (see Layton, for a detailed story of how these agents came together to drive fast adoption of the Common Core State Standards). They drive social reproduction along its path to high stakes testing, teacher-blaming, school-closing, and privatization of the public school system. They say they focus on education, one of the "biggest barriers that prevent people from making the most of their lives," and aim to fund "new methods to help students and teachers in the classroom" (Gates). I say, along with most of you *Radical Teacher* readers, that they focus on education in order to help turn kids into the (highly unequal) groups of workers the corporate order needs, in order to privatize schooling and so enlarge profits, and in order to make class rule seem natural (see Severns for a look at the political work Zuckerberg's \$100 million gift has been doing). Good topic for discussion and research, right? Inequality kills democracy. One way the rich are different from us is in being able to do that—in fact, unable **not** to do it, because as Hemingway put it, they have more money (Barkan, 2011; Barkan 2013).

***The new billionaires have outrun the possibilities of luxury consumption. Recall Ken Lay's ten mansions and retreats, back in 2001, when the Enron scandal broke. Now, billionaires buy \$50 million penthouses as *pieds a terre* in Manhattan. Some buy personal, \$2 million submarines to add to their yacht collections. Space travel vacations, maybe immortality: it's fun to expose the follies of this new Gilded Age.***

Looking at riches from this angle takes us back to the truth that wealth and power are structural. And relational:

the rich and the rest are not in a kind of American dream relation, or the relation posited by trickle-down economics; they are structurally antagonistic. Being rich is not just being different from other people; it is being dominant over them. The rich rule. Hegemonic processes obscure that truth, as does the conception of society as a 1% plus a 99%, superior though that analysis is to the pure ideology that Occupy contested. Occupy and the rise of the billionaires have removed a taboo from talk about class warfare, previously dismissed as fretful disturbance of the peace by sourpuss intellectuals. Now, a well-known TV figure near the edge of the mainstream, Bill Moyers, can, at an annual awards dinner, give a talk entitled "The Great American Class War: Plutocracy Versus Democracy" (Moyers). Warren Buffet can say, as he has on CNN (and elsewhere, with slight variations), "There's been class warfare going on for the last 20 years, and my class has won" (Buffett). Most students have heard, and many have been stirred by, revivals of old political ideas such as class struggle.

Besides class war, the ones I have skimmed through in this survey include **capitalist accumulation, wealth and its upward redistribution, the bourgeoisie, its luxury consumption, its control of the social surplus, its role in social reproduction, its rule—including by hegemonic processes.** Few readers of *Radical Teacher* are in a position to make categories such as these the main units of college (let alone high school) courses. Certainly I was not: I would teach about these ideas chiefly as fictional texts supplied the motive for doing so. How can students adequately learn about *Pride and Prejudice*, *Hard Times*, *Howards End*, *Age of Innocence*, the *U.S.A.* trilogy, *The Great Gatsby*, or even *The Sun Also Rises*, without going deeper than the conversation of Fitzgerald and Hemingway, to analyses in the marxian tradition? And without linking them to the world we inhabit now? I think students after Occupy are in a better position to learn about these things—have a greater **need** to learn about them—than students 20 years ago.

#### References

Barkan, Joanne, "Got Dough? How Billionaires Rule our Schools," *Dissent*, Winter, 2011; and "Plutocrats at Work: How Big Philanthropy Undermines Democracy," *Dissent*, Fall, 2013.

Bercovici, Jeff, "Jeff Bezos: I Had to Be Talked into Buying the Washington Post," *Forbes*.  
[http://www.forbes.com/sites/jeffbercovici/2013/12/02/jeff-bezos-i-had-to-be-talked-into-buying-the-washington-post/?&\\_suid=140949802452702429791963659227](http://www.forbes.com/sites/jeffbercovici/2013/12/02/jeff-bezos-i-had-to-be-talked-into-buying-the-washington-post/?&_suid=140949802452702429791963659227).

Buffett, Warren, in a 9/30/2011 interview, quoted by Greg Sargent, "The Plum Line," *Washington Post*, 9/30/2011.  
[http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/plum-line/post/theres-been-class-warfare-for-the-last-20-years-and-my-class-has-won/2011/03/03/gIQApaFbAL\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/plum-line/post/theres-been-class-warfare-for-the-last-20-years-and-my-class-has-won/2011/03/03/gIQApaFbAL_blog.html).

de Blasio, Bill. See the transcript of his November, 2013 speech in The

New York Times.

[http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/06/nyregion/de-blasios-victory-speech.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/06/nyregion/de-blasios-victory-speech.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

Domhoff, G. William, "Wealth, Income, and Power."  
<http://www2.ucsc.edu/whorulesamerica/power/wealth.html>.

Eichler, Andrew, "Young People More Likely to Favor Socialism Than Capitalism," *The Huffington Post*, 12/29/11.  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/12/29/young-people-socialism\\_n\\_1175218.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/12/29/young-people-socialism_n_1175218.html).

Gates, Bill and Melinda, "Letter from Bill and Melinda Gates."  
<http://www.gatesfoundation.org/Who-We-Are/General-Information/Letter-from-Bill-and-Melinda-Gates>.

Inequality.org Staff, "U.S. Income Distribution: Just How Unequal?"  
<http://inequality.org/unequal-americas-income-distribution/>.

Layton, Lindsey, "How Bill Gates Pulled Off the Swift Common Core Revolution," *Washington Post*, 06/07/2014.  
[http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/how-bill-gates-pulled-off-the-swift-common-core-revolution/2014/06/07/a830e32e-ec34-11e3-9f5c-9075d5508f0a\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/how-bill-gates-pulled-off-the-swift-common-core-revolution/2014/06/07/a830e32e-ec34-11e3-9f5c-9075d5508f0a_story.html).

Moyers, Bill, "The Great American Class War: Plutocracy Versus Democracy."  
<http://billmoyers.com/2013/12/13/the-great-american-class-war-plutocracy-versus-democracy/>.

Ohmann, Richard, and Frinde Maher. "Introduction" to the Teaching About the Upper Class mini-cluster," *Radical Teacher* #85, Fall, 2009.

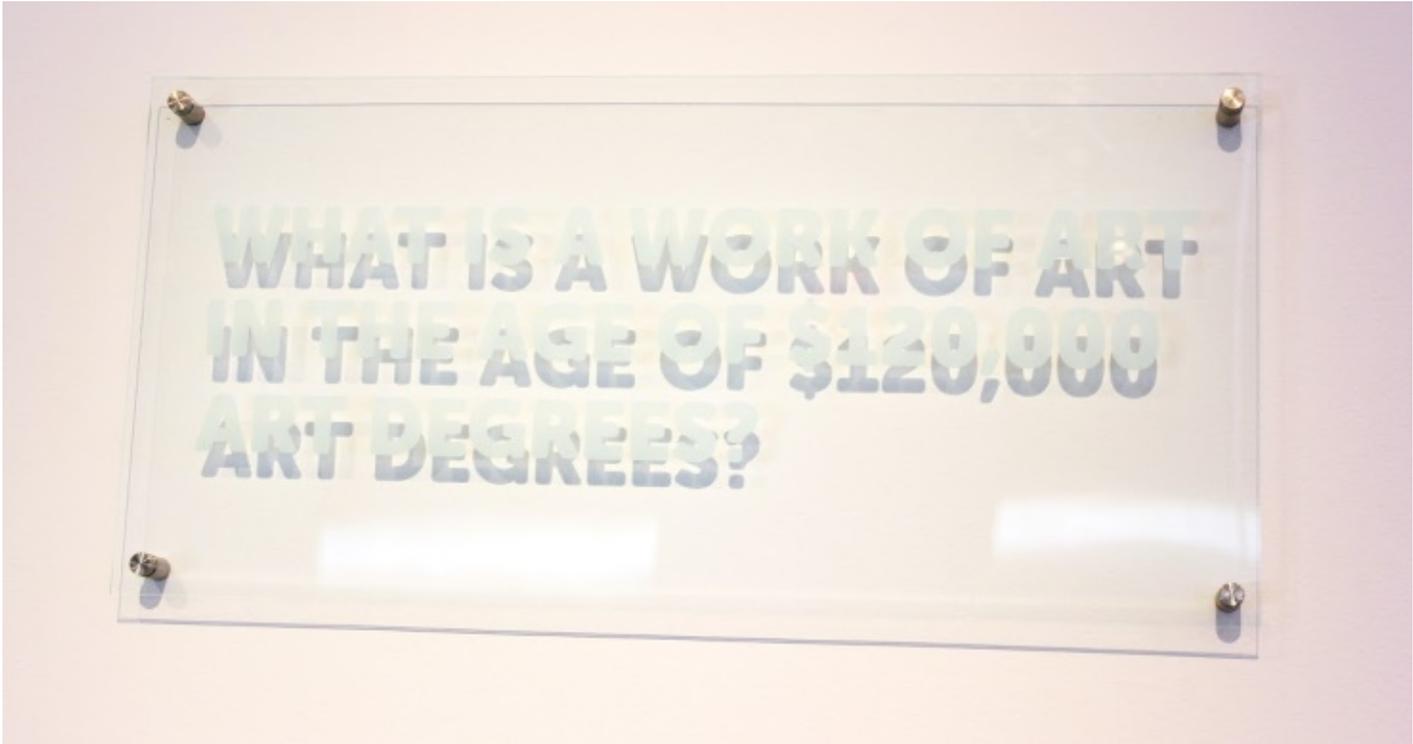
Severns, Maggie, "Whatever Happened to the \$100 Million Mark Zuckerberg Gave to the Newark Schools?"  
<http://www.motherjones.com/mojo/2013/03/zuckerberg-advocacy-group-100-million-donation-newark-schools>.

Strike Debt. <http://strikedebt.org/>.

Student Debt Crisis. <http://studentdebtcrisis.org/>.

Too Much: A Commentary on Excess and Inequality.  
<http://toomuchonline.org/>.

Zweigenhaft, Richie, "Teaching an Interdisciplinary Course on the American Upper Class," *Radical Teacher* #85, Fall, 2009.



"STATEMENTS"  
CAROLINE WOLLARD, WITH BFAMFAPHD



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://www.library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://www.dscribe.com/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.library.pitt.edu/).

# RADICAL TEACHER

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

“It’s Not Personal, It’s Business:  
or Teaching Structural Explanation ” (at an HBCU)

by Greg Meyerson



“PORTRAIT OF MAYA ANGELOU” BY SARAH CHAVARRIA

Needless to say, the dominant explanatory framework among our students generally is still individualism, and when it comes to their career trajectories, American dreams and equal opportunities predominate. Where I currently teach, the Historically Black University (HBCU) of civil rights fame North Carolina A and T University, it is more complicated. The common sense ideology of our HBCU combines bits of “radical” rhetoric of a nationalist character—from revolutionary, militant nationalism to Afrocentrism—with protest rhetoric from the civil rights tradition fond of citing Frederick Douglass on the relevance of struggle to change, and a stunningly naïve success rhetoric, that in isolation resembles undiluted American Dream talk. Many of my students (just like those at non HBCUs) think they will be, well, rich. A central characteristic of this HBCU common sense is then to combine incoherently (as ideology does) anti-establishment talk of structures and systems with “you can make it if you try” talk. What this means in practice is that class is actually collapsed into “race,” so that structures and systems amount to “the white power structure.” This “power structure” is not in the historical materialist sense a structure at all but a reification of a collective mind. My approach to teaching structure and system in this context requires the concept of forms of explanation in order to distinguish structural from individualist forms of explanation while allowing “racial categories” to be (momentarily) set aside—and thus to bring into view with maximum clarity the class structures and capitalist imperatives within which “race” and racism operate. Below, I share three instances of such practice.

Alan Garfinkel, in *Forms of Explanation*, offers a neat example of a structural explanation of a grade distribution. I have modified it for my own purposes.

There are 50 students in the class (we could make it one hundred in recognition of Occupy). The professor has imposed a severe curve on the distribution so that there can be 1 A, 5 Bs, 10 Cs, 20 Ds and 14 Fs. In the example, “Mary” gets the A. “She wrote an original and thoughtful final,” Garfinkel notes (Garfinkel, 41). But this would be inadequate as an answer to the question “Why did Mary get the only A?”

It is misleading because it might give the impression that writing a good final was sufficient to get the A. You could go down the list of 50 students, offering up properties of their papers that led to the evaluation. “If we take each person in the class and ask why that person got the grade he or she got, we have fifty answers to the question why Mary got an A, Bob got a B,” Greg and Marcial got Ds and Dick, or Richard, as the teacher would no doubt call him, unfortunately, received an F (Garfinkel, 43). But if we were trying to explain the distribution of grades, the answers to the fifty questions would have not just little to do but **absolutely nothing** to do with it. If there were no curve, the 50 reasons might carry explanatory weight. But here, it is the curve that explains the

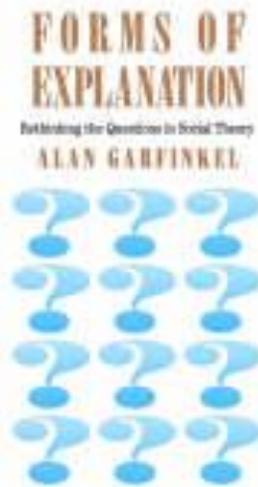
distribution. As you might imagine, I use this example to model crudely inequality in the global economy and so to make the point that the inequality cannot be explained by individual effort; that individualist explanations of inequality fail. And the explanation for the inequality must be structural.

The model allows a nice comparison between conservative, liberal and radical views of distribution. For conservatives, the distribution is as it should be. Insofar as there is in fact a curve imposed upon the distribution by the imperatives of a capitalist system, the conservative naturalizes the inequality. Liberals may very well want to eliminate the inequalities, but if our liberal fails to address the curve, for whatever reason, she will succeed only in moving around the inequalities, not eliminating them, whatever she may or may not want.

This particular version of the model leaves out sexism and racism. But a second version of the model incorporates racialized and gendered distribution effects, which would not change the distribution itself but would reshuffle (i.e.

“moving around the inequalities”) the names and identities so that a larger percentage of white men, for example, got the As and Bs. The first model where race and gender effects are abstracted out is crucial for understanding the precise role that racism and sexism play in reproducing class structures. The class structure generates the inequality. Racism and sexism distribute that inequality and legitimate it in order to facilitate social control and thus the reproduction of class rule. My more progressive students routinely use terms like “racial capitalism” or “structural racism,” without being clear on what precisely these terms mean.

It is crucial to show students that capitalism is fundamentally (“structurally”) unequal under any arrangement and this simple model accomplishes the task. It is only when they see that the inequality itself is a necessary product of the capitalist system that they can locate racism as ideology and social control and not something intrinsic to white people, for example, in the form of a fundamentally capitalist and racist psychology. Terms like “structural racism” and “racialized capitalism” can mean diametrically opposed things, even as both terms carry a radical penumbra associated with being “against the system.” One interpretation of the phrase can be historically materialist and another, for example, Afrocentrist, or some incoherent amalgam of the two, which reduces to some form of psychoanalysis or culturalism. I have an Afrocentric colleague who can view at once racial capitalism and white people as the problem since whites are in this view innately capitalist while blacks are innately anti-capitalist. And my student and friend (one of the two to whom this essay is dedicated) came to reject a Marxist Afrocentrism (in favor of a class analysis of racism) once he saw its faulty conflation of role and soul, individual and structure. **This simple example played a significant role in enabling this paradigm shift.** When Engels



says (or a close paraphrase) that capitalism does not solve its problems, but moves them around, think of the fundamental problem as exploitation and inequality. One central way capitalism moves the problem around is by racializing and gendering the inequality in order in effect to blame it on those it most oppresses—the better to exploit (and reproduce that exploitation) the working class as a whole.

Let us note that the model has many limitations. Here's one. The analogue to the ruling class here would be the professor imposing the curve. This is not a useful analogy although the disanalogies may be useful pedagogically. The professor could presumably eliminate the curve if she wanted and is herself not subject to it whereas the capitalist class, while they may rule, is subject to a system they cannot in fact fully control even as they make use of this uncontrollability—i.e. the phenomenon called disaster capitalism.

That the rich may not particularly like key elements of their system is indicated in my next example, from Michael Moss's discussion of the Food Giants in his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Salt, Sugar, Fat: How the Food Giants Hooked Us*. This is one of the best books for teaching both the limits of individualist explanations in their many guises and the power of structural explanations rooted in the contradictory imperatives of capital accumulation, all the more persuasive as it is written by someone who never articulates a sentence about capitalism.

The food giants make up an industry characterized by a fierce profit/competition imperative in a market with high sunk costs (asset inertia). This imperative determines Food Giant behavior, overriding or trumping any and all contradictory processes. One striking feature of this book is Moss's focus on the repeated failure of industry higher-ups of conscience, one section of "the rich," to change industry practice even though they know precisely what's going on. This is the case even in the instance where a Food Giant (Kraft) is persuaded by the arguments of said industry higher-up of conscience and attempts to make across the board changes in food production practice.

But the aforementioned structural imperative undermines efforts at regulation, especially and strikingly self-regulation. Kraft on the one hand genuinely wishes to address the obesity epidemic (I don't doubt their sincerity and I think it's important not to doubt their sincerity if we are to understand what's really happening here) and on the other hand must obey the competitive imperative if it is going to survive. In a nutshell, the dynamic goes like this: Kraft launched a set of anti-obesity initiatives only to face increased competition from their rivals. As Daryl Brewster,

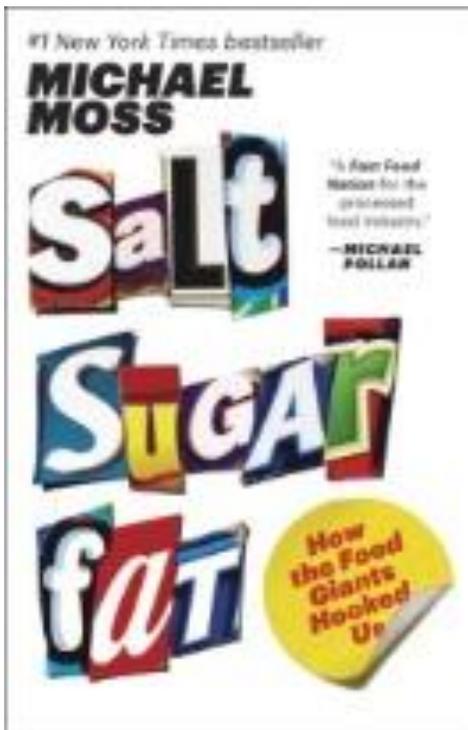
head of the Nabisco division, noted, when Hershey "came in attacking the cookie space with more indulgent products," we were put "in one of those interesting squeezes that big companies can find themselves in" (Moss, 260). Kraft responded domestically with a slew of fattier, sweeter cookies: Triple Double Oreo (also the name of an Olympic dive), the Banana Split Crème Oreo, the Oreo Fudge Sundae Crème, the Dairy Queen Blizzard Crème Oreo, the Oreo Golden Double Stuf, and culminating in the "Oreo Cakester" (Moss, 262).

Internationally, they expanded, especially in India, kicked off by a marketing campaign to teach "the country's population of 1.2 billion how to eat an Oreo properly" (Moss, 258). Half of their profits came from their global expansion.

This example points to the very important fact of variation in the industry. There are many individuals, even powerful ones, who work in industries like this who know what's going on and oppose it. That said, it's clear that the selective pressure of the capitalist imperative will weed out or co-opt some of this variation, that part that does not adequately serve the accumulation imperative. One of Moss's "good capitalists" is Jeffrey Dunn, former President and Chief Operating Officer for Coca Cola in North and South America. Well, long story short, he had his St. Paul moment in the Brazilian favelas where he saw the negative health impacts of his favorite product. What happened? This man, who in his rivalry with Pepsi said he "wanted to see a lot of bodybags," tried to make some changes, marketing the bottled water brand (in what is known as line extensions), but far more controversially, getting Coke out of the public schools (thus leaving the field to Pepsi.) The largest bottler of Coke asked "for Dunn's head" (Moss, 117). Dunn was fired.

Interestingly, Dunn decided to try his hand at good capitalist and head up a company that markets carrots as snack food. The idea is to use the techniques of Coca Cola on behalf of healthier products. He's found a niche market alongside and not in competition with the food giants. The good capitalist has not affected Food Giant hegemony.

Moss shows that self-regulation does not work and state regulation in the United States is constantly compromised by the power of the Food Giants. In his lengthy discussion of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and U. S. Department of Agriculture (U.S.D.A), he notes that the latter views itself as "a populist arm of the government." Abraham Lincoln, who created the department in 1862, called it "the People's Department" (Moss, 212). But Moss contends that "the People's Department of Lincoln's imaginings has long been



enmeshed in a conflict of interest that undermines its populist roots” (Moss, 213). So the U.S.D.A has a dual role to play—protecting the people’s health on the one hand and on the other placating and nurturing the “300 or so companies that form the \$1 trillion industry of food manufacturing” (Moss, 213). As we might expect, the two sides are not equal. It’s not that the health side (the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion) is merely public relations. The health advocates for the U.S.D.A are sincere and hard working. But “its lowly rank in the pecking order is not only reflected in its satellite office status” but “in the amount of money it’s allowed to spend in pursuit of healthier food: its annual budget clocking in at .0045 percent of the agency’s overall outlays of \$146 billion” (Moss, 214).

Moss’s solutions—education and regulation—to the problem make little sense, in fact contradicting his own evidence, even as they are the common sense and in fact the student’s common sense—a pragmatist version of problem solving (if there’s a problem, fix it) that is itself a form of individualist explanation. Moss notes that other nations like Finland and England have done a better job of regulation (against the Food Giants) than the United States. But he omits to ask why, leaving us to assume that countries just act like individuals writ large, and so system imperatives are once again hidden from view. The key question is “under what circumstances can state regulation trump the accumulation imperative?”

If you look at the history of corporations, there have been periods where they welcomed regulation because it was in their own interests. Complying with the regulations cost money that helped knock out the smaller competition (as with timber industries in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century). In the case of successful regulation:

- 1) the state entities must be strong enough, and the general tendency these days is to weaken them; and
- 2) you need a contradiction between the industry in question and, I would suggest, the system as a whole. I think this is what happened in case of tobacco in 1998 where Moss himself notes that the successful lawsuit against big tobacco brought “by more than 40 states” was necessitated by the fact that their “health care systems were buckling from having to cover the growing numbers of people made sick by smoking induced illnesses” (Moss, 247). In the case of Finland and England, the Food Giants are not based in these countries, and these countries as part of the worldwide competitive imperative need to defend their own accumulation imperatives against that of their rivals, and that will involve state regulation against the other guys. I should say that the education part of his solution is especially lame and comes down to “reading this book can make a difference.”

I have taught this book to undergraduates several times and, once it is pointed out, they do see the inconsistency between Moss’s (structural) diagnosis and his solutions.

My final example and in many ways the most topical turns to the financial crisis. This material, I should say, has not yet been yet taught in my classes. I am trying it out here first.

The left liberal view (and version of individualism) of the recent financial crisis is represented by a book like Matt Taibbi’s *Griftopia: Bubble Machines, Vampire Squids and the Long Con that is Breaking America*. Taibbi views what he calls “the grifter class” as responsible for the crisis. He sees elites of both major political parties as part of this class and views the Tea Party as the newest form of racism for dividing poor whites and blacks. Sounds pretty “structural” on the surface as it speaks forcefully of strategies of divide and conquer that have formed a central part of Marxian theories of racism but also liberal theories of racism (Frederick Douglass made the case against divide and conquer in eloquent ways without questioning capitalism).

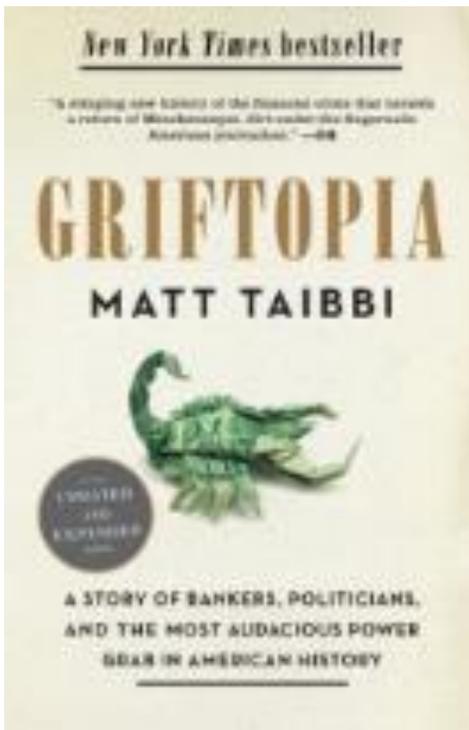
Yet Taibbi’s argument is not an argument about structural imperatives. The grifter class is not exactly the ruling class or if it is, it’s a ruling class gone bad, turned from its formerly productive and relatively equitable ways by “the bad rich,” represented by Alan Greenspan and Goldman Sachs, but especially the former.

For Taibbi, Greenspan is that “one-in-a-billion asshole” (“the biggest asshole in the universe”) who can single handedly make things way worse (Taibbi, 35). His ideology and practice is continually described as insane and greedy and Taibbi spends a fair number of pages doing a mini

biography to trace Greenspan’s relation to Ayn Rand and her ideas: the source of Greenspan’s world destroying one-in-a-billion assholitude. In short, Greenspan is “key to understanding this generation’s financial disaster”:

*He repeatedly used the financial might of the state to jet fuel the insanely regressive pyramid scheme of the bubble economy which like actual casinos proved to be a highly efficient method for converting the scattered savings of individual Schmuck-citizens into the concentrated holdings of a few private individuals. (Taibbi, 53)*

In short, Taibbi focuses on Goldman Sachs and Alan Greenspan (the bad rich) as representative of a group that in effect engineered a coup of sorts, a power grab, displacing productive (and relatively equitable) capitalism in favor of neoliberalism. A major assumption of this



model, note the similarity to Moss, is that inequality and lack of regulation both cause crisis (itself caused by “greed”), but that both can be remedied under capitalism if there is enough political will to do something like “take back our country.”

In essence, the left liberal argument is that there is good capitalism and bad capitalism, these capitalisms are distinct, and the good can be chosen over the bad or vice versa. Not surprisingly, with this kind of choice available, both good and bad capitalism can be represented by good and bad people who have good and bad policy flowing from their characters. Good policy is reduced inequality and greater regulation. Bad policy is more inequality and less regulation, a financialized economy, overreliance on debt, and bubbles.

***In essence, the left liberal argument is that there is good capitalism and bad capitalism, these capitalisms are distinct, and the good can be chosen over the bad or vice versa. Not surprisingly, with this kind of choice available, both good and bad capitalism can be represented by good and bad people who have good and bad policy flowing from their characters.***

The historical materialist view challenges all of these assumptions. Good and bad capitalism are dialectically related moments of a contradictory crisis ridden unity. Taking regulation first, the view offered here is that what we call neoliberalism, casino capitalism, financialized capitalism, etc. was not simply a policy choice which we could reject in favor of good capitalism, whether understood as productive capitalism, hi wage hi productivity capitalism, Keynesianism, return to the gold standard, whatever.

Neoliberalism was itself a response to prior system level contradictions. Capitalist ideology must, as Chris Harman notes in *Zombie Capitalism*, “pin the blame on something other than capitalism as such,” and must in effect “veer” from ideologies of free markets to state intervention back to deregulation and back again to state intervention.

The blowing of bubbles (whether the dot com or the housing bubble) was not simply a *choice* made by greedy capitalists (led by Alan Greenspan) to reproduce capital accumulation in unsustainable ways. Finance-led bubbles provided a profitable outlet for a productive economy that otherwise would have gone stagnant. Bubbles in other words were necessary even if themselves rooted in the contradictions which they tried to solve but could only defer. Harman notes that such bubbles (from the eighties on) were “central in ensuring markets that neither its (the supposedly productive economy) own investment nor what it paid its workers could provide”: without the ‘housing’ and ‘subprime’ mortgage bubble, there would have been very

little recovery from the recession of 2001-2 (Harman, 287).

Before ending, I do not want to give the impression that while regulation failed in the past, leading to deregulation, that the swing to regulation this time around will solve the problems. Focus on capitalist imperatives once again can help us. In his section of *Zombie Capitalism* called appropriately, “the system in a noose,” Chris Harman notes:

*The two long term tendencies pointed to by Marx—for the rate of profit to fall on the one hand and for the concentration and centralization of capital on the other—combine to put the whole system in a noose. The attempts of capitals and the states in which they are based to wriggle out of it can only increase the tensions between them—and the pain they inflict on those whose labour sustains them. (Harman, 303)*

The system is the key, so that, as Neil Davidson says, “[once] accumulation is engaged upon it is not a choice, rational or otherwise, because there are no alternatives, other than ceasing to be a capitalist: if this option is rejected, then capitalists are subject to a compulsion terrible, severe and inescapable.”

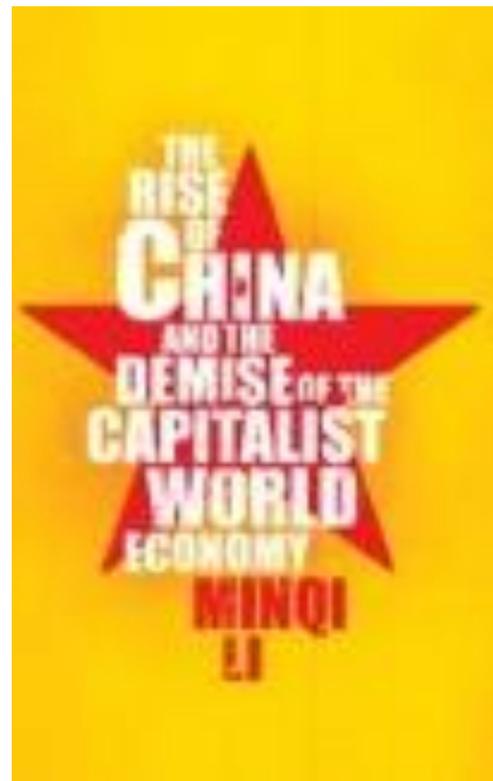
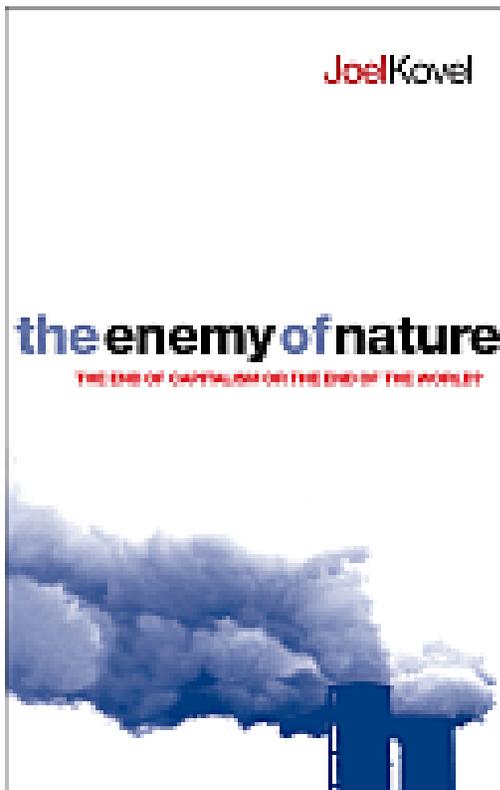
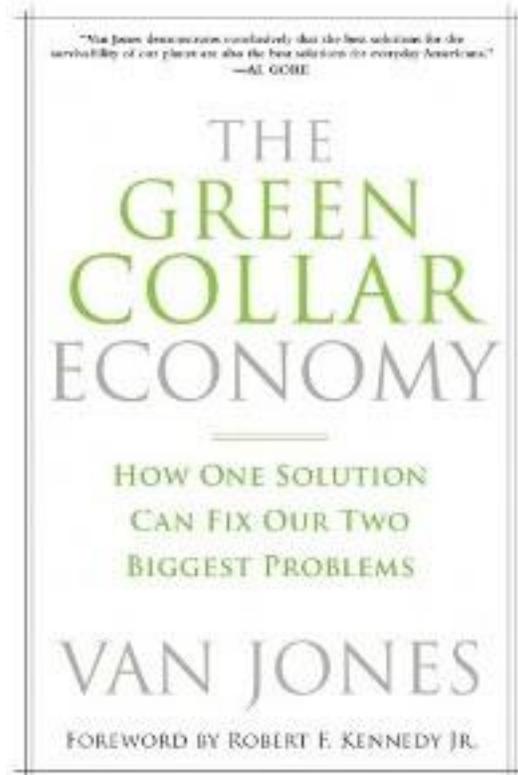
Once the structures and imperatives are brought clearly into view—revealing the errors of individualist “explanation,” racialized or not—racism must, as I’ve noted but it’s worth repeating, be brought back into the picture. This might require pointing out that the “pain” inflicted on labor continues to operate through a racialized and gendered division of labor in the service of class rule. Or, in the specific case of the latest financial crisis, how “the rich” fueled their speculation via a sub-prime crisis characterized by highly racialized marketing and then, in a specifically right wing discourse, managed to blame the whole thing on the nefarious forces (racial minorities plus liberal elites) that underlay the Community Reinvestment Act of 1977.

***Once the structures and imperatives are brought clearly into view—revealing the errors of individualist “explanation,” racialized or not—racism must, as I’ve noted but it’s worth repeating, be brought back into the picture.***

To conclude with a brief return to teaching practice, the material on the financial crisis could easily be integrated into a section in a critical theory course on crisis: though I would make this specific discussion of the financial crisis part of the larger question of capitalism, environmental racism and the ecological crisis (anthologies of critical theory now routinely include sections on eco-criticism). And I would be strongly inclined to pair liberal anti-racist analyses of the ecological crisis and environmental racism found in books like Van Jones’ *The Green Collar Economy* with Marxist treatments of the same

subject matter that reject the good capitalism/bad capitalism distinction underpinning Jones' efforts: books like Joel Kovel's *The Enemy of Nature* or Minqi Li's *The Rise of China: and the Demise of the Capitalist World Economy*.

Most of us are familiar with Gerald Graff's idea of "teaching the conflicts." It's an idea that I have benefited from as a teacher. But while Graff's idea assumes a detached point of view from which to observe the theoretical conflicts that are current or "live" in any discipline, radical teachers can and should go beyond tracking disciplinary debates and zoom in on theoretical conflicts that we ought to focus on, conflicts that need both theoretical and practical resolution. This essay, which argues for the superior explanatory power of structural explanations against various "individualist" rivals, suggests studying and teaching the conflicts that can most help us to understand a world in dire need of change.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



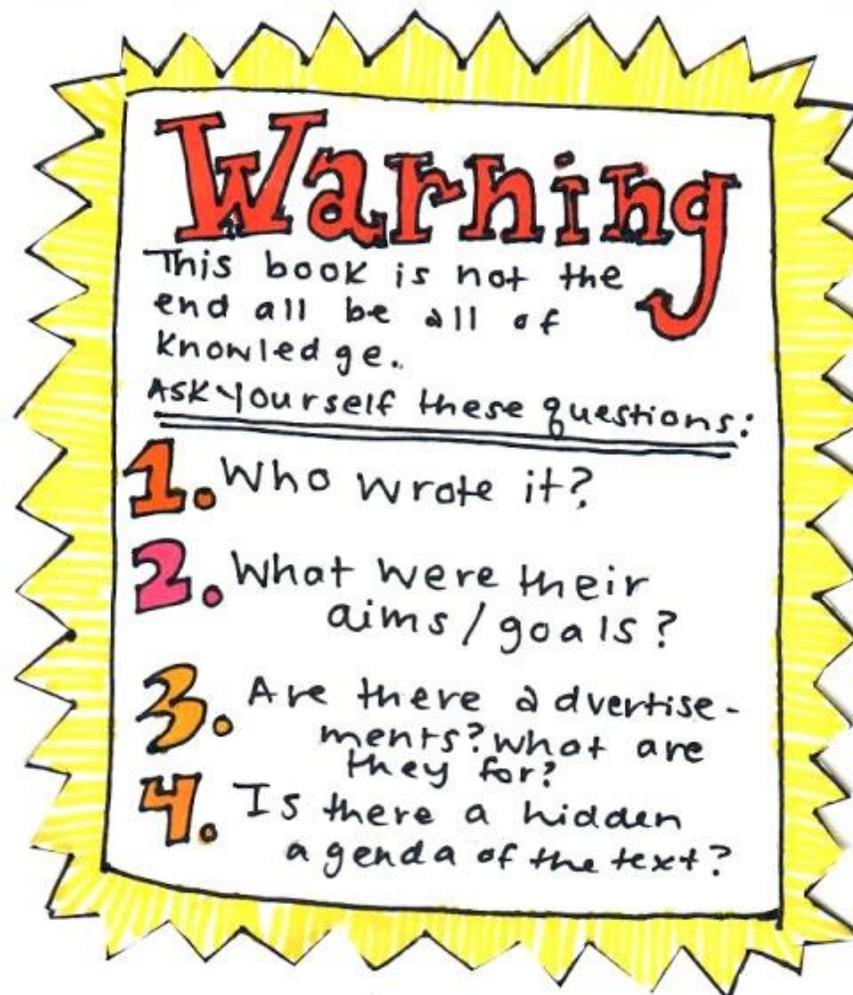
This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://www.library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://www.dscribe.com/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.pitt.edu/).

# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Where Do Social Inequalities Come From?: Class Divides in Chicana/o-Latina/o Literature

by Marcial González



"HIDDEN CURRICULUMS"  
BRITTANY SAUTA

There's no denying that the Occupy movement, aside from everything else it has accomplished since 2011, created ample opportunities in college classrooms for teaching about the super wealthy, or the 1%, and their role in reproducing social and economic inequalities in the United States and around the world. In my own courses, however, I have tried to emphasize to students that there is a marked difference between teaching about "the rich" and teaching about "class." The former implies a focus on the disparities between wealth and poverty; the latter, if conducted properly, affords the opportunity to investigate the structural causes of those disparities and their relation to class power. That is to say, whereas the former tends to be observational or empirical, the latter is potentially historical and critical. In what follows, I hope to explore, even if only briefly, the possibilities of developing a critical pedagogy based on a Marxist conception of class for the study of literature. About half way through the essay, I'll turn to a discussion of a specific literary work to link my theoretical claims and pedagogical practice. In suggesting some basic tenets of a critical Marxist pedagogy for the teaching of literature, I shall propose an approach that not only recognizes the inequalities that exist between people of different social class backgrounds, but one that poses and seeks to answer a question aimed at understanding structural causality: "Where do social inequalities and injustices come from?"

***For me, "teaching about class" to my students involves helping them to reflect on not only the differences between rich and poor, but the causes of social inequalities and injustices through the study of literary works about Chicana/o and Latina/o working-class characters.***

First, some background: I teach literature in the English Department at UC Berkeley and specialize in Chicana/o-Latina/o literature. As one might expect, issues such as racism, sexism and class oppression are robustly represented in many of the works I teach. Lately, my teaching has increasingly focused on works that depict the experiences of immigrant and migrant laborers, including such works as Helena María Viramontes' *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Elva Treviño Hart's *Barefoot Heart: Stories of a Migrant Child*, Tomás Rivera's *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*, Ramón Pérez's *Diary of an Undocumented Immigrant*, Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper*, and Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Devil's Highway*, among others.

Many of the students who enroll in my courses—and for that matter, a large percentage of students enrolled at Berkeley—are from affluent families, some of which are representative of "the 1%." But as a public institution, Berkeley has a student population that is actually fairly diverse in terms of class—at least in the humanities. In a recent survey of the English Department's 650 majors, 14% self-identified as "low income or poor," 25% as "working class," 37% as "middle class," and 23% as "upper middle class or wealthy." From what I can tell, my own

courses usually comprise a similar demographic breakdown.

***By historical materialism, I mean to convey generally the same definition that Engels assigned to this term in 1892 when he wrote that "historical materialism" designates "that view of the course of history, which seeks the ultimate cause and the great moving power of all important historic events in the economic development of society, in the changes in the modes of production and exchange, in the consequent division of society into distinct classes, and in the struggles of these classes against one another" (23).***

For me, "teaching about class" to my students involves helping them to reflect on not only the differences between rich and poor, but the causes of social inequalities and injustices through the study of literary works about Chicana/o and Latina/o working-class characters. One of my goals in the classroom is to help students recognize that class divisions and class antagonisms as represented in literature are not caused by "good" or "bad" individuals, but stem from the built-in structural contradictions of capitalism as a system. My aim is not merely to expose students to the realities of poverty and human suffering, important as this task might be, but to teach them to ask questions about the causes of these conditions. One of the most basic questions I pose to my students when studying literary representations of class is "Where do social inequalities and injustices come from?" To help my students answer this question, I employ a pedagogical approach that seeks to understand social inequality as a fundamental, necessary feature of capitalism, constituted by the labor-capital relation—that is to say, a pedagogical approach informed by the theories of historical materialism.

By historical materialism, I mean to convey generally the same definition that Engels assigned to this term in 1892 when he wrote that "historical materialism" designates "that view of the course of history, which seeks the ultimate cause and the great moving power of all important historic events in the economic development of society, in the changes in the modes of production and exchange, in the consequent division of society into distinct classes, and in the struggles of these classes against one another" (23). Specifically, as I hope to demonstrate below, I draw on three implications of Engels' definition of historical materialism that I find especially useful in the classroom: (1) it is not sufficient to recognize that social problems exist; one must also strive to comprehend the historical *causes* of those problems; (2) the cultural is never entirely independent of the economic; and (3) all social problems—and by extension, all cultural artifacts—

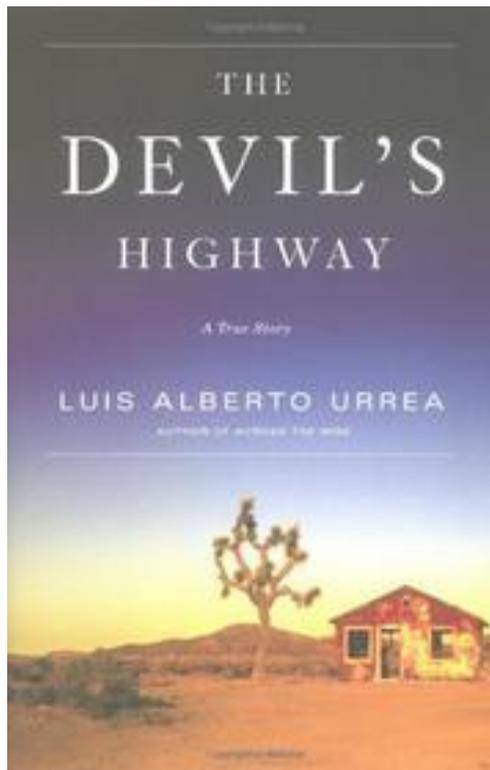
can be understood to one degree or another as expressions of class struggle.

I'm not exactly proposing a unique idea here; I'm suggesting, rather, the need to advance a critical approach that others have put into practice but that still remains underemployed and undervalued. This same suggestion has been made, for example, by Peter McLaren and Nathalia E. Jaramillo in an article entitled "Critical Pedagogy, Latino/a Education, and the Politics of Class Struggle" in which the authors argue that it is crucial to understand the differences between class struggle as a particular social form and other social antagonisms such as sexism and racism. But they also stress that these other social antagonisms are not entirely unrelated to class struggle either insofar as they emerge from and are made possible by the same political/economic/cultural system in which they exist. They play distinct but intricately interconnected roles in the consolidation of social class domination. Here, I share McLaren and Jaramillo's position that "class struggle is the specific antagonism, the generative matrix, that helps to structure and shape the particularities of the other antagonisms. It creates their conditions of possibility"(79). But likewise, the other antagonisms facilitate the operation of class exploitation and enable the consolidation of class power.

A few caveats: I don't believe a Marxist pedagogy is the only way to teach literature. When appropriate, I have employed other critical systems in the classroom, including psychoanalysis, feminism, structuralism, critical race theory, cultural critique, or a combination of these approaches. Nor am I arguing that a literary work needs to be Marxist for it to be considered a good work of literature. I hold rather that a literary critic gains advantages from a Marxist interpretive approach regardless of the political bent of the literary work. Similarly, when employing this approach, the value or merit of a literary work should not be judged by its political claims, but (at least in part) by its ability to give readers the opportunity to investigate the historical, material, and ideological conditions that made the work possible in the first place. Further, the study of literature to my mind would be lacking without proper attention to the formal or stylistic aspects of literary works (about which I'll say more below). I do believe, however, that form and style are always related in some way to a literary work's social content, and this relation might be even more relevant for literatures that offer sharp critiques of social conditions, as in Chicana/o and other minority literatures.

To ground the theoretical claims I am making, I'll now turn to a discussion of a specific literary work: Luis Alberto

Urrea's *The Devil's Highway: A True Story*. I taught this book recently and found that it lends itself to a historical materialist approach, even though it does not pose nor does it claim to answer the question, "Where do social inequalities and injustices come from?" *The Devil's Highway* is a work of literary non-fiction based on actual events. Written in a style that might be described as creative journalism, it details the experiences of the "Welton 26," a group of undocumented Mexican immigrants, all males, who enter the United States illegally on foot through the Arizona desert in May 2001. Of the twenty-six men, fourteen die, and the twelve that survive are on the verge of death when they are rescued by the border patrol. Welton, the namesake of the group, is a town in southern Arizona where the survivors were taken after their rescue, along with the deceased. Urrea documents the experiences of the twenty-six men beginning in their home villages prior to undertaking their journey and culminating in that treacherous stretch of desert in Arizona known as "The Devil's Highway"—a region described on the book's back cover as "so harsh and desolate that even the Border Patrol is afraid to travel through it."



A finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, *The Devil's Highway* is beautifully written and emotionally engaging. It's a great book to teach—both for what it says and what it leaves out. The graphic content of the narrative is tempered with seductive prose making the tragic experiences of the Welton 26 bearable to read. At one point, Urrea describes in gripping detail the five stages of hyperthermia, which trace the physiological changes the body undergoes as it slowly dies of thirst and dehydration. He also reveals in a kind of mocking realism aimed at exposing the desperation experienced by the border crossers that "sooner or later" they come to

the realization that "you have to drink your own urine. . . If you're really lucky, someone might piss in your mouth"(126).

The experiences of the Welton 26 and other border crossers help to explain, according to Urrea, why some of the border patrol agents have sometimes paid out of their own pockets to construct water stations and a signaling system that walkers can use to alert the "Migra" if they find themselves in need of rescue. Contrary to what readers might expect in a narrative that is sympathetic to the plight of border walkers, Urrea depicts the "Pinche Migra," often vilified by undocumented immigrants and pro-immigration activists, as sympathetic and benevolent. In effect, he humanizes the border patrol.

Urrea's treatment of the Migra is actually central to analyzing the issue of causality in *The Devil's Highway*. The narrative aims to make readers aware of the grave dangers

faced by undocumented immigrants who enter the United States through the desert, and the desperation that drives them to take such deadly risks, but it does not address the cause of the Welton 26 tragedy, nor does it point a finger at villains. In writing this kind of narrative, Urrea is reluctant to blame anyone for the death and suffering of the immigrants, and thus he remains elusive on the issue of causality. In a telling moment, Urrea speculates on the thoughts of the border crossers as they become increasingly desperate and afraid upon realizing that they are lost in the desert with a dwindling water supply and there is a good chance they will die. The immigrants (as ventriloquized through Urrea's consciousness) are trying to figure out who they should blame for this mess. "It was that goddamned Mendez [their guide]: no, it was this evil desert. No, it was the pinche Mexican government that picked the homeland apart, officials who got fat and rich while they starved. No, it was the Migra, it was the gringos, it was the U.S. government and its racist hatred of good Mexican workingmen just trying to feed their children! They themselves were the fools"(134). Urrea avoids asserting the cause of the tragedy by insinuating that everyone might be partly to blame, including the immigrants themselves. As Sandra Cox astutely observes, "One cannot, if one reads [*The Devil's Highway*] attentively, easily ascribe blame for the brutal conditions and eventual deaths that the migrants face to a single agent" (24).

In an effort to understand the significance of Urrea's silence on causality, I posed the question, "What kind of narrative is *The Devil's Highway*?" to my class of 30 students. The subsequent discussion shed light on the way narrative style can contribute to the ideological assumptions of a literary work. Some students described the book as journalistic, pointing out that its sub-title is "A True Story" and that the back cover categorizes it as "current events." They felt that Urrea's non-accusatory stance should be considered a positive quality of the narrative because it conveys a sense of fairness and neutrality. Others, however, argued that the narrator's non-committal vacillation can be read as problematic in falsely assuming the "objectivity" of a journalistic style. One student cited Cox, who states that *The Devil's Highway* is a "testimonial narrative," (10) even though a *testimonio* usually refers to a first-hand account of political struggles in which the speaker is a participant, which is not the case here. A few students argued that *The Devil's Highway* is written from the perspective of a sympathetic but nevertheless detached observer in the manner of ethnography, in which an author problematically attempts to speak for the subjects of a study. Further complicating the question of genre, Urrea (who is also a

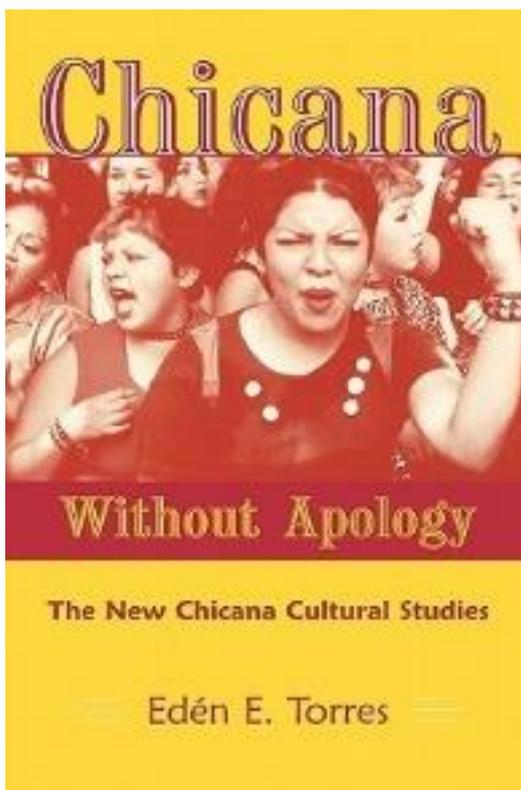
prolific novelist) narrates the story with the skill and habits of a fiction writer, often times employing free indirect discourse to imagine the conversations and feelings of characters. One of my students commented that Urrea's use of both a journalistic approach, which claims to represent the truth from an objective standpoint, and a fictional style, which takes liberties in imagining realities that may or may not be true, runs the risk of committing "ethical misrepresentations." Though not all students agreed with this claim, the general consensus was that *The Devil's Highway* employs a literary style that troublingly steers clear of asserting (or even speculating on) the causes of the tragedy it represents. The narrator seems to justify such a reading by claiming, somewhat scandalously, that "In the desert we are all illegal aliens," (120) as if to imply that a kind of equality exists when it comes to explaining the causes of suffering, exploitation, and death.

In the end, the story of the Welton 26 in *The Devil's Highway* is a tragedy for which no one is to blame: not the unscrupulous, greedy Coyotes; not the "good old boy" border patrol agents that Urrea befriends; not the indifferent U.S. or Mexican governments; and certainly not the capitalist system itself, strangely absent in Urrea's quasi-fictional journalistic account.

To be fair, Urrea does not claim to offer a political analysis of causality; his narrative can be characterized more accurately as a human interest story. Nevertheless, in teaching *The Devil's Highway*, I did not require tremendous effort in getting students to recognize the narrative's silence on causality. They tended to reach that conclusion on their own once I raised the topic for discussion. The greater challenge was getting them to analyze and verbalize the content of that silence while appreciating the book's literary

value. In an effort to undertake this challenge, I encouraged students to discuss the absence of causality in Urrea's account of the Welton 26 and to identify the structural aspects that he omits or only alludes to. I did this by involving students in an in-class exercise in which I asked them to write the sections of the story that Urrea has left out—to fill in the missing blanks, so to speak—and I instructed them to focus on the structural or political causes of this tragedy. I then reproduced their writings which I shared with the entire class for discussion at our next meeting.

Conducting this exercise required reading a good amount of secondary material beforehand and discussing it. We read, for example, chapters from Gilbert González's *Guest Workers or Colonized Labor?*; Justin Akers Chacón and Mike Davis's *No One is Illegal*; David Bacon's *Illegal*



*People*; and Mae Ngai's *Impossible Subjects*. In discussing this material, and in trying to arrive at an analytical consensus of causality in *The Devil's Highway*, students expressed no qualms about attempting a historical materialist literary critique, even though they didn't always agree with one another or with me in their specific readings of the text. One of my students, for example, wrote that "despite his silence on the issue of causality, Urrea writes in such a way that allows readers to indict the globalization of capitalism as the culprit responsible for the border policies that exist between the United States and Mexico." The same student argued that literature should be suggestive rather than assertive, and that Urrea's narrative accomplishes this task. By contrast, another student wrote that "Urrea frustrates his readers through his silence, mirroring the frustration that many people feel at the inaction on behalf of the government in response to tragedies," such as that of the Welton 26. She emphasized that, because of Urrea's silence, "we as readers are forced to bring our own sensibilities and analytical viewpoints to the narrative, thus rendering the government and the capitalist class at least partly to blame." Notwithstanding the differences of opinion, I was amazed at the ability of my students to think beyond immediacy, to link narrative style and political interpretation, and to strive toward a structural understanding of illegal immigration and the class implications of death in the desert. By the end of our class exercise, my students collectively produced the following two conclusions about *The Devil's Highway*:

(1) *Ultimately, the death of undocumented workers in The Devil's Highway was caused by the economic system of capitalism which needs cheap labor to satisfy the labor needs of industries such as agriculture, hotels, and food service, and to keep wages depressed in these and other industries. The workers were lured into the desert by the implied promise of a wage.*

(2) *Anti-immigrant ideology serves to blame undocumented immigrants for the depressed economy and other social ills, and it prevents some people from understanding the real causes of economic crisis, low wages, and unemployment. The story of ideology, however, remains untold in The Devil's Highway.*

Although I was pleased that my students were able to make these critical observations about *The Devil's Highway*, I could have done more, in retrospect, to help them formulate a sharper class analysis by exploring the issue of agency as it relates to structural causality. That is to say, the capitalist system is not agentless; it is not a machine that operates without machine operators. It is promoted and sustained by individual capitalists and corporations that together make up the ruling class, and the oppressive actions of those agents of capitalism are more often than not calculated and intentional. Recognizing this fact without giving ground to the analysis of structural causality is crucial for understanding the conditions that exist along the border for undocumented workers and for devising strategies to change those

conditions. Nevertheless, I felt that my students took a large step toward learning how to analyze literature from a historical materialist perspective, and hopefully they left my course with some basic critical tools that will enable them to continue doing this kind of work in the future.

***In Chicana Without Apology: The New Chicana Cultural Studies, Eden Torres argues that "those of us in the humanities," in addition to studying culture, must become "amateur economists." She gives this sound advice not to promote interdisciplinarity, in that crude academic sense, but because she believes we need to "pay attention to the implications of the widening gap between the rich and the poor . . . the disappearance of civil liberties . . . [and the constant] threat of war."***

Finally, in a book entitled *Chicana Without Apology: The New Chicana Cultural Studies*, (a section of which we also read for this course) Eden Torres argues that "those of us in the humanities," in addition to studying culture, must become "amateur economists." She gives this sound advice not to promote interdisciplinarity, in that crude academic sense, but because she believes we need to "pay attention to the implications of the widening gap between the rich and the poor . . . the disappearance of civil liberties . . . [and the constant] threat of war." She adds, "Whatever we write about, teach, analyze, or interpret . . . class analysis and the political economy must be the subtext" (59) of our work. Torres's bold historical materialist assertion reflects a position not taken nearly enough in U.S. literary and cultural studies these days, and it's a welcome breath of fresh air. I would simply add that those of us studying and teaching ethnic, feminist, anti-colonial, working-class literature must also consciously look for, detect, and analyze the ways that literary works open up avenues of inquiry into the issue of causality—even when those references are not fully formed, or are only alluded to in the various tropes of the literature. Ultimately, it's not enough to recognize that social inequalities and injustices exist. We must also engage students in asking (and seeking to find answers to) the question: Where do those inequalities and injustices come from? What is their cause?

#### Works Cited

1. Bacon, David. *Illegal People: How Globalization Creates Migration and Criminalizes Immigrants*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2008.
2. Chacón, Justin Akers and Mike Davis. *No One is Illegal: Fighting Racism and State Violence on the U.S.-Mexico Border*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2006.

3. Cox, Sandra. "Crossing the Divide: Geography, Subjectivity, and Transnationalism in Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Devil's Highway*." *Southwestern American Literature* (Sept 2012). 8-26.
4. Engels, Friedrich. *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. New York: International Publishers, 1972. Originally published in 1892.
5. González, Gilbert G. *Guest Workers or Colonized Labor?: Mexican Labor Migration to the United States*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006.
6. Ngai, Mae M. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004.
7. McLaren, Peter and Nathalia E. Jaramillo. "Critical Pedagogy, Latino/a Education, and the Politics of Class Struggle." *Cultural Studies* ↔ *Critical Methodologies* 6:1 (2006). 73-93.
8. Torres, Eden. *Chicana without Apology: The New Cultural Studies*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
9. Urrea, Luis Alberto. *The Devil's Highway: A True Story*. New York: Back Bay Books, 2004.
10. The survey on UC Berkeley student demographics was conducted in 2012 by UC Berkeley Cal Answers, and the results were published in a document entitled "English Undergraduate Major Demographic Summary," prepared in September 2013 by the University's Office of Equity and Inclusion.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://www.library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://www.library.pitt.edu/dscribe/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.library.pitt.edu/).

# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Introduction: Teaching Across Borders

by Linda Dittmar and Frinde Maher



ONE WORLD MANY PAPERS  
COURTESY OF JANE INGRAM ALLEN

Most of what we publish in *Radical Teacher* concerns teaching in the United States and speaks to the working lives of most of our readers and their students. However, articles about teaching in other countries have also occasionally appeared in our pages. These included pieces on teaching in Brazil, Kurdistan, Palestine, Israel, Mexico, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and more. These were all unsolicited submissions that reached us sporadically and got published over time. Even *Radical Teacher's* two clusters on "Globalism," one on "Post-colonialism," another on "Immigration," and two more on "Teaching in a Time of War," for all their geo-political and trans-national implications, did not feature centrally the challenges of teaching outside of one's familiar borders.

And yet several Board members and many other radical educators have taught in other countries over time, often in politically charged contexts of conflict and rapid social transformations. Of course the motives for these journeys always include a desire to both learn from and contribute to the countries that have hosted us. But we have other goals as well. Much of the information Americans hear at home about "us" and the rest of the world puts the United States at the epicenter of all important global anxieties and events. As internationalists, those of us who were born and brought up here seek to see both the United States from other vantage points and to see other societies and their problems from the inside out. We want to learn from progressive teachers and others about their concerns and their struggles, the local ones as well as the ones they see beyond their borders. We want to get outside the American bubble.

***Several Board members and many other radical educators have taught in other countries over time, often in politically charged contexts of conflict and rapid social transformations. Of course the motives for these journeys always include a desire to both learn from and contribute to the countries that have hosted us.***

Thus there is a need for multiple discussions around the challenges of teaching abroad. Beyond the far-flung teaching and lecturing sponsored by U.S. agencies such as the State Department's Fulbright Program, there are assorted other opportunities, including government-sponsored invitations by foreign institutions and the mushrooming of American universities' overseas extensions meant to serve local populations, perhaps most famously those in the Gulf States.

In tandem with this exporting of American (and Western) education is an opposite flow of faculty and teachers migrating transnationally into the United States and elsewhere. Unlike many Americans' short term "tours of duty" abroad, this migration is brokered individually, case by case, and tends to be less visible to American

hosts. It also tends to be longer term, sometimes permanent. As such, it involves a somewhat different set of bureaucratic, professional, emotional, and political commitments than the semester or program or year abroad that Americans undertake. Here too newcomers must learn to navigate the differences between "Us" and "Them," though this time with the "Them" being their American university counterparts.

***At issue is all that remains unspoken regarding our presence in that classroom in the first place: Why am I here? Whose interests are being served by my teaching? What use is this teaching to these students and/or to my host country? And conversely, in what ways is my teaching useless, disrespectful, and perhaps even deleterious from the host country's and/or students' point of view?***

Either way, teaching across borders is a sensitive matter. Beyond differences in language or curricula and other practicalities, it involves relations of hosts and guests, empathy and criticism, speaking up and keeping silent, coercion and freedom. It is hard to write candidly about this topic under all circumstances. Teaching outside one's own country is teaching outside one's comfort zone. Being an outsider throws the politics as well as content of teaching into high relief. Differences in assumptions and possibilities get accentuated and the political implications of what one does—or avoids doing—in the classroom rise to the surface. This is most obviously the case when a westerner teaches in less privileged contexts—in Myanmar, Pakistan, South Africa or India for example (all included in this cluster), but not only there. It could be France, Spain, Scotland, or Denmark, too.

At issue are not just the challenges of teaching in the midst of cultural and/or linguistic differences. At issue is all that remains unspoken regarding our presence in that classroom in the first place: Why am I here? Whose interests are being served by my teaching? What use is this teaching to these students and/or to my host country? And conversely, in what ways is my teaching useless, disrespectful, and perhaps even deleterious from the host country's and/or students' point of view? And finally, what is so "radical" about such teaching even if it occurs in countries ravaged by wars, marked by colonialism, suffering poverty, and scarred by human rights abuses?

The difficulty of these questions haunts this cluster of essays. When we Americans teach abroad we confront the power relations between ourselves (willy-nilly representing the American imperium) and "them" (country after country where we perform this representation), including the difficulty of what can and can't be said in our articles. It is easy, at least relatively, to critique our own institutions and conditions of learning, as we do in *Radical Teacher* even as we introduce alternatives; we do so at "home," on familiar

ground. Writing about such teaching from an outsider's perspective has one step on thin ice. One's best intentions may include unconscious disrespect and recoil, or they may be seen as such, as happened to one visiting American faculty who asked a Nepali Ph.D. candidate why he was researching Saul Bellow only to be told, "Why are you asking? Do you think we are not good enough to work on him?" Similar instances are found in the articles gathered here.

***Radical teachers, and others too, may also be faced with their host countries' institutional pressures to watch what they say politically, conform to local norms and customs, and be careful about getting ensnared in institutional struggles ranging from dress code to curricular priorities, from avoiding religious discussions to debates about "standards."***

When the contact is across disenfranchisements, the hegemonic power of the visiting outsider can be overwhelming, and all the more so when the outsider is American. This is not a matter of thin skin, whatever its color. The realities of U.S. imperialism, racism, and condescension are liable to taint any innocent exchange.

Issues of pedagogy also crop up across borders, including situations where Americans used to a collectivist approach to teaching "critical thinking" find themselves in classroom settings where traditional lectures are the predominant pedagogical mode and teachers are considered the ultimate and unquestioned authority. What happens when an American professor used to a more open-ended, skeptical way of teaching, tries to have students ask questions and even critique the teacher's authority—in China, for example, or Myanmar, or even France—only to find the students, quite appropriately for their norms, silent? "We want to know what you have to teach us," they might think. "You are here to teach us about our subject matter. Why have you come all this way just to ask us questions?" Radical teachers in particular may have a hard time shifting from collaborative teaching and learning to a more authoritarian "banking" model so often critiqued on these pages.

Radical teachers, and others too, may also be faced with their host countries' institutional pressures to watch what they say politically, conform to local norms and customs, and be careful about getting ensnared in institutional struggles ranging from dress code to curricular priorities, from avoiding religious discussions to debates about "standards." How does one respond to a colleague beleaguered by the emergence of "redundant" Women's Studies courses—"Women's Studies is not a discipline!"—or to the concern that GLBT's are "taking over" academia? Of course these are crossroads we face at home too, except that, away from home, one's visibility is magnified and the need to be accountable to one's sponsors is greater, be it

the U.S. grant that funds this teaching or the local institution that invites it.

In their various ways, the articles collected here all concern the tensions of the teacher's outsider position in countries where teaching is fissured and split between the severe imperatives of defining, shaping, or discovering and re-discovering their own cultural, political, and economic identities and, at the same time, doing so in conversation with an outside world. That conversation may feel at times like a catching up, but at times it may also feel like a pitched debate. Does one aspire to become "a world class university," or locate and disseminate aspects of indigenous culture hitherto ignored and demeaned by colonialism?

In many ways the situation of being a "radical teacher" abroad, or being a "radical teacher" from abroad teaching in the United States, makes such issues particularly visible. While these issues undergird all our efforts at teaching for social justice and democracy, we don't always notice them as sharply in our home settings. Investigating the history of racism, exposing the dynamics of class exploitation and income inequality, using literature to explore the lives of women and girls across the world—we teach such topics with relative freedom in our own classrooms and our own home institutions, even if under conditions of increasing marginality, institutional indifference, and declining job security. One way of thinking about the questions raised by the articles collected in this issue is to mine them for a deeper awareness of our own situations at home as well.

The articles gathered in this cluster represent teaching and working situations from a variety of places: Israel, India, Pakistan, South Africa and Myanmar, as well as one piece by a sociologist who teaches in the United States but was born and raised in India. The one set in South Africa focuses on educational consulting but raises many of the same issues as the others. Though many of the issues they explore overlap on ones familiar to all of us, they take on new dimensions with the locations and dislocations of teaching across borders.

***The articles gathered in this cluster represent teaching and working situations from a variety of places: Israel, India, Pakistan, South Africa and Myanmar, as well as one piece by a sociologist who teaches in the United States but was born and raised in India.***



COURTESY OF JANE INGRAM ALLEN



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://www.library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://www.library.pitt.edu/dscribe/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.library.pitt.edu/press/).

# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Speaking of Freedom: U.S. Multicultural Literature and Human Rights Talk In an Emerging Democracy

by Amy Levin



PHOTO BY LEONARD VOGT

It's 100 degrees Fahrenheit in Yangon (also known as Rangoon), and I am trying to explain to a student that when she analyzes irony in *Hamlet* for her MA thesis, she may want to consider politics and the ways in which Shakespeare commented both on Elizabethan England and the nature of power more generally. Ophelia doesn't even come up in the conversation. I pause for a moment to adjust the feeble fan near my desk, imagining a Danish winter. The parallels between the play and the political situation in my host country are glaringly obvious to me, with Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of a murdered leader, in place of the prince. Dare I say something? Is my student oblivious to this matter, or is she choosing to ignore it, knowing the fragility of human rights in the emerging democracy? Is she able to speak freely or speak of freedom?

I faced this dilemma with the first student I met in Myanmar,<sup>1</sup> and similar questions arose in the following weeks. Our conversations grew increasingly open, but even in anonymous course evaluations at the end of my stay, many students were indirect. One used the third person to describe the cultural estrangement between the United States and Myanmar: "Most of the students do not exactly



HAMLET AND OPHELIA LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

know about the literature in US. Thus, they want to explore more and more but some barriers and difficulties make them delay. They are very thirsty for knowledge, if the US helps them, they will be the best friends forever."

I encountered these students in February 2013, when I served as the first U. S. Fulbright scholar in a Myanmar public university in close to thirty years. The excitement and sense of privilege that accompanied the experience were tempered by anxiety that I might unintentionally jeopardize my students or the reception of future American scholars through my actions, speech, or appearance. Yet literature was chosen for my Myanmar venture because, according to the project overview I received, "American literature is not a sensitive subject with the Ministry of Education and thus a good area." This sentence was to haunt me almost daily. I was assigned to meet at least once with each of the 27 second-year MA students to talk about their theses, to facilitate a "train the trainer" workshop for up to 70 Yangon-area university faculty members, and to participate in events elsewhere, including a Muslim women's empowerment group that was interested in discussing lesbianism, among other topics.

Yet my primary activity was a workshop for close to 35 first-year MA students which met for six hours weekly.

I approached my work from a critical human rights perspective. I met Westerners everywhere who worked for international agencies, ranging from those protecting displaced persons to UN mine sweepers, from census advisors at glamorous cocktail receptions to Mennonite missionaries in an elegant restaurant. At functions for a visiting delegation of American academics, human rights workers jockeyed for attention. Women affiliated with NGOs to promote reproductive health haggled for jade in the market. I wondered whether the local economy would collapse if the human rights workers left, remembering Linda Polman's assertion in *The Crisis Caravan*<sup>2</sup> that some NGOs appear to exist primarily to perpetuate themselves. Without NGOs and foreign missions, translators, drivers, secretaries, and cooks would find themselves without work.

Human rights talk was pervasive among Westerners and often turned to aspects of Myanmar culture that were presented as "backward" or morally inferior as opposed to being results of a lack of resources.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the individuals from more developed nations often failed to distinguish between cultural differences that were the result of poverty and those that were consequences of political or religious oppression. While the circumstances were intertwined, these situations provoked me to think about human rights discourse, both in terms of the texts I was teaching as well as in terms of who speaks on this topic, for whom, and in what setting.



AUNG SAN SUU KYI LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

My experience learning and teaching in Myanmar also came at an important juncture in the opening of the country: Coke had only been reintroduced a month earlier. The quota for imported cars had been raised within the last year, so sparkling Chinese Cherys wove between rusted Toyota Corollas spewing fumes. The preferred currency was crisp one hundred dollar bills, and adjacent restaurants charged anywhere from \$5 to \$30 for similar meals. After student riots in the late 1980s, many undergraduate-serving institutions had been expelled from the capital. Yangon Technological University had only returned to its Soviet-built campus in the fall of 2012. Individuals my age reported breaks in their education when universities were shut for years. Americans had not been allowed on the campus of the University of Yangon until Obama's visit three months prior to my arrival.

In the month I visited, dramatic changes continued to occur. Desmond Tutu made an unexpected trip and delivered an address critical of Myanmar's human rights record, drawing parallels between South Africa's history and the lives of Myanmar citizens. His presence in the

country and ability to say what he did marked a major shift. Press freedom increased that month as well. The U.S. embassy informed me that journalists who were interested in my visit would not be welcome on campus. I made laborious plans to meet one reporter outside the university's gates so she could photograph me with the classroom building in the background. Yet on the appointed day, I was surprised to find that she had been admitted and waited for me in the building's entryway. While one faculty member appeared askance, the interview took place right there, and U.S. embassy staff declared this a first in recent history.

Experiences inside and outside the classroom yielded multiple opportunities to reflect on and theorize about the nature of global rights, marginalization, and reciprocity; I was able to compare how women in Myanmar and the United States respond to concerns relevant to disadvantaged populations, even as I confronted issues arising from post-colonialism and male privilege daily. Yet the most intriguing parts of the experience were the silences, evasions, and hesitations that constantly interrupted conversations about the opportunities for gaining civil rights in the shift toward democracy. Slowly, we were able to use literature to draw implicit parallels and to open conversations about "sensitive" topics so that in the end, the experience was transformative for all of us. Lena Khor refers to a human rights "regime," based on a Western essentialist view of human rights.<sup>4</sup> The discourse in my classroom was based on an assumption that the United States was not the world's exemplar in this area, even though on occasion students' questions cast me in the role of ambassador, as when they asked about jury trials. More significantly, texts which are not necessarily perceived as human rights works in the United States stimulated exchange in a situation that called for delicacy. With frequent opportunities for questions ranging from the pronunciation of unusual words to the weight of snow, from Valentine's Day rituals to political violence, students became more direct. In a course evaluation, one student wrote: "the instructor gave chances for students to question; we can dare to express our feelings."

While the stated purpose of the Fulbright program is people-to-people exchange, I could not escape the fact that lurking under our country's zeal for Myanmar are visions of huge untapped markets for goods and expertise as well as a cheap labor force eager to adopt English as the global language of business. In turn, a U. S. presence might create a more competitive market for imports from China and other areas in Asia. As a scholar engaged in a work of critical humanitarianism, familiar with works by such authors as Jack Donnelly, Michael Ignatieff, Anne Orford, Joseph Slaughter, Rory Stewart and Gerald Knaus,<sup>5</sup> I arrived eager to gain a complicated vision of Myanmar culture and not to create an intervention that placed me in the company of those whom Richard Falk describes as playing "the role of saviours of people trapped in barbaric circumstances."<sup>6</sup> Nor did I want to replicate for myself the experience of what Anthony Ogden refers to as the "colonial student," observing another culture from the comfortable "veranda" or "bubble" of the home culture.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, another irony of my work in Myanmar is that

I find myself speaking for others whom I would prefer to hear speaking for themselves, because the process for Myanmar citizens to obtain exit visas remains convoluted, incompletely documented, and at times mystifying. The greater openness in the country is new and remains tenuous; in another month, my students might find themselves grateful for their indirection with me.

I further hoped to present a nuanced portrait of the United States and not to subscribe to a simplistic vision of our country as the world's champion of democracy. I did not come to moralize and took seriously the Fulbright emphasis on exchange. The work plan I submitted was terse: "student workshops: introduction, one week on women writers, one week on African-American writers, one week on Native Americans and Latinos (combined)." These descriptions were tailored closely to what I had been asked to do, and I hoped to use the sessions with instructors to generate locally appropriate approaches to teaching the material. I was encouraged by my liaisons to establish the importance of a student-centered classroom and to promote critical thinking, which they claimed had been absent from Myanmar education for many years.

This placed me in a somewhat contradictory position. Attention to these qualities has improved my teaching over the years; at the same time, they may also be understood as Western constructions rather than universal truths about teaching. As much as I might focus on exchange, I could not deny that I was arriving as a consultant, which suggested that I had some form of expertise that those around me lacked. Consequently, I repeatedly found ways to reveal the contradictions or even to put into question my own authority. In class, I chose to balance a structure that was familiar to the students and faculty—the lecture—with group work and discussion. I also developed a situational definition of critical thinking, which simply involved asking students or teachers for their opinions. If I thought I heard a received opinion, I would inquire further, "do you really believe that," "what are the strengths and weaknesses of that argument," or "what would someone who objected to that say?" The latter strategy was most successful because it encouraged my listeners to take diverse perspectives without asking them to put themselves on the line. In a culture where students' favorite question was "is that right," this approach also shifted the focus toward an appreciation for a variety of opinions.

***These pedagogies were novel to my students. They rose and greeted me on my arrival; someone raced to erase the whiteboard; and another student would rush to replace or refill markers that dried out almost instantly in the heat.***

These pedagogies were novel to my students. They rose and greeted me on my arrival; someone raced to erase the whiteboard; and another student would rush to replace or refill markers that dried out almost instantly in the heat. Students would bring me jasmine garlands in the

morning after they learned what a novelty they were to me. Classroom technology was superior to what I have at home, and students helped with that, too. Nevertheless, my efforts to instigate dialogue were often disrupted by group recitals of canned answers from adjoining classrooms. Students were accustomed to rote learning and memorization. These techniques were the norm, possibly because most faculty members had never been exposed to native English speakers and dared not move beyond a limited vocabulary. Consequently, it was virtually impossible to obtain participation at first. One Westerner who tried to teach in Myanmar found himself asking "If anyone is alive here, can you please raise your hand," because the silence was so profound.<sup>8</sup> When I called on someone, I evoked blushes. A student pulled out a phone, and when I tried to stop her, she indicated that she was looking up a word in her dictionary. I waited. I reminded the class that conversation was welcome and that there were no wrong answers. Individuals shifted in their seats. Finally, one brave person tried to answer, giggling and checking with her friend in the next seat. I applauded her answer. Smiles. Slowly, we developed a plan: if I were willing to let students consult with each other, they would try their answers on the class next. Patiently, we worked from the buddy system thereafter, though as the weeks passed, students increasingly ventured answers on their own. Realizing that it took courage to speak spontaneously about new concepts and in a foreign language, I praised participation extensively. In an evaluation, a student commented, "The instructor's welcoming attitude to questions, discussions and interruptions makes this class a good one. Moreover, the appreciation and praise by the instructor to any students who have participated in activities is also one of the best features of the class."

The first time we divided into groups, silence mingled with bewilderment: what exactly *were* they supposed to do? As I explained how they could come up with answers collaboratively, the students relaxed visibly, feeling less responsibility to be correct. I circulated, playing devil's advocate. When the groups reported back, their responses often reflected deep insights about the texts, although group reporters continued to hesitate when speaking. But by the last week, groups exploded with energy and laughter; students had already gathered to analyze texts when I returned from lunch. If my asides and indirect remarks provided opportunities to raise difficult topics that might be discussed after I left the room, groups provided safety in numbers, a "stress free" environment, as one student put it.

***I made jokes about their "strange" or "clumsy" American professor to put into question the cultural and professional authority vested in me by their faculty and the Ministry of Education.***

The contents of the workshop were new and difficult for the students as well. The 1988 crackdown that closed Myanmar occurred as the canon wars were being fought,

so the curriculum, which is set nationally by the English Department at Yangon University, exemplified what ours might resemble without greater acceptance of literature by women and minorities. To expand students' knowledge of U. S. writing, I therefore concentrated primarily on this literature. Texts were selected from those I teach at home and were discussed with predominantly female<sup>9</sup> groups representing many religious and ethnic populations. I hoped to use the "not sensitive" aspects of the discipline, such as a focus on the theme of adolescence, to move beyond an evolutionary discourse of unimpeded American progress toward greatness. To reverse the power imbalance which would establish me as sole expert, I also frequently asked students about parallels to their country. I made jokes about their "strange" or "clumsy" American professor to put into question the cultural and professional authority vested in me by their faculty and the Ministry of Education. Students frequently asked how I felt about my visits to tourist sites, new foods, and encounters with their fellow citizens. These questions provided multiple opportunities for me to respond with humor aimed at myself—how I had unwittingly committed sacrilege at a temple, how I mistook a karaoke bar for a temple, and how I simply couldn't fasten a sarong so it would stay up. At first, students laughed nervously or looked at each other in discomfort—and I recognized why they did so—but eventually they understood the destabilizing effect of humor and its role in creating a welcoming environment. To quote one evaluation, "The instructor plays actively and encourages student's participation." Ultimately, we were able to talk more as peers, with students explaining, for example, why certain suggestions for a thesis might be unacceptable to their faculty, either because they deviated from the standard format or brought in unfamiliar authors and texts.

To increase dialogue, I also focused on two themes: who or what is an American and becoming an adult. The first theme addressed the purpose of my visit, and the latter provided an avenue to comprehension by asserting commonalities even as we questioned our differences. After an introductory meeting, sessions centered on short works by white women, African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and recent immigrants. At home, I avoid isolating ethnic and racial groups (and I did speak about overlapping forms of difference as well as hierarchies of oppression), but in Myanmar this structure enabled me to provide background on each population, admittedly superficial. I began each section with a short lecture and slide show on the history of the minority group, listing key dates, authors, and supplemental texts on the board. The necessity for this approach became evident when I presented slavery and slave narratives as a genre; several students displayed uncertainty about whether slavery still exists in the United States. One pupil remarked, "By categorizing topics and the texts, it is easy to understand their social, historical, cultural background," although I remained uncomfortable about the way in which I had to generalize and summarize.

Sessions on white women writers were introduced with information on the distinction between sex and gender as well as the three waves of feminism. I compared the

differences in performances of masculinity and femininity in our two countries, pointing out that in the United States men rarely wear sarongs, but shoveling snow might be considered a sign of manly strength. When I explained how some might go so far as to shovel even when a snow blower was available (another term I had to explain), students laughed, recognizing the ways gender roles may involve some vanity. We also shared the experience of seeing women take primary responsibility for feeding their families and providing health care to them.

I introduced Adrienne Rich's poem "Power" to discuss a certain feminist moment and the ways female artistry has been perceived as both creative and self-destructive. I asked about power more generally, and whether it could hurt those who sought it. The students claimed not to understand this notion at all. I did not have the courage to mention Aung San Suu Kyi at this early point in the class (though I was to do so later), but I engaged in a practice I was to adopt frequently, in which I would say something like: "Maybe you, too, know of a situation like this." Often students paused or looked meaningfully at each other without saying anything, engaging in a wordless but significant conversation that frustrated me at first. In this situation, as I described how a woman who expressed strong ideas in the public arena might be punished, the nodding was evident. At the end of the session, I asked students to write short summaries of what they had learned to check whether my presentation had been clear to them. The summaries were anonymous, and the silence regarding political issues was broken: "I've learned to see another point of view on the word, 'feminism'," "among the three waves, I totally agree with the third wave," and "women should have the same chance[s] as men and they shouldn't be discriminated against." Another addressed the poem about female strength: in her written summary of the day, a student commented, "I came to understand the deep meaning of the poem named 'Power.'"

Our next selection, "Old Woman Magoun" by Mary Wilkins Freeman, presented the effects of powerlessness and related it to sexual trafficking. U.S. students are generally attracted to the way it resembles a children's fable, even as they are shocked by the ending: how could a doting grandmother allow a young girl to eat poison in order to protect her from being traded in payment for her father's gambling debt? The day before I taught this story I participated in a panel on slavery and human trafficking at the American Center, a library and cultural complex operated by the U. S. State Department, and the event remained on my mind. Thus when students grappled with Old Woman Magoun's actions, I inquired whether the plot reminded them of contemporary issues in Myanmar. At first, the students were shocked by Old Woman Magoun's desperate remedies and found nothing sympathetic about her behavior. However, I kept asking questions about the situation and parallel ones the students might encounter. The notion of marriage to please family came up, and I mentioned that students at the American Center the previous day had talked about sex trafficking, particularly

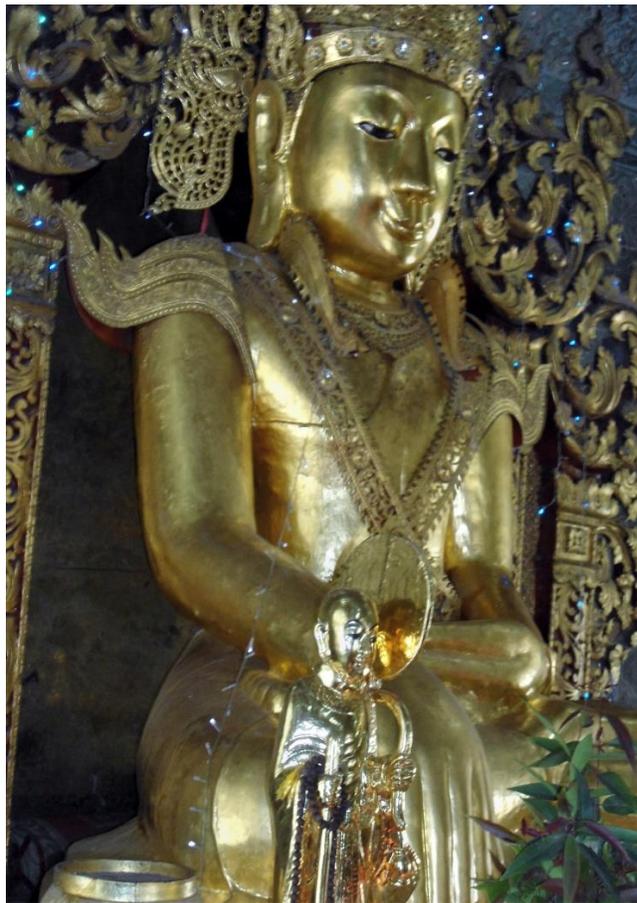


PHOTO BY LEONARD VOGT

for individuals who went to Thailand without a visa. This generated head nodding. We sidled up to this theme and did not spend a great deal of time on it. I had yet to discover the boundaries of students' comfort zones, and I wasn't sure how far I could go in discussing sexuality or gender politics. I envisioned the police car perpetually stationed at the American Center entrance and remembered that speech was often carefully monitored.

In other conversations, speech flowed freely, particularly when students asked about U.S. culture and politics. A session on Susan Glaspell's play *Trifles* epitomized a frequent occurrence: a well-planned session hijacked by a series of questions that revealed the need for additional background. In this case, when I mentioned that the short story version of the play is titled "A Jury of Her Peers," I was asked what a jury was, how jurors are selected, and how a trial in the United States might proceed. Students were particularly intrigued by the notion of ordinary citizens being selected for juries. As I explained, Anne Stock, Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs, entered with an entourage from the embassy—even though I hadn't planned it, if someone had asked me to show the political benefits of Fulbright grants in democratizing other nations, I could not have chosen a better moment. A similar lesson occurred when I talked about African-American urban housing since the 1960s, in the context of Gwendolyn Brooks' *In the Mecca*. In response to questions, I explained about segregated housing as well as the benefits and limits of Fair Housing legislation. This topic was new and intriguing

to students, who appreciated the irony that the run-down site was named after a Muslim holy place.<sup>10</sup> They asked questions about how a landlord could be prevented from discriminating and how penalties could be enforced. In turn, I told them a story about a landlord I once reported because she refused to show the apartment I was vacating to two males of Middle Eastern descent. They asked how I knew it (I saw her turning them away and she later made a bigoted comment about them to me). Wasn't I afraid to turn her in?

Themes of cultural exclusion and deprivation merged with concerns of young adulthood when we turned to discuss a pairing of Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl" and Amy Tan's "Fish Cheeks." Students referred to grandparents whose habits and foods discomfited them. I asked why the mother in the first work and the girl in the second wanted to assimilate into the dominant society, and I encouraged students to explore the advantages and disadvantages of this desire. What was gained? What was lost? What cultural conditions make people desperate to fit in? These questions arose again, and conversation grew spirited after I screened a film of Alice Walker's "Everyday Use," which was an assigned reading. We shared insights about migration from small towns and attitudes toward assimilation, modernity, and heritage. Students could understand both sisters' perspectives. The younger sister appealed to them because they had been taught to revere their elders, but they also understood why the older sister expressed scorn for tradition, because many of them had left villages to come to university, clutched cell phones, and sported stylish clothes when they were not required to wear uniforms.

As a museum studies scholar, I focused particularly on the quilts and wooden dasher in the story as emblems of tradition. Myanmar attitudes toward heritage are mixed—major tourist sites such as Shwedagon, the golden temple, are impeccably maintained. In contrast, the National Museum is in ill-repair, its priceless collections deteriorating due to minimal conservation measures. Members of oppressed groups and inhabitants of refugee camps face limited opportunities for cultural preservation. I therefore turned Walker's story on its head and asked whether the elder sister was entirely wrong in wanting to preserve items related to her heritage, as well as the extent to which what counts as heritage is a social construction. Students engaged actively with these topics and several referred to their experiences with temples and museums.

Literature by Latinos added a twist to the theme of cultural difference: living between two languages. I included Pat Mora's poem "Sonrisas." Mora's poem contrasts two worlds within a school—one white and bland, and the other Latino and colorful. Many words in the English version of the poem remain in Spanish, estranging those who speak only English. The informal writing prompt that day asked students to describe their morning, adopting words in Myanmar when they were unfamiliar with the English equivalents. Students commented that this activity led them to realize how many vocabulary words they still had to look up and the extent to which this curbed their communication. This assignment also yielded

discussion on what is lost when a culture's language becomes second to that of a dominant nation. The descriptions of students' mornings also taught me a great deal about their daily lives: exhaustion after staying up late to complete homework, helping family members, and, in some cases, tutoring others; a lack of privacy and quiet at home for studying; parents who insisted they sit down for a morning meal; and the difficulties of traffic in downtown Yangon. I had noticed that students were frequently late and no one seemed to mind. As students described lengthy commutes on crowded buses that often zoomed by without collecting passengers, long walks, and precarious motorbikes, I understood why it would be unreasonable to set rigid rules regarding punctuality.

We continued to explore the difficulties of living between cultures after the introduction to Native American works. I presented two women who struggled with acculturation. The women's stories led to Western colonialism and its effects on indigenous peoples. We were well into our month together, so I felt comfortable mentioning Myanmar's colonial past. One of the few times I heard a direct allusion to contemporary circumstances in Myanmar occurred when I brought up reservations, at which point one student cautiously noted that she had "heard" of Muslim camps in Rakhine state, and others nodded solemnly.<sup>11</sup> My effort to introduce literary theory into this discussion was not successful: I brought Paula Gunn Allen's "Kochinnenako in Academe" to contrast white, feminist, and native perspectives, but the theoretical language proved too challenging for the students.

### ***Literature by Latinos added a twist to the theme of cultural difference: living between two languages.***

We also explored Joy Harjo's poem, "Perhaps the World Ends Here." Harjo focuses on the kitchen table and its centrality to the family and its culture. I asked students where their relatives gathered. As we converged on the topic of family conversations, I deliberately joked about how the students might find it strange that until recently, they were discouraged from having contact with U.S. culture, and suddenly, parents and faculty expected them to respect and listen to an American professor. This yielded considerable head nodding and a couple of stories. The cultural norm of respect for one's elders and teachers had not been altered, but many of those elders displayed changed attitudes to the presence of Americans.

Buddhist practice arose the final week, when we studied writings by recent U.S. immigrants as well as Asian Americans. Students explained allusions in Jane Hirshfield's poem, "Green-Striped Melons," including images of reincarnation and other Buddhist beliefs. Although I often took on the role of learner when we compared cultures, this activity dramatically reversed the classroom hierarchy, as I developed a more nuanced comprehension of a poem I had not particularly enjoyed before. Linguistic issues, pedagogy, and content came together in these discussions, as I realized how far we had moved from the stiffness and

formality of the earliest days, students' discomfort with sharing ideas, and their timidity about speaking in English.

Cultural differences reappeared on the final day. Several students came during my office hour for help with an essay they were assigned by another professor. We had recently read a poem by Rafael Campo, whose parents were refugees from Communist Cuba. The professor made a valiant effort to include this work, which was new to her, too, in the assignment, but as so often happened, some cultural significance was lost in "translation"—she asked the class to write an analysis of the poem using Marxist theory. I took a deep breath, imagined Campo's anti-Communist relatives' reactions to this assignment, reminded myself that I couldn't be critical of the Myanmar faculty member, and asked the students what they would do. By then, they were sufficiently accustomed to my methods that they were able to summarize for me their teacher's definition of Marxist theory, and we were then able to address images of oppression in the work. Even so, the students struggled, so I indicated that they would still be demonstrating their knowledge of the theory if their analysis showed how the poem failed to fulfill Marxist tenets.

Addressing cultural differences was equally important in analyzing our closing text, Naomi Shihab Nye's poem "Arabic." The speaker has returned to visit Jordan and engages in a conversation with a local who argues, "Until you speak Arabic, you cannot understand pain." My writing prompt began with the expression, "Until you speak Myanmar [language], you will not understand," and I asked students to complete the thought. Many included aspects of Myanmar culture such as food—*mohinga* (fish soup) or pickled tea leaves (a delicacy I never could savor). Others stuck with language and terms I did not know. Yet I was stunned by responses that referred to deeper topics, and most of all, by this sentence: "Until you speak Myanmar, you will not understand freedom." And the author was right. After my departure, many students "friended" me on Facebook. When one posted a photo of herself with some classmates taken shortly before my arrival, I teased, "You looked so innocent before you met me!" Her rejoinder captured the continuing uncertainty of political change in the nation as well as other aspects of our dialogue: "Yes, we've become artful since you left."

## Notes

- 1 Naming the nation creates a dilemma. The U. S. government refers to the nation as Burma, while the citizens of the country generally refer to it as Myanmar. However, since the latter name is linked to the junta that ruled the country for decades, some locals also prefer the name Burma.
- 2 Linda Polman, *The Crisis Caravan: What's Wrong with Humanitarian Aid?* (New York: Picador, 2010), 48-62.
- 3 For a description of such behavior among NGO workers in Africa, see Maria Ericksson Baaz, *The Paternalism of Partnership: A Postcolonial Reading of Identity in Development Aid* (London: Zed Books, 2005).
- 4 Lina Khor, *Human Rights Discourse in a Global Network: Books Beyond Borders* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013).
- 5 Jack Donnelly, "The Relative Universality of Human Rights," *Human Rights Quarterly* 29. 2 (May, 2007): 281-306; Michael Ignatieff, "The Attack on Human Rights," *Foreign Affairs* 80. 6 (Nov.-Dec. 2001): 102-116; Anne Orford, *Reading Humanitarian Intervention: Human Rights and the Use of Force in International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003); Joseph R. Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York: Fordham UP, 2007); Rory Stewart and Gerald Knaus, *Can Intervention Work?* (New York: W. W. Norton), 2011.
- 6 Richard Falk, "Humanitarian Intervention: Elite and Critical Perspectives," *Global Dialogue* 7. 1-2 (Spring 2005). Accessed at <http://worlddialogue.org/content.php?id=329>. 24 June 2014.
- 7 Anthony Ogden, "The View from the Veranda: Understanding Today's Colonial Student," *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* LXIV (Winter 2007-2008): 35-56.
- 8 Lara Farrar, "Myanmar Moves to Rebuild Its Universities, With US Help," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 18 March 2013. <http://chronicle.com/article/Myanmar-Takes-Steps-to-Rebuild/137943/>.
- 9 According to the faculty members with whom I worked, English is a feminized discipline in Myanmar universities. At the graduate level, English is mostly taught and studied by women.
  - 10 On my return, mention of this discussion in a university press release led to praise from John Trasviña, Assistant Secretary for Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity U. S. Department of Housing & Urban Development, who is a proponent of social equality.
  - 11 Most of the camps in Rakhine state are occupied by members of the Rohingya ethnic minority.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://www.library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://www.library.pitt.edu/dscribe/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.library.pitt.edu/).

# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Critical Thinking for the Modern Muslim Woman Psychology Student: A Summer in Islamabad

by Justin Podur



## A teacher's Point of View

"Sir, should we apply critical thinking to all areas of our lives, including our faith?" The young woman in full niqab asks me this question as we sit around a small table: a couple of professors from the women's campus of the International Islamic University - Islamabad (IIU-I), a number of women students who are considering taking two short summer courses with foreign professors, our host, Junaid Ahmad, now a professor at Lehigh University of Management Services (LUMS), me, and the other visiting professor, Robert Jensen from University of Texas - Austin's Journalism School.

It's 2008, and while I was expecting this type of question to come up at some point, given that I was asked to teach a course on Critical Thinking at the Islamic University, in Islamabad, in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, I wasn't expecting it to be the very first question at a preliminary meeting before my course even met.

"In the course," I start carefully, "I'll talk about critical thinking in different domains. Critical thinking is something you can do—pay attention to evidence, make and follow logical arguments. Your faith is a value, in many cases a fundamental value, so there need not be any contradiction."

***"Sir, should we apply critical thinking to all areas of our lives, including our faith?"***

This, as it happens, is not my personal view. I believe that religion is based on unsupportable claims, and that accepting some irrational and supernatural beliefs, even benign ones, makes it more difficult to use the tools of critical thinking to question claims which might be oppressive or harmful. But teaching at IIU-I was an opportunity to sharpen both a skill and a distinction that all committed teachers must learn. The skill is knowing where your students are and figuring out how fast and how far you can push them in the time you're given. Push too fast or too far, and you'll turn them off. Push too slowly and you've wasted opportunity. The distinction is between teaching, which is potentially transformative, and pushing one's personal views on students, which is an abuse of power and ultimately counterproductive.

As a pair of thoroughly secular foreign guest professors, Bob Jensen and I found the distinction emerge over and over again. It emerged most dramatically not in anything we taught, but in the very environment we were teaching in. IIU-I has two architecturally identical campuses: a men's campus and a women's campus. As visitors, we were allowed to teach our classes once, instead of twice, and have both men and women students in our classes (that strange thing called "co-education"). Still, the problem of gender never disappeared as became evident during one of the frequent power cuts (called "load shedding" in Pakistan) that occurred in Islamabad. In an

article he wrote at the time<sup>1</sup>, Bob described what happened:

*When we arrived that morning and found our classroom dark, we looked for a space with natural light that could accommodate the entire class. The most easily accessible place was the carpeted prayer area off the building lobby, and one of the female faculty members helping me with the class led us there. I sat down with the women, and one of the most inquisitive students raised a critical question about one of my assertions from our previous class. We launched into a lively discussion for several minutes, until we were informed that the male students had a problem with the class meeting there. I looked around and, sure enough, the men had yet to join us. They were standing off to the side, refusing to come into the prayer space, which they thought should not be used for a classroom with men and women.*

*Our host Junaid Ahmad, who puts his considerable organizing skills to good use in the United States and Pakistan, was starting to sort out the issue when the power came back on, and we all headed back to our regular classroom. I put my scheduled lecture on hold to allow for discussion about what had just happened. Could a prayer space be used for other purposes such as a class? And given that the space is used exclusively by men here, is it appropriate to use it for a coeducational classroom?*

A debate ensued, in which the women overwhelmingly believed that the space could be repurposed for a coeducational classroom, and the men did not. To Bob, the debate was revealing about patriarchy:

*What struck me about the exchange was how ill-prepared the men were to defend their position in the face of a challenge from the women. It was clear that the men were not used to facing such challenges, and as they scrambled to formulate rebuttals they did little more than restate claims with which they were comfortable and familiar. That strategy (or lack of a strategy) is hardly unique to Pakistani men.*

***A debate ensued, in which the women overwhelmingly believed that the space could be repurposed for a coeducational classroom, and the men did not.***

My class was scheduled after Bob's, but the incident was still ongoing when I arrived that day. Bob and some of the local faculty filled me in, but since my students were also not involved directly they said nothing to me about it that day.

Inspired by this incident, I added to my critical thinking reading list a piece by Chinese revolutionary Lu Xun on women's rights, a talk given in 1923 ("What Happens After Nora Leaves Home?"). In the essay, Lu Xun, who was a very independent-minded intellectual in the period of ferment before the Chinese Revolution, looks at Henrik Ibsen's play, *A Doll's House*. At the end of the play, which premiered in Norway in 1879, the protagonist, Nora, leaves her stifling marriage in order to discover herself. Several decades later, for an audience of Chinese women, Lu Xun's lecture argued that for women to be truly free, they had to have the material means to support themselves—that freedom was an economic proposition, not solely a philosophical one. In its assumption of female equality, its embeddedness in Asian cultural norms, and its practical discussion of how to achieve freedom, I thought the essay was an excellent choice for my class, and one that would not have occurred to me to assign had the incident in Bob's class not happened.

I asked my students to guess who wrote the essay. Most guessed a Western woman, writing in the 1960s, which gave me the opportunity to show that feminism had roots that were deeper and more local to Asia than they had been led to believe.

ost of what I taught in Critical Thinking had to do with trying to determine what the claims were in a piece of writing, what the logic of the arguments were, and what the evidence for the assertions was: the same kinds of skills that are taught at universities everywhere. The situation's unique challenges—trying to navigate political and religious taboos that were also the topics of greatest interest to the students—were a product of the unique opportunity we were given, through the IIU-I's Iqbal Institute fellowship: Bob and I stayed at the guest house, worked most of the time on our own projects, and taught one course each at the IIU-I.

Though my class was called Critical Thinking, in retrospect it might have been called Critical Thinking for the Modern Muslim Woman Psychology Student. For some reason, even though the university had students in Islamic Studies, Economics, Political Science, International Relations, Environmental Science, Bioinformatics, and Media, the vast majority of my 40-some students were psychology students from the women's campus. I had only a smattering of male students from other disciplines (mostly economics and politics). Bob, who taught a course on Media Law and Ethics, had a slightly

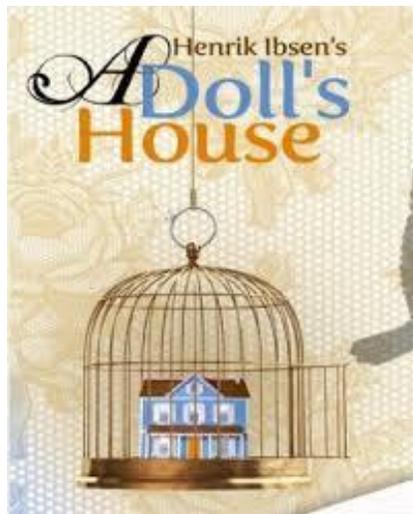


PHOTO COURTESY OF JUSTIN PODUR

bigger group of about 60, all from the Media and Communications program. Males and females were together in our classes, which was not normal practice and led to the incident described above. Most of the women in my class wore the hijab, many wore the niqab, and a plurality just wore the traditional shalwar kameez. A couple of the men wore western clothes, most wore the shalwar kameez, and a few alternated on alternating days. I saw in the coexistence of different norms of dress the same fluidity between religious, traditional, and western norms and practices that exists throughout South Asia. What we were able to accomplish depended on this diversity, which has been diminishing with the increasing strength of politicized religious doctrines in Pakistan, demonstrated by the incident in Bob's class.

In a later class, Bob held a longer discussion about the space-sharing incident, which was attended by other faculty members who stood up for the principle of co-education, as well as by students involved in the campus branch of one of the religious political parties. These student politicians wanted co-education to cease and for us to conduct separate classes for male and female students, but they were ultimately overruled and our classes continued on a co-ed basis.

Of course, the conflict between religious rulings and universal human rights—or even just between universal education and gender segregation—is not unique to Pakistan. This past school year, we had a case arise at my own Canadian campus, York University, where a sociology student in an online course sought accommodation from his professor because his religious beliefs did not allow him to attend meetings with female students. The professor refused to accommodate the student, the administration argued that the human rights code demanded that the student be accommodated, and a debate arose about whether granting this accommodation would have been oppressive. The student ended up doing the group project<sup>2</sup>.



But even though these debates do come up everywhere, they have a particular force and salience in Muslim countries and especially in Pakistan. Civilian democracy and military dictatorship, class and gender, ethnicity and caste, imperialism and local tyranny, and of course religion and politics, are all in play in Pakistan. For anyone thinking about these questions, Pakistan is an important place to study. For a secular radical teacher trying to teach in a religious context, Pakistan offered some interesting challenges,

including how to design a course that students would be receptive to, how to find common ground between a secular radical world view and a religious and nationalist one, and how to challenge views a teacher like me might disagree with while communicating respect to one's students.

## Designing the Course

I designed the course to appeal to students from all disciplines. The proposal I sent to the IIU-I in May 2008 included the following:

*To think critically is to be aware and explicit about one's assumptions and premises, to not accept claims without evidence, and to be prepared to revise or change one's conclusions when presented with new evidence. Everyone thinks critically at some times and uncritically at others. This course aims to give students a chance to think critically in their own fields of inquiry and in others.*

Like most teachers, I was far too ambitious in terms of what I expected to accomplish in the class. I had planned on giving students four assignments, plus oral presentations, except that because they had difficulty with the workload and less experience writing in English than I had planned for, I had to settle for only two written assignments. The first was to identify the premises and conclusions in a series of short arguments, to state whether the argument was deductively valid, inductively strong, or worthless, and to state whether the student believed the premises to be true, rejected them as false, or had no opinion. The simplest example was a public health question from a standard logic textbook: "The bird flu vaccine was tested on 10,000 people. None of them got bird flu. I should get vaccinated since I don't want to catch the flu." The second assignment was to summarize the argument made by Lu Xun in his article on women's rights, to describe the writer's perspective, to state the student's agreements and disagreements with the writer, and as a bonus, to guess the writer's gender, country, and the decade the article was written.

In my lectures, I emphasized applications, trying to explore with students the idea of rationality. After an introduction to concepts in logic (syllogism, premises, conclusions, analogies, consistency) and statistics (central tendency, variability, probability), I moved on to discuss the use of "critical thinking" and "rationality" in various fields, some of which define rationality differently than others. This included lectures on economic, psychological, political, and scientific rationality. Once I had made a case for rationality, I added additional complexity, discussing questions like: Where do values and ideologies fit with rationality? Can rationality serve them, or does critical thinking conflict with them? What does it mean to think critically about science itself and about rationality? Why does rationality in one field (for example, economic rationality in maximizing profits or military rationality in winning victories) create irrational behavior in another field

(for example, by destroying the environment or killing people)?

Students joined the discussions and came to attach a high value on rationality. They started to qualify their statements in discussions with why they were being rational or using critical thinking. I had more difficulty trying to lead discussions about the dangers of narrowly conceived economic or military rationality. While students were interested in environmental problems and discussed local examples, they didn't follow my argument that many environmental problems were the outcome of a narrowly conceived market rationality. Instead, they insisted that corruption or a lack of education were to blame. Similarly, my subtle attempts to argue for the rationality of internationalism were mostly lost on them, as students saw rationality in the service of their country as an unqualified good.

In these discussions, students were willing to accompany me to the point of valuing rationality and critical thinking, but most of them stopped the journey short of the point I wanted to get to, which was to use rationality to question ideology and come to a more radical analysis of the world's problems. I did not feel, however, that pushing harder would have led to a better outcome, though more time and more assignments may have created more openings for such efforts.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JUSTIN PODUR

## Identity and the Teacher-student Relationship

I was keen to take the opportunity to teach in Pakistan because this country has been particularly fascinating to me for a long time. My parents, Christian Malayalis, came to Canada from Kerala, South India—a part of the subcontinent that was not divided by the partition or by the India-Pakistan wars. From cultural, linguistic, and historical perspectives, there are bigger differences between the north and south of India than there are between the north of India and Pakistan. The histories that influenced my understanding of India growing up were written by secular Indian Nationalists from the north of the subcontinent, who were writing before the partition: Ambedkar, as well as Gandhi and Nehru. Visiting only the northern part of India would have shown me only half of the story of the struggle

for independence. Teaching in Pakistan was exciting; it was my chance to see a part of the subcontinent where it would have otherwise been difficult to travel.

***My list of topics, "gender, politics, nationalism", did not include "religion." This was partly because of taboos like Pakistan's anti-blasphemy law, partly because as a foreign non-Muslim I was not in an ideal position to challenge religion, and partly because my prior readings gave me the sense that "Islam" was the facile explanation for analysts, especially of Pakistan.***

I particularly wanted to get to know the world of one of the scholar-activists I admired the most, Eqbal Ahmad<sup>3</sup>, who was of Pakistani origin. Some other activists whom I knew and respected were also Pakistani: media activist and *Viewpoint Online* editor Farooq Sulehria, organizer and professor Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, professors and anti-nuclear activists Pervez Hoodbhoy and Zia Mian, scholar of Pakistan's cultural politics and activist Saadia Toor, and our host, Junaid. Virtually all of these activists are also teachers whose writings had led me to want to do my own investigations of Pakistan's political economy and social movements. Further, as a critic of Canadian and U.S. foreign policy towards the poorer countries, I knew how important Pakistan is in that key theatre of U.S. and Canadian intervention—Afghanistan. Teaching in Pakistan was an opportunity for me to understand better the ways Pakistan and Afghanistan's histories, influences, and politics interact, hoping to develop a stronger anti-imperialist politics. (This was in 2008. I have since filled out the picture somewhat: I managed to get to Kabul in 2013).

In addition to politics and my own partly Indian and partly Western background, both of which are suspect in Pakistan, I wondered: would students listen to someone from a different religious background? Given these differences, would I even have the credibility to teach? As one former leftist, now conservative Pakistani-Canadian writer put it to me in one of our last email exchanges: "Do you really believe that students who believe that you are the infidel and deserve to be converted to Islam are going to grasp the notion of critical thinking?"

I replied: "You are right about the difficulty of teaching critical thinking here, and about my lack of authority as a Christian-born Indian and a Canadian, but the teacher-student relationship still exists. . . . I try to make some modest contribution and maybe some students will think about things a little differently based on something they heard in my class or Jensen's. . . . I'm here to teach 'critical thinking'", I added, "because I believe in trying to engage people I disagree with. I wouldn't be teaching 'critical thinking' at a place I didn't think there was a need for it. Every lecture I've given here I've been

trying to get students to challenge their own preconceived beliefs and assumptions about gender, politics, nationalism."

## Touching Religion Indirectly

My list of topics, "gender, politics, nationalism", did not include "religion." This was partly because of taboos like Pakistan's anti-blasphemy law, partly because as a foreign non-Muslim I was not in an ideal position to challenge religion, and partly because my prior readings gave me the sense that "Islam" was the facile explanation for analysts, especially of Pakistan. My hypothesis was that the political phenomena that seem on the surface to be driven by Islam are actually driven by the underlying phenomena studied by radical political economists: questions of economy and state, of military and business power. Yes, culture and identity are important, but even in this sphere nationalism is at least as powerful a category as religion, and religious identity is itself manipulated, mobilized, and used by political actors. The controversy over co-education that arose in Bob Jensen's class, for example, became aggravated when student politicians from one of the religious political parties got involved, though it de-escalated once Bob discussed the issue directly with his students. Their desire to continue the class as a co-ed class won the day.

***The conflict between the students' keen interest in questions of gender, politics, nationalism, and religion on the one hand and the deep taboos prohibiting free discussion of these questions on the other, required some very careful balancing.***

Still, despite my sense that Pakistan is best understood in terms of multiple variables, where religion is only one among several, the topic of Islam kept coming up in class, with students raising religious and political examples in their questions about critical thinking concepts: *Is faith rational? Are science and religion compatible? Can religious doctrines be interpreted critically?* Though I expected courses tackling such questions to be of great interest to students and of benefit to their intellectual culture, I also had to take into account the power of the religious parties and organizations on campus. Inevitably, such teaching will face organized resistance. Tackling the issues indirectly, as I did, may be the best compromise for the current moment.

The conflict between the students' keen interest in questions of gender, politics, nationalism, and religion on the one hand and the deep taboos prohibiting free discussion of these questions on the other, required some very careful balancing. The arguments I asked students to parse for their assignments were from the fields of public health (vaccination), environmental studies (climate change), labor economics (the inadequacy of minimum

wage), and feminism (the relationship between economic emancipation and equality for women)—all issues important to radicals. But I did not ask students to apply the tools of critical thinking to religion or nationalism, even when they showed curiosity about connections between them.

## Pakistan's Education System from the Inside

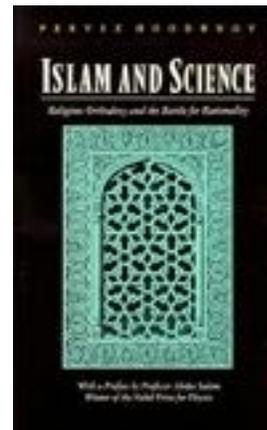
For guidance on how to balance these conflicts, I drew on some of the Pakistani scholar-activists mentioned above, whose discussions of their organizing and teaching invoke the education-for-social-change models discussed in Paolo Freire and Myles Horton's book, *We Make the Road by Walking*. Freire and Horton's traditions of radical teaching and popular education go well beyond techniques, of course, but I did find that "nontraditional" techniques of popular education were very well received in my classes at IIU-I. I used small-group discussions and "think-pair-share" to great success in my critical thinking class. In a longer course, I would have also included simulations, debates, and games. Given the students' evident appetite for the small-group exercises, I suspect that these, too, would have been very successful. In contrast, the students' struggle with the English language was clearly a limitation on how much I could do in the class. Students had such challenge just reading and writing the assignments that following the logic and analysis of arguments was particularly difficult. These were not problems specific to IIU-I, but problems that percolated throughout the education system.

A recent mainstream critique of Pakistan's education system was provided by the International Crisis Group's (ICG) Asia Report No. 257, *Education Reform in Pakistan* (June 23/14). The ICG points out that nine million children in Pakistan receive no education and literacy rates are stagnant. The report blames teacher absenteeism, curriculum weakness, and the "ghost schools" (private schools and madrassas) that have arisen to fill the void. Pakistan's expenditure on schooling is the lowest in the region. The curriculum, the ICG points out, has an "over-emphasis . . . on Islamic interpretations, not just in religion classes but also in history, literature and the sciences." Reforming education is politically contentious, played out over the curriculum as each party strives to appear more nationalist or religious than the other.

The most sustained critics of Pakistani education on the left, and of the university system in particular, are probably physicists Pervez Hoodbhoy and A.H. Nayyar. Hoodbhoy, author of *Islam and Science: Religious Orthodoxy and the Battle for Rationality*, and editor of *Education and the State: Fifty Years of Pakistan*, shows how the Zia dictatorship's campaigns of 'Islamization' did tremendous damage to Pakistan's capacity to conduct research and to train scientists. A.H. Nayyar, along with Rubina Saigol and K. K. Aziz, carefully studies Pakistan's textbooks and curricula, exposing the use of the education system for an agenda of Islamization and indoctrination. The results of this religious agenda, described in reports

like *The Subtle Subversion: the State of Curricula and Textbooks in Pakistan*<sup>4</sup>, are not only an educational system with a strong political and ideological bias, but also a system that suffers academic and scientific weakness.

Hoodbhoy's and Nayyar's critiques are shared by Eqbal Ahmad, who argues that the flaws in Pakistan's higher education have multiple reasons: the "confused and in some ways very uncreative attitude of nationalist governments toward language", in which governments impose linguistic orthodoxy and purity but maintain business/capitalist links to the West; the inherited colonial system of higher education which was to produce "servants of the empire"; and of course international financial institutions like the World Bank, which de-emphasize higher education, seeking to "produce a relatively more skilled pool of workers and not people who can govern themselves"(Ahmad, *Confronting Empire* pp. 19-20). Ahmad's answer was to try to create a university, Khaldunia, named after Abdul-Rehman Ibn Khaldun, a "secular and scientific figure" from the fourteenth century. Ahmad chose that name because of his "belief that the Muslim people, or for that matter any people in the world, will not make a passage from a pre-industrial traditional culture and economy to a modern culture and economy without finding a linkage within, finding forms and relationships that are congruent between modernity and inherited traditions. . . . My argument is that we will not be able to fight fundamentalism until we produce a modern progressive secular educated class of people who know the traditions and take the best of it" (pg. 22) But Pakistan was too turbulent and the 1990s too unsympathetic for Khaldunia to be established.



Instead of Khaldunia, what we have as of this year is the Eqbal Ahmed Centre for Public Education (EACPE): Hoodbhoy and others have tried to honor Eqbal Ahmad's legacy by creating EACPE (eacpe.org), which could become a kind of online Khaldunia. EACPE's mission is to "foster the use of science and reason to understand nature and society and so better enable the citizens of Pakistan to participate fully in the political, social, economic, and cultural life of their society; to exercise their democratic rights and responsibilities; to value human rights, democracy and the rule of law; to promote cultural and religious diversity; to raise awareness of global issues and the natural environment; and to advance the goals of international peace and justice." EACPE's site, just getting started, features interviews with Noam Chomsky (another friend of both Eqbal Ahmad and Pervez Hoodbhoy), a lecture series introducing Calculus, archives of articles relating to Pakistan, and more<sup>5</sup>.

## Is There Space for Change?

The problem of education in Pakistan was brought to international attention by the Nobel Committee in fall 2014, when Malala Yusufzai, a young advocate for girls' education who was nearly killed by the Taliban for her trouble, received the Nobel Peace Prize. Even more dramatically, a massacre of Pakistani schoolchildren at an Army School in Peshawar by the Taliban on December 16, 2014, revealed how schools and students are all too often considered a military target to the Taliban, whose relationship to the Pakistani military establishment is complex and not always conflictual.

***There was no way that my experience would be anything like that of a Pakistani faculty member, not least because of physical risks. The Taliban target all schools. At the university level, in September 2014 in Karachi, two scholars, Muhammad Shakil Auj and Maulana Masood Baig, were shot dead. Professor Auj had been accused of blasphemy by fellow scholars at his university and denounced at a seminary for a speech he had made in 2012.***

Towards the end of my summer at IIU-I, Bob Jensen and I started giving public lectures on an area we both study and work in: the foreign policy of the West. We share a similar approach to lectures as we do to teaching: we try not to tell the audience what they want to hear, but rather to find some way to challenge them. In North America, our public lectures criticize U.S. and Canadian foreign policy. But in Pakistan, where U.S. intervention is extremely unpopular, such criticism would have been no challenge to the audience. On the other hand, the idea of detente and even alliance with Pakistan's neighbors, India and Afghanistan, did challenge popular beliefs in Pakistan, and when we suggested in our lectures that to be truly sovereign Pakistan would have to make peace with these neighbors, we felt like we were making a radical argument that challenged our audiences.

Ultimately, is there enough space for the left to talk about Pakistan this way, we wondered? In an article about Pakistan's left<sup>6</sup> Hoodbhoy argues that there is space for struggle, but only if the left is very strategic. In particular, Hoodbhoy suggests that the Pakistani left over-emphasizes the critique of imperialism: "It is futile to frame the debate in pro- or anti-America terms; the key point is to be pro-people." Given the impossibility of the left gaining state power in the foreseeable future, he argues, the role of the left would be in "setting the moral compass" and fighting for "economic justice, secularism, universalistic ideas of human rights, good governance, women's rights, and rationality in human affairs." Although this essay came two years after my time in Islamabad, these are the concepts

with which I tried to infuse my teaching of critical thinking as well.

Because my engagement with Pakistan was shaped so much by my anti-imperialist perspective, I found Hoodbhoy's suggestions to be challenging to my own beliefs. I was not Pakistani after all, but I wanted to at least make some small contribution to the people who had been my hosts, not only in the Pakistani university but, indeed, on the Pakistani left. It was clear that if I wanted to continue to work on these questions, I would have to continue to use all the tools of "critical thinking" that I had sought to teach at IIU-I.

Still, there was no way that my experience would be anything like that of a Pakistani faculty member, not least because of physical risks. The Taliban target all schools. At the university level, in September 2014 in Karachi, two scholars, Muhammad Shakil Auj and Maulana Masood Baig, were shot dead. Professor Auj had been accused of blasphemy by fellow scholars at his university and denounced at a seminary for a speech he had made in 2012<sup>7</sup>. Visiting scholars and foreign instructors, especially those visiting for a short time, don't face these risks, but they also contribute much less. Ultimately, I got much more out of my visit to Pakistan than I gave in my course. My summer there helped shape my thinking about the relationships between religion, politics, and social class, and about the history and evolution of the region.

## Evaluating the Course

I decided at the outset that I will not challenge students' religious beliefs directly, even though students asked me right away how critical thinking fit with faith. I feared that if I present the two in opposition, forcing students to take sides, they will choose faith and discard critical thinking. If, instead, I could introduce critical thinking concepts through a series of concrete examples, students may follow their own line of reasoning, whether during the class or later. Grading the assignments supported this conclusion, as I could see that students' prior educational background, including the systemic and curricular problems discussed above, were a barrier to what I was trying to teach. Did some of them get over the barrier?

I consider it a victory that despite the pressure to disband the co-educational classroom, we persevered. It seemed to Bob and me that the female students' insistence, not to mention their numerical preponderance, was key to that outcome. The women's campus of IIU-I brought more students, more curiosity, and more energy to my class than the men's campus. The class discussion of Lu Xun's argument that women need to have material and economic security in order to achieve liberation was easily understood by the female students and ultimately accepted by the male students as well. In our last class students asked me some very interesting political questions. "Sir, do you think you can have democracy if the people are not prepared? Should they do a course on critical thinking before they have democracy?" I replied in the spirit of the Spanish anarchists: "The best way to prepare for

democracy is to participate in one, by having the power to make decisions democratically."

***I consider it a victory that despite the pressure to disband the co-educational classroom, we persevered.***

Though the course would have been more successful technically (in terms of understanding premises and conclusions, learning how to argue and summarize, etc.) had we had more time for more reading and writing, I do believe my students got the idea of critical thinking as a way to approach life, work, and politics. To use the words of the ex-leftist Pakistani writer who emailed me, they "grasped the notion of critical thinking," of evaluating claims in light of evidence and arguments for logical consistency. In that sense the course was a vindication of my belief in teaching students who have a very different point of view than the teacher: find points in common, pose problems that can lead to more general insights, and don't push taboos directly. One must pick one's way carefully between the risk of missing opportunities to challenging students and the risk of failing to earn students' trust.

In my exit interview with the Rector of the university, as we went over my syllabus, I told him of the paradox I saw in the students—the appetite for discussing religious and political questions, but also the reality that tackling them directly in class is likely to encounter resistance. The Rector's own approach was very cautious. Responding to my concerns about missed opportunities and the risks of

pushing too much, his final comment to me was minimalist: "hopefully, probably, one day, we might make some small change in young people's thinking."

Endnotes

1. Robert Jensen, "Universal Patterns within Cultural Diversity: Patriarchy Makes Men Crazy and Stupid", MRZine, August 7, 2008: <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2008/jensen080708.html>.
2. Reading the professor's own words is the best introduction to the issue: Paul Grayson, "Why I said no to gender segregation at York", Huffington Post Canada, January 17/2014: [http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/paul-grayson/j-paul-grayson-york-professor\\_b\\_4611750.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/paul-grayson/j-paul-grayson-york-professor_b_4611750.html).
3. Eqbal Ahmad worked with Frantz Fanon during the Algerian Revolution, participated in the anti-Vietnam war movement in the United States, worked with Edward Said and was an advocate of the Palestinians, helped found the Transnational Institute, and worked for peace in South Asia—among many other things. He taught at Hampshire College.
4. A.H. Nayyar and Ahmad Salim, eds. Subtle Subversion: the State of Curricula and Textbooks in Pakistan. Report of the Sustainable Development Policy Institute Pakistan, Islamabad. 2014. <http://eacpe.org/content/uploads/2014/05/The-Subtle-Subversion.pdf>.
5. Indeed, some of Hoodbhoy's books, including Islam and Science, are available on eacpe.org as PDFs.
6. Pervez Hoodbhoy, "Can the Left Become Relevant to Islamic Pakistan?" New Politics Summer 2010, Vol XIII-1, No. 49
7. Zia ur-Rehman, "A Pakistani Scholar accused of Blasphemy Is Shot Dead", New York Times, Sept 18, 2014.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://www.library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://www.library.pitt.edu/dscribe/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.library.pitt.edu/press/).

# RADICAL TEACHER

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

Cape Town, South Africa, 2003

by Frinde Maher



NELSON MANDELA LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

When Norman Levy returned to South Africa in 1990, after 25 years of exile in London, Nelson Mandela had just been released from prison. Norman couldn't wait to get home, even though the position of the African National Congress (ANC), and his own status as a formerly jailed, then exiled ANC activist, was still unclear. When he got off the plane, he was greeted by a man in a police uniform who said, "Are you ANC? Then come with me." Masking his trepidation, he followed the man through the crowd to a closed door. When the door opened, what he saw in front of him was not a jail cell, or a police desk, but a big room full of balloons, tables full of food, and a welcoming committee full of smiles and cheers. "Welcome home!" they said.

My husband John and I heard this story from Norman when they were reunited in New York, fifteen years after they had become friends during John's sabbatical in London in 1984. I was a sometime former anti-apartheid activist, one of many who marched in support of demonstrations and worked on divestment issues. Norman spent four years in jail and twenty-five years in exile. Having given much of his life over to a successful, nonviolent revolution, he could experience victory after decades of commitment, a life-defining struggle with a happy ending. What a contrast to the way things were in the United States! At home, democracy, racial and economic justice, seemed hopelessly unattainable in our lifetimes. Here was this new society, poised to embark on a parallel journey, on the move when our own society was so bogged down.

John and I went to South Africa for the first time in 1999 to visit Norman and his New Yorker wife Carole in Cape Town. We took snacks and ANC leaflets to the enthusiastic lines of people waiting to vote in the second national election. They were not as long as the world-famous and much photographed lines for the first election in 1994, but they were long enough. We went back again in 2001. We began to meet a few people at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) outside of Cape Town, where Norman had begun teaching in the Political Science Department. Then, in 2003, we decided to go and live there for six months.

Under Apartheid there had been four racial classifications, White, Indian, Coloured and Black, representing a strict hierarchy of privilege and access. Every single aspect of life, from housing to education to health care to employment to drivers' licenses to the regulation of leisure time, was divided by racial classification. Of these groups Black Africans were and are by far the largest, making up 80% of the population. From the anti-apartheid struggle many Americans are familiar with images of the townships, where the bulk of the poorest of the Black population continue to live in shacks of cardboard and corrugated iron. Near the vast stretches of the townships in Cape Town lie sections of small houses once allocated to the Coloureds, giving way to the slightly larger bungalows of the Indians and working class Whites. Of course middle and upper class Whites lived, and still do, in all the comfortable and attractive townhouses, mansions and apartment buildings overlooking the harbor or Table Mountain.

The University of the Western Cape is a formerly "Coloured" university that used to have mainly Coloured students and mostly white faculty. By 2003, and still today, UWC has more Coloured faculty (although still mostly white), and an almost all Black and Coloured student body. It is located in a working class town called Belleville, half an hour outside the city, beyond the airport and amid a desiccated landscape of scrub pines, lowrise factory buildings and Coloured and Indian housing estates. The campus itself is a large and rambling assemblage of stucco buildings surrounded by green grass, an attractive oasis in the desert.

Some of the people we met in 2001 at UWC worked at a research laboratory called the Education Policy Unit (EPU), a government funded organization administering



NELSON MANDELA CASTING FIRST POST-APARTHEID VOTE  
COURTESY OF LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

various grants to transform the apartheid education system from the ground up. How to make a functioning, open and equitable school and university system out of four distinct and profoundly unequal educational ghettos? When the opportunity arose for me to take part of my sabbatical abroad in 2003, I decided to accept an invitation to be a Visiting Fellow at the EPU. (John was finishing a book on economic theory and would find colleagues in local economic departments.) My own work in the United States at the time was studying the excruciatingly slow pace of integrating American university faculties by race and gender, and I hoped to find out more about the processes by which post-apartheid South African universities were building their new faculties and student bodies.

According to the plan I made with the director of the EPU, my role would be to help people with their various research grants, give several talks, and coach the few graduate students getting MA's there in educational administration. My major responsibility quickly became working with a Coloured colleague, a young woman I'll call Betty Taylor, on one of her grants. The director thought she needed help in conceptualizing and conducting her research, as well as in her administrative duties. As it turned out, she was a whiz at all of these tasks, and needed my support less than she needed some help in dealing with an extremely unreasonable workload. She became a close colleague and long-term friend.

What did I expect at the EPU? Most of all, I told myself, I was looking forward to participating in any research they were doing on, say, hiring of new faculty under the new dispensation. My stance was eagerness above all. "How can I help?" Not only did I not question many of my assumptions, I was often unaware of their existence—they came into view only to be overturned or reframed into something else.

I had no idea of the extent of the indignities of apartheid. One Monday morning I stopped by the desk of the Unit's administrative assistant, an affable Coloured man named Charlton. I had just climbed Table Mountain that weekend, and wanted to boast about it. "Have you ever climbed it, Charlton?"

***I had no idea of the extent of the indignities of apartheid.***

"No, Coloureds weren't allowed on Table Mountain." *Not allowed on a simple mountain trail.* He went on to tell me about the typical background of apartheid housing policies: his family's removal from their apartment in one of the coastal towns outside the Cape of Good Hope to a hastily constructed and now falling down township in the middle of nowhere, ironically labeled, "Ocean View." They still live there, with no hope of collecting the damages due them by the government for the loss of their seaside community.

In subsequent encounters I began to learn about the severe limitations of my own experiences of race, racism and white privilege (about which I had considered myself an expert.) One day at lunch a colleague explained to me the new policy of "deracialization"—"We try not to use racial designations any more, or notice racial differences." I swallowed my reaction, that at home not seeing "race" might be itself racist. Of course they are trying to get rid of racial classifications. Who am I to say any different? Was my radical American take on race really more "advanced?" Or was I just not getting the situation well enough? Was I right or wrong to think that they were not "ready" to ignore race? Of course, this is an unresolvable dilemma: as long as the realities of discrimination and disadvantage exist, there is no "right" way to deal with it. Erasing "race" is hypocritical; acknowledging it risks perpetuating it.

In any case, I soon learned that in practice this deliberate erasure of racial classifications was not at all a linguistic or as we might say a "discourse" issue, but rather an urgent, universal political concern. Every single law and regulation, from the national to the provincial to the local level, needed to be rewritten, because for every law and regulation there was a different version for each of the four racial classifications. And of course, the whole educational system was based on them, with the so-called "Model C" schools, formerly reserved for Whites, at the top. The pressure to integrate such places was exacerbated at every stage by the low educational levels of Coloured and especially Black African children. Apartheid had denied them anything more than basic literacy, and sometimes not even that.

In short, Table Mountain was the least of it.

I also had to face the irrelevance of much of my previous experiences in the field of education. My academic specialty is pedagogy, the classroom construction of knowledge. I had written articles and a book about how to bring students into conversations by finding out what they already knew and working with their own experiences to build broader understandings.

I was supposed to give a talk on Feminist Pedagogy, my field, at the EPU. Yet when I tried to enact it rather than just talk about it, by asking the researchers about their own pedagogies of engagement with students, I was told, "Just tell us what you know. What do you do at home?" I lectured for an hour, to friendly stares of polite incomprehension, about the challenges of leaving off lecturing in favor of student-centered teaching. After all, I told myself, why would they want to spend a precious lunch hour listening to my questions about them?

In the event, over time, my concerns with student-centered teaching jibed with some of their worries about the very low level of preparedness of many of their students and how they could reach them, to teach them the kinds of research methods they would need for an MA. Most of the staff at the EPU taught classes as well as ran their research projects. They agreed with me about the need to listen to students, but they also helped me see the limitations of my well-honed, student-centered, American "pedagogies of difference" in a setting where many students were struggling with the fact that English, not their native Afrikaans or Xhosa, is now the language of the classroom. They did not want their "difference celebrated" as the phrase commonly went in the United States—they wanted to get on with learning the English-dominated academic game they had signed up for.

***They wanted mostly to learn the secrets of intellectual upward mobility in an English-language dominated Western educational system. And they were right, as English-language MA's are the coin of the realm for careers in higher education.***

I was forced to rethink my own pedagogies of student engagement at home. How much had I always relied for my technique on working with more privileged students, those in no need of training in basic academic skills? How could so-called interactive pedagogies genuinely bridge the huge gaps here of learning and experiences, building on and extending rather than stifling all the valuable things these students already knew?

When I was asked to help an African man with the organization of his Master's Thesis, he apologized for his stupidity and his poor English. English was his fifth language, after four African languages and Afrikaans. Some stupidity! Yet these students minimized their own achievements. They wanted mostly to learn the secrets of intellectual upward mobility in an English-language dominated Western educational system. And they were right, as English-language MA's are the coin of the realm for careers in higher education.

South Africans admired America, knew about the American Civil Rights movement and revered Martin Luther King. One day, we went to the funeral of a former ANC activist who had done a lot of community work in one of the townships. At the service the township choir sang The Battle Hymn of the Republic: "His Truth is marching on."

And yet the American empire that I represented in spite of myself, and wanted to resist every chance I could, that American empire was not that big an issue for the people I met. In February of 2003 it looked as if the United States was about to invade Iraq. Seething with outrage I went to a meeting at the University of Cape Town (UTC) to plan a demonstration, and offered to pass out leaflets and help to build the crowd. Instead I was told, "Look, we agree about the U.S. invasion, but it's not really our issue. It's your issue. We are much more worried about AIDS, you know."

At the demonstration a week later, the turnout was meager. Most of the local demonstrators were Cape Muslims, members of a local community formerly classified as Coloured, who objected to the invasion of another Muslim country. I made a sign, "Americans against the War," and got a lot of smiles and some interesting conversations. However the turnout, on February 14<sup>th</sup>, was about one tenth the size of the one the next day, February 15<sup>th</sup>, a Valentine's Day rally to demand that Mbeki start treating AIDS. We were swept up in a vast crowd of thousands and thousands of people, mostly Black, the masses we had looked for in vain the day before. It's a big mistake to take for granted that "our" causes are universal.

Most important for my own work, there was the issue of faculty recruitment, curriculum and research priorities for the new South Africa. My research project at home was an investigation, with Mary Kay Tetreault of Portland State University, of the recruitment of women and faculty of color at three major American universities.<sup>1</sup> Thus my main activity at the EPU was to help Betty in carrying out a research grant from the national government to study the "deracialization" of higher education faculties at several local institutions: UWC; UTC, the preeminent university in Cape Town, formerly White and English speaking; and

Stellenbosch University, located in a nearby suburb, formerly White and Afrikaans speaking. (Note the term "deracialization"—but I was getting used to it.) Beyond collecting statistics on the current numbers of Black, Coloured and Indian faculty, she planned to interview key people at each place about their experiences in the institution. We decided to conduct as many as possible of these interviews together, comparing notes and writing up the findings.

I quickly learned that the reason there were and are so few Black African faculty members in any of these places is that until the 1990s so few Blacks were allowed any education at all beyond elementary school. Predictably, the few Black faculty we met were from Uganda, or Kenya, or Zimbabwe. Betty and I interviewed three or four of these faculty members in each place, all of whom told us how isolated and beleaguered they felt. They faced the same problems of American faculty of color. They felt responsible for the students of color, who were suddenly the majority at all three schools. They were the tokens on faculty committees and absent on the important ones, like hiring. They were underrepresented in permanent posts, overrepresented in temporary ones. Perhaps most importantly, they often lacked the time, training or experience to create a research agenda for themselves. In one interview a senior Coloured professor at Stellenbosch told us how he instructed his Ph.D. students and newly hired colleagues in constructing a personal research agenda.

"I do this for everyone, but it's really for the Black recruits. I take them away for the weekend and give them a crash course in academic research. I tell them, first, find a research topic that is yours, and only yours. Then publish in a local newspaper or journal, write op-eds, that kind of thing. Then write a few articles and publish them in national journals. Then, if your field demands it, turn your dissertation into a book. Finally, go for international publications, and your reputation is made. Start *small*. Get your *own* topic."

This kind of trenchant advice about the research process seemed an excellent example of identifying and supplying the kind of cultural capital needed by newcomers to the norms of academic life. When I left, Betty was still collecting data; her final report recommended increased attention and funding for the recruitment, mentoring and support of Black, Coloured and Indian faculty on all three campuses. In my subsequent visits to Cape Town and UWC, I could see very little progress along these lines. I reminded myself that the few significant changes Tetreault and I found in the racial and gender composition of our universities had taken 40 years.

Some of the people we interviewed also spoke of the challenges of selecting research topics. Many investigators in the social sciences and education were on government grants, examining various aspects of the new society—in the case of the EPU, literacy rates, adult education, the location of new school buildings and the like. In some areas, however, research followed a longstanding Western colonial agenda. For example, at the University of the Western Cape, in spite of the fact that tropical diseases are

a huge problem in Southern Africa, there was more money to study Western diseases than there is to study health issues closer to hand. I met three people, all women, one Coloured and two Indian, who were researching native medicines and healing practices. They were adjunct instructors with no job security and no prospects for it. "We are told what we are doing is not science," one said to me.

Many of the Coloured and Black colleagues we spoke to ruefully bemoaned the complete lack of attention to Black African history, literature, scientific and religious traditions in the university curriculum, in spite of the fact that their student bodies had drastically changed and were mostly Black and Coloured now, and even though the phrase "Proudly South African," meaning the new, inclusive multicultural society, was the phrase on everyone's lips, on every poster, and on every logo in sight.

***Many of the Coloured and Black colleagues we spoke to ruefully bemoaned the complete lack of attention to Black African history, literature, scientific and religious traditions in the university curriculum.***

Betty and I thought we might write an article comparing Stanford University and the University of Cape Town around their common curriculum reform efforts. Stanford University had successfully initiated a multicultural requirement a decade earlier, in 1989. At the University of Cape Town a similar initiative was begun in the late 1990s, to incorporate topics and concerns from an Africanist perspective into some aspects of the undergraduate curriculum. One theme was a reconception of African history that challenged the idea of the colonial era as bringing "civilization" to Africa. But entrenched senior faculty at UCT rejected the project out of hand, as many American universities had once done. Its most famous proponent, the prominent Africanist scholar Mahmoud Mamdani, gave up his administrative position at UCT in disappointment and disgust. He subsequently left Cape Town altogether and decamped to Columbia University in New York.

Again and again I was to run into this paradox of a brand new African nation, brimming with potential to build a truly Afrocentric university system, seeking nothing more than renewed contact and parity with the West. After all those years of isolation from their international peers, many of the South African professoriate, mostly White but by no means all, were starving for Western contacts, Western publishing contracts, tickets and travel to Western academic conferences. Upward mobility in the new South Africa is tied to, even identified with, Westernization.

At least in part, of course, this was and is a question of legitimization and self-respect. With such a long history of colonial dismissal and degradation it's hard to retrieve "native" concerns when they are not credentialed in traditional ways. Such delegitimization has long been the

lot of Women's Studies, African American Studies and many other such fields in the United States as well. Faculty have had to "prove" that they, and their academic fields, are as rigorous as those in the mainstream, before they achieve academic legitimacy. These issues of "quality" and "excellence" still haunt the diversity agenda at home.

Yet the attachment to traditional European knowledges in South Africa, to the exclusion of African ones, kept puncturing my dream of a "proudly South African" intellectual community. Seeking a course in African Literature at the University of Cape Town, I found no one at first who was teaching it. I learned instead that the English Department was offering a course on Derrida. (UCT, a formerly all white English-speaking university, now has over 50% Black and Coloured students but still an almost all-white faculty.) When I asked someone about this I was told, "Why shouldn't we teach Derrida if they teach it at Columbia and Oxford? We are a world class university too." When I finally did find a course on African literature all seven students were foreigners like me, and the teacher was a visiting professor from Uganda. It felt like a last-minute add-on and was not a requirement in the English department. I felt like a tourist taking it.

Looking at my experiences in 2003 again, ten years later, the feelings of dislocation they produced in me make a kind of fractured sense, one observer's fuzzy expectations confronting a confusing reality. I have made many subsequent visits to Cape Town and to my old friends there, every other year since 2003, amid my increasingly clearer realization that neither in South Africa nor in the United States, despite an ever more visible Black middle class in each country, has racial equality any kind of a chance without economic and political equality and justice.

***In my longing to see my own ideals of racial progress reflected in the "New South Africa" I had also been looking into a broken mirror. The South Africa of university life was, and is, fissured and split between the two severe imperatives of catching up with the outside world and discovering, or rediscovering, its own cultural, political and economic identity as a flagship state of the new postcolonial Africa.***

As in many other countries, most of South Africa's people are victims of the dictates of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, as the government sacrifices progressive economic policies to a place in the world's free market system. Some of the main beneficiaries, as elsewhere, have been a growing and prosperous Black (and Coloured and Indian) middle class, and government policy sees the role of education in general, and higher education in particular, as equipping

this new middle class with the skills to run a technologically modern economy and society. And yet Black unemployment in particular has not gone much below 70% in the twenty years since Mandela was elected President in 1994. Whether the country's membership in this system of international exploitation has given them their "world-class university" system is a different question.

In my longing to see my own ideals of racial progress reflected in the "New South Africa" I had also been looking into a broken mirror. The South Africa of university life was, and is, fissured and split between the two severe imperatives of catching up with the outside world and discovering, or rediscovering, its own cultural, political and economic identity as a flagship state of the new postcolonial Africa. Becoming a prominent Western university or locating and disseminating an indigenous African literature? Working on stem cells like everyone else or exploring the biological bases of longstanding successful local healing practices? And above and beneath all of this is the persistence of African poverty, the world of the townships. There seemed little room for the ideas of some of my friends there, those who want to build their

world-class university on the basis of rather than in spite of an African literature, history, politics and science.

Ultimately, after all, what could an American academic have to offer, who herself is the beneficiary, and unwilling representative of, the hegemonic knowledges and practices sought by her hosts? "We want what you have," even though what I have, I see as representing the new world order of global capitalism, a system deeply damaging to the South Africa of racial harmony and economic equality that I dream of. And, ultimately had South Africa itself, for me, been a stand-in all along for a United States of America of racial harmony and economic equality that I now understand I will never see?

## Notes

- 1 Published as Frances Maher and Mary Kay Tetreault, *Privilege and Diversity in the Academy*, Routledge, 2006.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://www.library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://www.dscribe.com/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.library.pitt.edu/).

# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Seeing and Hearing the Other: A Jewish Israeli Teacher Grapples with Arab Students' Underachievement and the Exclusion of Their Voices

by Tamar Hager

### Introduction

This paper begins with feelings of frustration and anger. It has grown out of my distressing continuous encounter—as a feminist Jewish teacher in a college in northern Israel—with the glaring examples of inequality and structural discrimination experienced by Arab students in Israeli academia.<sup>1</sup> I thought that narrating and analyzing my vulnerability, despair and rage as well as Arab students' feelings of alienation might help us to better understand social and political obstacles, while constructing ways to better overcome these educational impediments.

Following bell hooks (1994) and Sarah Ahmed (2004) I consider our (mine and theirs) emotions as significant information as to the power structure reflected in my classrooms—the structure that assigns Arab students an inferior position in Israeli institutions of higher education. Ahmed suggests reading the relations between "affect and structure, or between emotion and politics in a way that undoes the separation of the individual from others" (2004, p.174). This reading which exposes the connection between me, the Jewish teacher, and each of my Arab students, enables me to challenge the common perspective which ascribes minority students' difficulties and estrangement to their educational and cultural deficiencies (Essed, 1999, p. 221). If our emotions are read as evidence of our political adherence, the students' feelings of estrangement as well as my frustration and helplessness indicate the deficiency of our present educational exchange

and the need to transform the micro-politics of the classroom.

***The alienated behavior of these students which is frequently understood by teachers as their disregard, lack of interest and uncaring attitude towards the course provokes feelings of frustration and rage, often mixed with guilt.***

Striving to comprehend the complex micro-politics which evoke my negative feelings and theirs, I have initially chosen to narrate what happens in class, hoping to clarify why our exchange induces my anger. I focus on my own experience, yet I believe that similar interactions occur in other classes in academia where teachers cope with minority students who undergo institutional discrimination. Subsequently the paper undermines teachers' justification for directing their/our anger towards minority students by analyzing the reasons for the students' feelings of alienation.

The next part of the paper tells the story of my resistance to this prevailing social and political structure. Adopting feminist critical pedagogy in my course Representing Disability in Literature and the Cinema, I have defied "the traditional hierarchical relationship between teacher and taught" and have created a space for my Arab students to overcome "the internalized barriers

created by the dominant group's negative evaluations of them" (Morley, 1998, p.16). The process of empowerment and the subsequent educational transformative and liberating exchange has enabled all participants to grant Arabs' transparent and excluded knowledge a significant social, cultural and political place, thus creating new and more culturally sensitive knowledge. Confronting the empowering effects of this method, I conclude my paper by suggesting some explanations as to the rarity of critical feminist pedagogies in Israeli academia.

## Emotional Circle: Alienation, Frustration and Anger

Entering the first class of a new semester, I always notice her/him/them.<sup>2</sup> He sits in the last row and stares at me, but her stare never convinces me that she understands what I am talking about. Throughout the semester he tends to disappear for several meetings and reappear again in silence in the last row, rarely participating in the class discussion. Sometimes she leaves the classroom to use the phone and returns after half an hour or fails to return altogether. He rarely reads the assigned texts or summarizes lectures. Her grades are lower than average. Their Hebrew language proficiency is poor, and it is hard to comprehend what they are saying or writing. In the worst cases, she hands in assignments she has copied from classmates or from an internet site, and more often than not, he is caught at this, after failing to notice (chiefly because she does not know Hebrew well enough) and delete telltale signs identifying the original paper. These students' profiles, I imagine, are known to many teachers across national, ethnic, class and gender boundaries. In Tel Hai College (and in most other higher education institutions in Israel), however, a significant number of them are Arabs, citizens of Israel.<sup>3</sup>

The alienated behavior of these students which is frequently understood by teachers as their disregard, lack of interest and uncaring attitude towards the course provokes feelings of frustration and rage, often mixed with guilt. I try without much success to encourage them to ask for my help and that of others. Sometimes I help them to apply for a mentoring program which was constructed to meet their needs.<sup>4</sup> At other times I ask for an excellent student in class to help them in their coursework. I feel sorry for them. I tend to give them higher grades than they have earned, sometimes as atonement for being unable to help them, sometimes as a sign of recognition of their difficulties: Hebrew is not their first language; Jewish culture is not their culture. Israel is hardly their country, since state institutions by implicit policy discriminate against them, situating them as second-class citizens.

Too often my frustration turns into anger. Recognizing her difficulties, I warn him that missing classes will lead to failing the course but, as I sadly expect, she goes on missing classes. Well, I think, he does not take responsibility, just adding another failure to his expanding list. Serves them right, I think; why should I show any consideration if they never listen or do what I say? At this point I am unaware that my arrogance and my rage are

holy and self-righteous and lead us, me, her, and him nowhere, on our shared journey towards higher education.

Reflecting on my instinctive resentment, I realize that I, despite myself, too frequently fall into the trap of new racism, explaining discrimination as a problem of the victim, a result of his-her cultural mentality, personal or collective traits (Hopkins et al., 2008; Balibar, 2008). This is my and others' "efficient way" to create explanations which justify social gaps without having to take responsibility and use educational methods to change class climate.

In the face of this disagreeable and disturbing picture of myself, I remember something I know and tend to forget in the daily wearing routine of teaching, that Arab citizens of Israel undergo institutional discrimination in Israeli academia in general and in Tel Hai College in particular. This awareness does not diminish my helplessness and frustration, yet it ends my unjustified rage.

## Political Climate: Arabs in Tel Hai College

Tel Hai College is located in the northern periphery of Israel, where 53% of the inhabitants are Arab citizens of Israel (Central Bureau of Statistics 2011). As in most academic institutions in the country, however, here too, faculty and students include a small minority of Arabs, far smaller than the 20% Arab minority in Israel's population. In 2011, for instance, Arabs accounted for 13% of the college student body and 8.3% of its faculty.<sup>5</sup>

The college, like most institutions of higher education in Israel, is primarily a Jewish college. The spoken and written language is Hebrew, which is the second and sometimes the third language of the Arab students, who therefore face a disadvantage in reading and writing tasks in comparison to their Jewish peers.

Furthermore, the Arab public school system inside Israel, which most Arab students have attended, though legally obliged to provide a level of education equal to that offered to Jewish citizens, is in fact inferior, on average, to the Jewish public school system due, in part, to the unequal budgets and resources allocated by Israel's government. This often creates gaps in knowledge in a range of subjects (Golan-Agnon, 2004; Jabareen and Agbaria, 2011; Arar, 2012). Arab students from Israel also find it more difficult than their Jewish peers to meet the demands of an academic system that requires critical discourse, as Arab schools tend to allow less room for expressing opinions and encourage more passive learning (Al Haj, 1996; Barak et al., 2000). Therefore, many Arab students are at a disadvantage when they reach Tel Hai College, especially relative to their Jewish counterparts. Many of them lack both the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986, 2005; Olneck, 2000) and the type of academic skills required for coping with Western-influenced Israeli culture, making it difficult for them to match the achievements of their Jewish peers. In addition, the socioeconomic status of Arab students from Israel is generally lower than that of their Jewish classmates with the gap increasing all the more in college due to

discrimination against Arabs in the job market and the limited availability of scholarships for Arab students (Al-Haj, 2001, 2003; Dagan-Buzaglo, 2007; Arar and Mustafa, 2011).

Arab students from Israel are also assigned a cultural minority position. As in other higher education institutions in Israel, the hidden curriculum of the college—the "unstated norms, values and beliefs embedded in and transmitted to students through their underlying rules that structure the routine and social relationships"—is controlled by the Jewish dominant group (Giroux, 1983, p.47; Doyle and Singh, 2006). For example, Jewish culture, customs and holidays dictate the structure of the school year and the academic content, while Arab culture is virtually non-existent within the organizational space (although non-Jewish students are permitted absences on Muslim, Christian and Druze holidays). Arabic is spoken and heard principally in the informal margins of institutional space: in the hallways, in the cafeteria and on the lawns.

Additionally, every outbreak of violence between Israel and its non-citizen subjects in the West Bank, or the Gaza Strip, or its Arab neighbors in Lebanon or Syria affect campus life and relationships, heightening tensions and anger among Arabs and Jews, silencing Arab students' voices and opinions which frequently do not go hand in hand with the Jewish consensus.

In this reality, it is difficult for most of the Arab students to fulfill the expectations of the predominantly Jewish academic system. As a result, their achievements are significantly lower than those of their Jewish peers (Al-Haj, 2001, 2003; Hager et. al, 2011; Arar and Mustafa, 2011).

The analysis and recognition of both the formal and hidden curricula enabled me to better understand the political, social, educational and institutional obstacles awaiting my Arab students. This challenged me to transform my teaching and thus to change the micro-politics of the classroom (Denzin, 2007; hooks, 1994).

Henry Giroux asserts that "while the hidden curriculum cannot be entirely eliminated, its structural properties can be identified and modified" thus enabling the teacher to develop new pedagogical methods (Giroux, 1988, p.51). These methods, which Giroux and others identify as critical pedagogy, may partially and temporarily transform the power relations in class and may develop critical and political consciousness among participants, students and teacher.

However, critical pedagogy, claims Norman Denzin, "requires citizens and citizen-scholars committed to taking risks, persons willing to act in situations where the outcome cannot be predicted in advance" (Denzin, 2007, p.139). bell hooks has accurately acknowledged the reluctance of many teachers "to see the classroom change, to allow for shifts in relations between students" between students and me their teacher (hooks, 1994, p.30). hooks and Denzin remind me that using methods of critical pedagogy transforms the educational power structure and if I aspire that my class will contain "persons jointly working together to develop new lines of action, new

stories, new narratives in a collaborative effort," my authority as the class teacher will be threatened (Denzin, 2007, p.139). To create these changes teachers should overcome their fears, work harder, be adventurous, imaginative and spontaneous (hooks, 1994). No wonder many of them panic.

***Taking the lead from her story,  
we didn't discuss the social  
construction of disability, but rather  
the unequal distribution of  
resources in Israeli society, the lack  
of proper treatment for the Arab  
and the poor disabled.***

These difficulties did not deter me. Following Nancy Naples (2002), I wanted to develop "a critical feminist pedagogy that is open to self-reflexivity about the processes by which we produce knowledge for and with our students" (p.16). But how should I do it? Spontaneity and imagination are not activities you can plan. Classes vary and their needs change. How am I going to know that my reaction to my students is the proper one?

What follows is my story of some precious moments when I was able and willing to take the pedagogical and personal risk and use critical pedagogy to reverse the existing social and political power relations in the classroom. Creating space for my Arab students allowed them to voice their stories. Together, all participants transformed the educational site by collaborating to make room for new stories and new knowledge.

## Changing the Climate: Seeing and Hearing the Other

My class Representing Disability in Literature and the Cinema was crowded; 50 students filled the room, mostly Jews. I noticed three Arab women students sitting in the last row. They held their bags on their knees, as if ready to get up and leave. There was no evidence of notebooks or sheets of writing paper. "According to various social theories, disability is a social construction," I stated. "Different societies grasp disability differently. In some societies disabled people are excluded and committed to special institutions while in others they are held as cherished members of the community, cared for by family and neighbors." I leafed through my papers looking hurriedly at the usual examples for attitudes towards disabled people in various societies and cultures that I had prepared in advance. When I raised my eyes to continue, I saw the three students staring at me. It was then that I realized what I should do. Maybe something new would happen if I took my chances and related to the Arab community, though I knew nothing of its attitude towards disability. Maybe these three students in the last row would give us fresh examples, benefiting us all and acquiring space and voice. Maybe next time they would actually put their bags on the floor and plan on staying in class.

Pushing my luck, I said: "In traditional societies like the rural Palestinian society...." The three students in the last row were listening, their bags still on their knees, now looking at me intently rather than staring numbly. "Who lives in a Palestinian village and can tell us how the disabled are treated?" I asked. The students, mostly Jewish, were looking backwards. Suddenly the usually silent Arab students were the center of attention, the ones whose knowledge the lecturer was seeking. One of them raised her hand. She told us slowly, in poor Hebrew, that her brother was disabled and lived at home, since her parents could not find a suitable institution for him. Good institutions are private, expensive ones and the nearest affordable public institutions have no Arab teachers. He couldn't manage with Hebrew. Even his Arabic was very

gave examples, asking for stories on disability in Arab culture. Gradually they didn't wait for my questions, but volunteered their opinions, stories and comments, laboring to use Hebrew. Their curious and intent gaze during the course sessions and their frequent participation in class discussions made me acknowledge their presence (hooks, 1994, p.8). Jane Rinehart (2002) points out that "students enter the classroom as representatives of a variety of interpretative communities . . . making communication more likely to be troublesome because translation is necessary" (p.25). I turned into a translator, constantly checking my cultural assumptions as to the prior knowledge held by my students, fairly assuming that Arabs don't usually possess the Eurocentric and Westernized cultural capital adopted by the Jewish hegemony.



FROM TEL HAI COLLEGE WEBSITE

poor, she explained. "So who takes care of him?" I asked. "My parents and the neighbors", she answered. "But we wish it was otherwise."

Taking the lead from her story, we didn't discuss the social construction of disability, but rather the unequal distribution of resources in Israeli society, the lack of proper treatment for the Arab and the poor disabled. Another Arab student told us about a documentary film dealing with this issue and suggested screening it in class. When the lesson ended, she and her two friends were surrounded by Jewish students. I could see the smiles of the Arab students and the curiosity of the others.

During the remaining course sessions, the three students sat in the first row. I turned to them whenever I

Subsequently I fully noticed the narrowness of my literary and film corpus which, until then, had seemed to me quite broad and representative of all important trends.

## Changing the Climate: Transforming Oneself

Following my Arab students, I wanted to cross cultural boundaries and examine the representations of disability in works of art created in other parts of the globe. At home I kept looking for texts from Middle East and North African countries to balance my examples, to bring new perspectives to class but also to contain the Arab students. This search made me realize how limited my corpus had

been. I also understood that it was not only because I was oblivious to the impact of the exclusion of the Arab culture from the curricula on my individual work as a teacher, but rather because most literary and film analyses in the discipline of disabilities studies which I came across focused on Western culture.

This point became a center of discussion in one of the sessions, creating a space for one of the Arab students to express her feelings of estrangement in most of the courses she attended. "I sometimes don't understand the examples the teachers are giving and none of them is actually relevant to my life," she said. One of the Jewish students maintained that she realized during the last sessions how exclusionary the academic curriculum is. "I see clearly now," she said, "most of us have never heard the stories of the disabled or the narratives of Arab citizens of Israel and I wonder what else we don't hear, see, or know. It seems like someone is interested in concealing important knowledge from us. It is so frustrating and annoying." She was looking at me attentively as if expecting me to calm her fears of a global conspiracy. This comment became an opportunity to discuss the nature of knowledge itself. I shared with them my belief as a feminist that knowledge is always partial, exclusionary and incomplete. Relating to Louise Morley's claim that knowledge is "produced in the process of the interaction of classroom engagement," I introduced our class as a space for building knowledge together (Morley, 1998, p.16).

The opportunity to discuss these important issues came up only because I was ready to take the pedagogical risk and give space to these three young women in the first row, who were willing to share with us their different cultural perspective and stories (Denzin, 2007; hooks, 1994). Although this thought came to my mind while discussing these issues, I avoided sharing it with the students. I was afraid to embarrass the Arab students and/or put too much pressure on them, too much responsibility. I was afraid this claim would objectify them

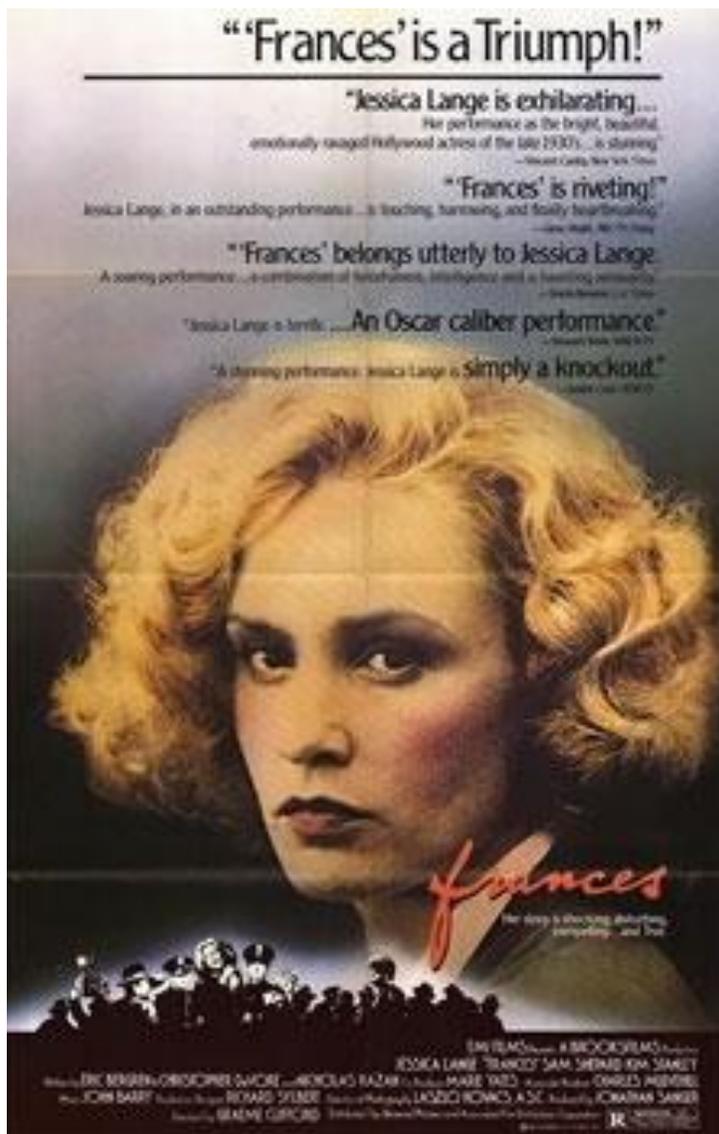
and force them "to assume the role of 'native informant'" (hooks, 1994, p.43), the oriental other (Said 2000 [1979]), valuable objects of our—mine and my Jewish students'—anthropological gaze. But I became silent also because at that point I had lost my pedagogical courage and felt that to focus again on the Arab students would upset the other students and might raise hostility towards me. This antagonism would leave an impact on their assessments of my course. The conventional academic lecturer in me was raising her head worrying that praising Arab students too much would be educationally inappropriate.

Writing my story now, I am convinced that silencing my praise was a mistake. The three Arab students deserved the full credit not only for teaching me and their Jewish peers innovative valuable information, but also for uncovering my/our ignorance. I think now that I should have risked the accusation of Orientalism, or the danger of students' criticism for the sake of thanking them publicly.

However, it seemed to me that they had, in any case, benefited from the process. They regularly attended classes, completed homework assignments. Whenever they needed help with the coursework, they turned to me or to the other students. It was clear that they took responsibility for their studies: they told stories, described movies, shared with us research dealing with disability as related to and addressed by Arabs in Israel and abroad and voiced their opinions concerning all issues discussed in class.

Close to the end of the course, after seeing the movie *Frances* addressing the actress Frances Farmer's repeated forced hospitalizations in mental institutions, one of the Arab students submitted a short paper voluntarily.

"I am not proficient in Hebrew," she wrote. "But I tried to express my anger towards reality in this language. I hope it will be clear despite my grammatical mistakes." Providing her critical analysis of the movie, she claimed that seeing it made her acknowledge women's oppression. "It is clear to me that I am doing a subjective and not objective analysis of the story!!! This was the problem that



led Frances to 'madness', and this is the problem of all women. We are accustomed to being sensitive and following our hearts. In this way it is easier to get hold of us. We were taught how important it is to be beautiful all the time and to take care of ourselves. This way it is easier to take advantage of us. We have turned into the most delicate creatures on Earth, who are 'really amazing' but easily broken. Many women break down."

***The story of the Arab minority which they had revealed became a significant part of the course. Instead of a regular course on disability in literature and the cinema, I found myself dedicating sessions to teaching about disability in a multicultural context. However, the class gained more than the Arab social and cultural narratives of disability. Since the voices and stories in the class were culturally and socially diverse, the students learned to listen more sensitively and attentively to one another.***

Reading her comment I remembered bell hooks' observation that education could be the practice of freedom if teachers and students become critical and engaged participants rather than passive consumers, connecting "our will to know with our will to become" (hooks, 1994, p.19). Here was a young Arab student who was struggling against all types of oppression in order to become.

The story of the Arab minority which they had revealed became a significant part of the course. Instead of a regular course on disability in literature and the cinema, I found myself dedicating sessions to teaching about disability in a multicultural context. However, the class gained more than the Arab social and cultural narratives of disability. Since the voices and stories in the class were culturally and socially diverse, the students learned to listen more sensitively and attentively to one another. bell hooks claims that "to listen to one another, is an exercise in recognition" (hooks, 1994, p.41). This capacity to acknowledge difference became an opportunity for each of us to question our social and cultural perspectives and norms. Consequently, the course turned into a space for challenging our perceptions of disability, of women's position, of academic freedom, of the educator's role, thus expanding our knowledge to include excluded and absent voices and stories (Morley, 1998, p.16).

## Endless Efforts

My teaching to counteract in this course ended with a sense of achievement. Providing Arab students' voices and stories a central place in Israeli academia undermines the status quo which relegates Palestinian culture and history to the margins considering them frequently a threat to

Jewish hegemony. The micro-politics of this particular classroom which intentionally gave space to stories of discrimination, exclusion and oppression was transformed. Gone were Arab students' alienation and resignation as well as my feelings of helplessness and frustration.

However, outside the walls of this classroom nothing has changed. In most courses Arab students (probably the students in my courses as well) are still considered to be the underachievers, the wearisome problem, those who, without assistance, would not survive the academic system. As I claimed earlier, this perspective echoed the pervasive tendency to blame the victims. But even teachers who acknowledge Arab students' inferior position in higher education institutions have found it hard to apply radical pedagogy in class. I myself have not always found the courage and strength to resist the prevailing power structure in my teaching. I would like to conclude this paper by trying to explain why these moments of resistance are so precious and rare; why it is so hard to challenge the prevailing social and political order even when acknowledging the deficiency of the present educational exchange and the need to transform the micro-politics of the classroom.

Disrupting the existing power structure involves institutional risks. According to Elizabeth Brule, most students who are used to the established teaching methods want to know the right or correct answer and refuse to engage themselves in critical pedagogy and to question the power structure. For these students critical feminist educators, who question established norms and perspectives while refusing to provide ready answers, are considered incompetent teachers (Brule, 2004). Moreover, applying these methods could turn the classroom into "a site of conflict, tensions and sometimes ongoing hostility" (hooks, 1994, p.111). In a reality in which students' assessments of teachers' aptitude can determine a teacher's career in a neoliberal academia which seeks more and more economic efficiency, fostering feminist and anti-racist perspectives is a gamble many teachers are not willing to take.

***Disrupting the existing power structure involves institutional risks. According to Elizabeth Brule, most students who are used to the established teaching methods want to know the right or correct answer and refuse to engage themselves in critical pedagogy and to question the power structure.***

Institutional sanctions may also await teachers who dare to question the political consensus in Israel and give voice to stories of prolonged injustice. If students complain to the management about a "straying" teacher, there is a chance that he/she will be rebuked or at least warned to be careful.

Furthermore, liberatory education involves emotional labor as Morley (1998) rightly suggests. Whenever I use

critical feminist pedagogy in my classes I feel the strain embedded in ostensible power sharing. Much effort is invested in deciding when and how to transfer power to students and let them lead the discussion. The need to make spontaneous decisions and use my imagination is also a source of tension. And what works for one class does not necessarily work for another; thus every course forces me/us to start anew. I agree with Nancy K. Miller that "the narrative of [such] occasions is necessarily locational: it is what happens to theory in the flesh of practice, the in the social spaces of institutional life" (quoted in Feigenbaum, 2007, p. 340). As in my case, this locational process frequently involves changing the course's syllabus and investing great effort in preparing new lectures. This effort is pedagogically and intellectually worthwhile, yet it becomes a burden in the underfunded, patriarchal and hierarchical system which increases teachers' work load and publication demands (Feigenbaum, 2007, p.346). I agree with Nancy Naples (2002) when she claims that the presupposition that teachers can always interrogate hidden assumptions and limitations with their students is "a problematic assertion in the context of our institutional location within the academy, as subjects within a racist homophobic social context" (p.16).

Still, despite all these setbacks and obstacles, we cannot be easily discouraged nor should we despair. For me the intent look of the three Arab women in the first row is a reminder that changing the micro-politics of the classroom leaves its impact on all those involved. And this is definitely a good reason to continue.

## Notes

1. The self-definitions of individual Arab citizens of Israel vary enormously. Some of them view themselves as Palestinians. Others do not. In Tel Hai there is also a significant group of Druze from the Golan Heights who see themselves as Syrian citizens and some of them do not hold Israeli identity cards. In view of all these issues, with much hesitation, I have chosen to apply the term Arabs or (since most students do hold Israeli identity card) Arab citizens of Israel, to the students of Tel Hai College.

## Works Cited

1. Ahmed, S. (2004). *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
2. Al-Haj, M. (1996). *Education Among the Arabs in Israel: Control and Social Change*. Jerusalem: The Magnes Press (Hebrew).
3. Al-Haj, M. (2001). *A Report to the Sub-Committee of Planning and Budgeting Committee for Promoting High Education Among the Arab Population*. Jerusalem: The Council for High Education (Hebrew).
4. Al-Haj, M. (2003). Higher education among the Arabs in Israel: Formal policy between empowerment and control. *Higher Education Policy*, 16, 351-368.
5. Arar K. & Mustafa M. (2011). Access to higher education for Palestinians in Israel. *Education, Business and Society*:

2. My impression is that this behavior characterizes both female and male students.
3. This paper discusses teaching to counteract systemic discrimination against Arab citizens of Israel or in the case of the Druze in the Golan Heights, Arabs who live within Israel's borders. It does not engage, at all, with the question of teaching to counteract the very different, less subtle and far more blatant types of discrimination and oppression exercised against Palestinian students from the occupied territories. To the best of my knowledge, no students from the West Bank or the Gaza Strip attend or have recently attended Tel Hai College. My ongoing encounter, and therefore this paper, both focus on teaching to resist the enforced academic (and other) disadvantages and the structural discrimination exercised against students coming from and living inside the "Green Line" and in the Golan Heights.
4. The mentoring program as well as other programs was initiated by the Center of Peace and Democracy to meet Arab students' difficulties. The Center was founded in 2007 following five years of bottom-up initiative. The objective of the center has been to support Arab students and to increase the opportunity for mutual cultural exchange among Arabs and Jews (more information on the center's aims and activities: Hager and Saba, 2009 and Hager and Saba, 2013).
5. The mentoring program as well as other programs was initiated by the Center of Peace and Democracy to meet Arab students' difficulties. The Center was founded in 2007 following five years of bottom-up initiative. The objective of the center has been to support Arab students and to increase the opportunity for mutual cultural exchange among Arabs and Jews (more information on the center's aims and activities: Hager and Saba, 2009 and Hager and Saba, 2013).

*Contemporary Middle Eastern Issues*, 4(3), 207-228. doi 10.1108/17537981111159975.

6. Arar, K. (2012). Israeli education policy since 1948 and the state of Arab education in Israel. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 4(1), 113-141.
7. Balibar, E. (2008). Does the new racism exist? In Y. Shenhav & Y.Yona (Eds.) *Racism in Israel*, (416-425). Jerusalem, Tel Aviv: Van Leer Institute, Hakibbutz Hameuchad (Hebrew).
8. Barak M. Peleg R. & Avrahami M. (2000). Scientific technological education as a focus of the renewal of the Arab-Druze school in Israel. *Iyunim B'khinukh (Studies in Education)*. 4 (2), 51-76 (Hebrew).
9. Bourdieu, P. (1986) The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp.241-258). New York, Greenwood.

10. Bourdieu, P. (2005). The linguistic market. In *Sociology in Question* (pp. 121-133). Tel Aviv: Resling (Hebrew).
11. Bourdieu, P., & Passeron J. (1977) *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. London: Sage.
12. Brule, E. (2004). Going to the market: Neoliberalism and the social construction of the university student and an autonomous consumer. In Marilee Reimer (ed.) *Inside Corporate U: Women in the Academy Speak Out* (255-281). Toronto: Sumach Press.
13. Dagan-Buzaglo, N. (2007). The right to higher education in Israel: Legal and budgetary perspective. *Adva Centre: Information on Equality and Social Justice in Israel* <http://www.adva.org> (retrieved March, 13).
14. Denzin, N. (2007). The politics and ethic of performance pedagogy: Toward a pedagogy of hope. In McLaren & Kincheloe (Eds.) *Critical Pedagogy: Where Are We Now?* (127-142). New York: Peter Lang.
15. Doyle C. and Singh, A. (2006). *Reading and Teaching Henry Giroux*. New York: Peter Lang.
16. Essed, P. (1999). Ethnicity and diversity in Dutch academia. *Social Identities* 5(2), 211-225.
17. Feigenbaum, A. (2007). The teachable moment: Feminist pedagogy and the neoliberal classroom. *Review of Education, Pedagogy and Cultural Studies*. 29(4), 337-349.
18. Giroux, H. (1983). *Theory and Resistance in Education: Pedagogy for the Opposition*. Westport: Bergin & Garvey.
19. Giroux, H. (1988). *Teachers as Intellectuals: Towards a Critical Pedagogy of Learning*. Westport: Bergin & Garvey.
20. Golan-Agnon, D. (ed.). (2004). *Inequality in Education*. Tel Aviv, Babel (Hebrew)
21. Hager, T. Shamai, S. Garriba, R., Sivan, T. Saba, T. & Shay, N. (2011). Multiculturalism on campus in the shadow of Jewish-Arab conflict: Jewish and Arab students' attitudes. In Leehue Zysberg (ed.) *Student Attitudes* (pp. 56-84). Hauppauge, New York: Nova Publishers.
22. Hager T. and Saba T. (2009). Changing against the grain: Academy for peace in a reality of conflict. *Diaspora, Indigenous and Minority Education: An International Journal*, 3(3-4), 191-201.
23. Hager, T. and Saba, T. (2013). "Between Obstacles and Challenges: Could Israeli Academia Respond to the Jewish Arab Conflict?" Unpublished paper given at the conference on Racism and Anti-Racism through Education and Community Practice: An International Exchange, University of Edinburgh, Scotland UK.
24. hooks, b. (1994) *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York, London: Routledge.
25. Hopkins, N, Reicher S. & Levine, M. (1997). On the Parallels between Social Cognition and the New Racism. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 36, 305-329.
26. Jabareen, Y. and Agbaria A. (2011). Education on Hold: Israeli Government Policy and Civil Society Initiatives to Improve Arab Education in Israel. Dirasat: The Arab Center for Law and Policy & The Arab Minority Rights Clinic, Faculty of Law, University of Haifa. Retrieved from [http://www.dirasat-aclp.org/files/Report\\_Education%20on%20Hold\\_Jan2011.pdf](http://www.dirasat-aclp.org/files/Report_Education%20on%20Hold_Jan2011.pdf).
27. Morley, L. (1998). All you need is love: Feminist pedagogy for empowerment and emotional labour in the academy. *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 2(1), 15-27.
28. Naples, A. N. (2002). The dynamics of critical pedagogy, Experimental learning, and Feminist praxis in women's studies. In Nancy A. Naples and Karen Bojar (eds.) *Teaching Feminist Activism: Strategies from the Field* (9-21). New York, London, New York: Routledge.
29. Olneck, M. (2000). Can multicultural education change what counts as cultural capital? *American Educational Research Journal*, 37(2), 317-348.
30. Rinehart, J. A. (2002). Collaborative learning, subversive teaching and activism. In Nancy A. Naples and Karen Bojar (eds.) *Teaching Feminist Activism: Strategies from the Field*. (22-35). New York, London, New York: Routledge.
31. Said, E. (2000). *Orientalism*. Translated by Atalia Zilber, Tel Aviv: Am Oved (Hebrew).



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://www.library.pitt.edu/) of the University of Pittsburgh as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://www.library.pitt.edu/dscribe/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.library.pitt.edu/).

# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Teaching Cisneros in India: *Post(?)*colonial Parables

by Linda Dittmar



LINDA DITTMAR WITH HER STUDENTS COURTESY OF LINDA DITTMAR

**Setting: As Fulbright grants put it, I was a “cultural ambassador” to India twice, 1994-95 and 2009-10, but what exactly does being a “cultural ambassador” mean?**

**Scene I: 1994**

The air is crisp as I walk to the English Department at the Central University of Hyderabad on the first day of class. Ahead of me are three sari-clad figures—pink, yellow, and cornflower blue—their long braids swaying as they walk. When they hear my footsteps, they turn and smile at this foreigner, me.

--- *“Oh, you are our new English teacher! We are so excited to have you be our teacher,” they say, smiling warmly.*

--- *“Yes, I’m excited too,” I smile in return. “I’m Linda. What are your names?”*

--- *“I am Malini, and she is....”*

When I enter the classroom the students stand up. One gangly young man just finished scrawling “WELCOME, PROFESSOR DITTMAR!” on the blackboard and dashes back to stand with the others. We are off to a friendly start. I introduce myself, review their names, comment on the syllabus (modern American literature) and I tell them about my meeting their three classmates a few minutes earlier.

--- *“Shalini, Malini, and Rajya are probably not the only ones excited about this class,” I say, misplacing the accent on their names though nobody tells me at the time. “But why should you be excited?”*

--- *“Because you’ll teach us about America,” they say eagerly.*

We talk about what they anticipate from me, a “real” American—access to a United States they mainly know through popular music, movies, and TV. They don’t know yet that I’m Israeli-American, not a “real” one. I note the difference between “America” and the “U.S.” We formulate preliminary questions about the “America” they imagine and the United States portrayed in our literature. I assign a short “getting to know you” paper—me them and them me—via a close reading.

That first paper turns out to be a mess: no focus, no topic, no development. It’s more like free-writing, whatever happened to come to mind. “Well,” I say on the following day, “you thought I’ll teach you about America but actually we’ll work on your writing!” We laugh. They know their writing was careless. They also know that I mean business. They don’t yet know that the “America” we’ll be discussing—with its issues of race, and gender, and social class—shares something with their own India, after all.

**Scene II: 1994**

Still new to India, I am invited to a three-day conference on American literature hosted by the United States Information Services at a luxury Himalayan resort north of Kolkata. The attendees are Indian scholars, handpicked, many of them established, some “promising.” The two or three most senior Indians, the American USIS sponsors, and three American guest presenters (two white scholars and one black poet/novelist) are distinctly privileged. We get spacious individual suites while most of the Indians share ordinary double rooms. At meals the Americans sit apart, though I break ranks with my compatriots and join this or that “Indian” table. They have their own insider conversations. Once in a while I chip in, noting a point of contact—a difficulty we, Americans, also face, issues of race and class for example, or gender. But my presence is not entirely welcome; they don’t trust me.

At some point somebody suggests in undertones that USIS is an arm of the CIA. “What are we to make of her?” I imagine them thinking, especially the young leftists. They are all from Kolkata, a communist stronghold where the street fronting the American Consulate has been renamed for Ho Chi Minh! Still, by the time we leave, three days later, I seem to have gained provisional acceptance: friendlier eye-contact, easier chat . . . But when I head for the bus assigned to my new Indian friends I am recalled back to the American van.

**Scene III: 1995:**

--- *“Let’s go haggle for Saris,” my student, Arunadha, says to me, adjusting her shiny black braid over the beautiful palu (the ornate edge) of her own emerald sari as she looks disapprovingly at my beige American skirt and pale blue blouse. At this point I’ve been on campus for some five weeks, still in western attire.*

--- *“Me... errr... Sari?” I mumble in panic at the colonial specter of me masquerading in local “folk” attire.*

--- *“Yes. You really need to wear something nice,” Arunadha insists. “We can go on Friday. That way we won’t miss class. And haggling is fun,” she adds, her black eyes twinkling into mine.*

Arunadha is right. All the adult women on campus wear colorful saris, even the sweepers. My American clothes are dull, though I do worry about the colonial implications of her proposed sartorial East/West venture. I remember with horror a joke my father liked telling:

--- *Eleanor Roosevelt at the UN, complimenting a sari-clad Indian lady: “How lovely you look in your native costume.”*

--- *Indian lady to the grey-suited Eleanor: “And how lovely you look in yours.”*

Still, our day at the market was fun and come Monday morning I appear in class draped in the more sedate of my two new saris. The students cheer and rush me out for photographs. Nobody but I worries about the East/West distinction between “costume” and “clothes.” As they see it, I am honoring their culture. Over time, it stops being an “honoring.” It’s just clothes, like everybody else.

**Scene III: 1995 and 2010**

I am to read poetry at Hyderabad’s Poetry Society, but what should I read for this group of mostly aging, solidly middle class, cultured non-academics brought up on a British curriculum? The usual fare of Keats and Shelley? I assemble a mini-anthology of poetry about African-American women: Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Rita Dove, Nikki Giovanni, and Kate Rushin, concluding with the “laying on of hands” ending of Ntozake Shange’s, *For Colored Girls . . .* “That was very different,” they tell me later over tea and dainty pastries.

Years later, when I return to Hyderabad, I read poetry by two American war veterans: Bruce Weigle’s *Song of*

subject matter? Shouldn’t one of you be standing at this podium? Is it simply because I’m an American? A white American?”

Everybody laughs, especially the younger faculty and graduate students. The cards are finally on the table, which is a good thing as the conference is in Bengal, known for its leftist politics on the ground and postcolonial theorizing in the stratosphere. It’s the question I raised obliquely on that first day of class in 1995, the reason I headed for the “Indian bus” in that Himalayan resort, my hesitation to wear a sari, and the purpose behind my choices of poetry for Hyderabad’s Poetry Society.

Taken together, these incidents and quite a few others speak to the contradictions inherent in my position in India. They speak to the warm welcome I received but also a certain spuriousness that runs through it. They speak to the distrust as well as deference accorded me and perhaps, sometimes, also to envy and competitiveness: why should *she* get this special treatment?



*Napalm* (Vietnam) and Brian Turner’s *Here, Bullet* (Iraq). That, too is “very different.”

Is “different” a compliment, I wonder, or a sign of discomfort? Is my bringing to this complacent gathering the dissenting voices of black and warrior poets something they wish did not happen? And did my being a white American in some way cushion this transgression?

**Scene IV: 2010**

I turn down an invitation to be Keynote speaker at a conference on Asian literature in English. “I know next to nothing about this body of literature,” I find myself repeating in several emails as I ward off the insistent invitation. (As Fulbright’s Distinguished Chair that year I am expected to lecture widely.) We settle on my giving the closing “valedictorian” talk, which I start by reviewing the back and forth around the Keynote invitation: “Why was I invited to be your Valedictorian speaker,” I ask, “let alone a Keynote presenter, when I know so little about your

Cross-cultural teaching is always a minefield of potential mistakes, misunderstandings, intended and unintended insults, and more. We encounter versions of that inside the United States as well, but each context is also particular. What I felt most acutely in India was the surplus of power assigned to me in my role as a “cultural ambassador.” As such, it was assumed that I am a white, American, Christian woman—none of which categories is quite accurate. In actuality I am a secular American-Israeli Jew who even speaks with a slight foreign accent.

This surplus of power was, for me, the most troubling aspect of those two “tours of duty,” as I’m tempted to call my Fulbright assignments. I was keenly aware, repeatedly, of the chasm between the high regard I was assigned in India and the much more modest realities of my usual work at an urban, commuting university in the United States. The high regard ascribed me in India was, I felt, derived from the Fulbright label. It respected the grant’s

competitive selection process, but also registered the U.S.'s hegemony in its unquestioning trust in my abilities.

Working with my students on their writing was one of my attempts to dislodge the colonizing powers assigned to me. After all, that's what I've been doing in my American classrooms all along. It felt good to posit critical thinking in that Indian classroom, early on, as far more important than the frisson of my provenance. My wearing a sari made explicit the ironies of belonging and otherness (and, additionally, highlighted the ironies of being "woman," easily reducible to "lesser" despite my august status). The poetry I selected for Hyderabad's Poetry Society had the same function as my attempt to join the Indians' bus in that Himalayan resort. Both dislodged the hegemony of what I was made to represent. Finally, my valedictorian speech, which occurred towards the end of my second stint in India, exposed the power relations that underlie the production of knowledge.

Still, invited lectures aside, and there were many, most of my teaching in India was of the familiar lecture/discussion sort, where a teacher's power is built into the teaching situation. Mostly I taught at two different universities, both located in greater Hyderabad: the Central University of Hyderabad (UHyd 1994-95) and Osmania University (OU 2009-10). Though some faculty were keenly aware of my assigned status as a tremor under the surface of good fellowship, it turned out that students were also not unaware of it. It was in the air. As one student told me later, a faculty colleague, who eventually became a dear friend, rightly warned students before my arrival "not to be swayed by a white face."

UHyd is a selective, graduate, national university whose students come from all over India and abroad. Abdu, my one foreign student, was from Jordan and probably Palestinian in origin. He was planning to become a teacher back home. Many other male students were hoping to go on to a Ph.D., and several did, two of them now teaching in the United States. The females, as assertive and confident as the males in this highly selective university, were nonetheless expected to enter into arranged marriages, and several dropped out mid-semester to do so. The one Moslem female among us resisted pressures (by male Moslem students) to wear a hijab and after graduation ran away to marry a Hindu. Her widowed mother, I later heard, supported her choice. These students knew that they were among India's best but were joined in a relaxed, non-competitive companionability. The bemused observation with which they greeted me quickly gave way to trust and readiness to work.

The situation was different at OU, some ten years later. Founded by the wealthy Nizam of Hyderabad (India's last holdout ruler, a Moslem, resisting postcolonial unification), OU is a less selective private university that serves students from Iran and the Arab world as well as locals. My students here included two Iraqis desperate to come to the United States and a few rather self-effacing women, mostly in hijab, who tended to sit on one side of the isle, apart from the males. These students were less well prepared as a group than those at UHyd, and they seemed less sure of themselves or why they were in a literature class in the first place. Getting discussion in this class was harder; getting them to do at-home writing or meet with me out of class was almost impossible.

In both universities I was handed a ready-made syllabus. At UHyd it included a substantive collection of stories by Willa Cather, Hemingway, Faulkner, and other American writers while the OU syllabus was thin—two plays to be taught over twelve weeks: Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and Neil Simon's *The Sunshine Boys*. In both instances I had already decided to add to the set syllabus supplementary materials, though at UHyd the addition meant an overload that upped the pressure, while at OU it was more of a filler. At UHyd, where the assigned authors were all white and mostly male, I added James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues," Maxine Hong-Kingston's "The No-name Woman" chapter from *The Woman Warrior*, and Sandra Cisneros' "Woman Howling Creek." At OU I added poetry by Langston Hughes as a complement to *A Raisin in the Sun* in order to enrich the context of that play. I had not yet decided what to do about a "filler" to supplement *The Sunshine Boys* when our semester got disrupted by riots. As it turned out, Hansberry's play and Hughes' poems were all we got to study.

Such tweaking of a syllabus may be unremarkable in an American university, but not in India, at least not during my first time there, 1995, when British culture still ruled English Departments. I give great credit to UHyd for having the strength and independence to allow me that leeway. Though an exceptional American Studies Research Center was thriving in Hyderabad at the time, one of only two globally (financed by the U.S. government), American literature, if taught at all, seemed to consist mainly of Hemingway and Bellow, with a buzz about Black women writers just beginning to be heard from the margins. But why only blacks and why only women?

Puzzling this question in 1995, I introduced black poetry where it was least expected—at Hyderabad's very conventional Poetry Society—and added Baldwin, Hong-Kingston and Cisneros to my course's syllabus. In both



COURTESY OF LINDA DITTMAR

instances I wanted this more complex image of “America” to elicit reflection on ways social marginality in the United States is in dialogue with India’s own versions of it. (This was also my theme at the Himalayan conference early on and on many other occasions.) Ethnic, economic, and gendered oppression in the United States, I suggested, has its parallels in India’s “scheduled classes”—its Untouchables, Tribals, and other Dalits who have existed outside the caste system from time immemorial but were now becoming eligible for India’s version of affirmative action. What I did not expect, though, was that even to admit that we may be beset by equivalent problems would feel daring.

I realized this early on in 1995, as people thanked me specifically for the honesty of my not-so-rosy lecture I gave at the then illustrious American Studies Research Center in Hyderabad. (Until the United States defunded it a few years later, ASRC was the foremost American Studies library and conference center outside of Europe.) My lecture was part of a weeklong faculty seminar focused on American multiculturalism. The audience, which included faculty from emergent nations in Africa as well as South and Southeast Asia, did not take to the standard-issue image of the United States as the seat of democratic equity and widespread well-being. Outsiders tend to register the boast undergirding our triumphalist claims of achievements, the condescension and the swagger. In 1994 and still new to India, I meant no more than be truthful. What I learned from the audience’s warm response was the extent to which they needed to see us as partners who understand their struggles because we know and care about our own.

When I returned to India in 2009/ 2010, this time to OU and a much diminished ASRC (now barely supported by the United States and renamed Osmania University Center for International Programs) the traditional British literary curriculum was still in the lead though the interest in black American women’s writing had grown, and with it a budding interest in the literature of other minorities. After all, by then Paul Lauter and other American Studies scholars had done much to challenge the literary canon and put forward an appreciation of the range and depth of inclusiveness, paralleled by emergent minority literatures in the UK and elsewhere. So what was it about specifically black American writers, and especially women, continuing to capture the imagination across India’s many campuses, as Hemingway and Bellow had done previously?

There are many reasons for the emergence of this black and mostly female canon in India, including the originality and vitality of its literary “voice” as it reclaims vernacular energies; its compelling focus on power, rebellion, and self-affirmation; its vividness and depiction of social context; and perhaps traces of reverse exoticism. All this has shaped the American curriculum too, but the opening of India’s curriculum nationally to black and to a lesser degree other minority American literatures has most to do with India’s own internal politics. In this sense American literature becomes a vehicle for reflecting on Indian politics, notably the pressure by disenfranchised Dalits to escape their prescribed misery—a reality that near

seventy years of postcolonial independence has not changed much.

Seen against this background (including rural and urban poverty, vast shanti-towns, government corruption, and glaring economic inequalities), it’s no wonder that some Dalits choose to convert to Christianity or join the military—that great equalizer—while others join the Naxalite and other “terrorist” groups discussed by Arundati Roy and others. Despite differences in class, caste, religion, languages, and ethnicities, the emergence in India of strong feminist voices is informed by an understanding of oppressions as equivalent. Surely the subaltern can speak, Dalit and American alike, as our respective U.S. and Indian curriculums show. Our struggles over what we teach in either country speak to the intersection of these social movements.



COURTESY OF LINDA DITTMAR

Since this U.S./India parallel is not often voiced, I tried to address it whenever possible, including that time in Chennai (2010) when I was asked to speak at a ceremony honoring the publication of the first Tribal novel in English. As it so happened I was in town to participate in a conference on “The Future of American Studies” sponsored by the U.S. consulate. Since I was in town, organizers of the book launch at a nearby college nabbed me for the book launch, wanting my words as an American to validate the importance of the moment. Still, for me the invitation was unsettling. After all, who am *I* to speak on a local issue about which I know very little, and what am I to say? My solution was to speak of our own “Dalit” writers, including disenfranchised whites, and their substantial contributions to social change through their cultural work. I talked about Frederick Douglass and Richard Wright, Agnes Smedley, Tillie Olsen and others, many of whom the audience never heard of. As we dispersed, a young faculty member approached me: “I want to work on Agnes Smedley. How do I go about it?” I gave him what leads I could and dearly hope he went ahead with this project. While my own emphasis was mainly on ways disenfranchised people claimed their position as thinkers and writers, Smedley’s involvement with the Indian independence movement makes her also an interesting subject for an Indian researcher. But in this instance there was something about this young man’s demeanor, including his eagerness to depart from the literary canon, that made me wonder whether this man, himself, is also a Dalit.

Though my earlier teaching at UHyd, in 1995, rested on close textual analysis, it pried loose related questions: ways different disenfranchisements (aka subaltern positions) divide or unite people; ways an author (Hong-Kingston) orchestrates disparate viewpoints to critique the policing of women's sexuality; ways the thematic thread of music negotiates race, expression, gender, art, social class, and personal responsibility (Baldwin); the politics of pastoral nostalgia (Cather); or the uses of dialect in Faulkner, Spanish by Cisneros, black vernacular in Morrison, Yiddish by Tillie Olsen, etc.. The textured "Americas" that emerged from the close—very close—reading of language as at once brilliantly original and yet also expressive of particular social groups is quite different from my students' much more passive reception of media-derived images. Here was a course that required of students a particular kind of critical thinking—patient, attentive scrutiny of language—as it shapes stories and gives life to characters, but doing so through their own experience in India as a dialogue with mine in the United States.

Sadly, during my second time in Hyderabad, in 2009 and especially 2010, the city was engulfed in riots. There were hunger strikes, suicides, traffic blocked by cars in flames, daily rallies, and demonstrations—an uprising of the impoverished western part of the state (Andhra



COURTESY OF LINDA DITTMAR

Pradesh) against long standing government neglect. At issue was and still is the wealth generated by the water resources that flow from the state's rocky highlands of the Telengana region in the west and enrich the fertile lowlands to the east. Hyderabad, the capital, is a prosperous and rapidly growing high-tech center that boasts a sumptuous international airport and a new U. S. consulate, with high tech centers and apartments mushrooming in its periphery. Technically, it is in Telengana, except that its investments come from the east and its profits benefit the east disproportionately.

After years of fruitless political lobbying and agitation, the leader of the Telegu people went on hunger strike, and my campus, with its many Telegu students, became a hub of local activism. Rallies were held daily, with amplified speeches wafting into my distant guesthouse windows at all hours. A few students committed suicide; cars and busses were overturned and burnt in the nearby streets; classes were cancelled and students were sent home for weeks at a time; armed guards were posted at the gates, allowing no entry or egress. I found myself bereft of my

students and missing the guesthouse residents who would gather at mealtime. Only a skeletal staff remained, none speaking English.

Yet my own situation was not that bad. I felt safe in the guesthouse and found ways to leave campus through back roads when invited to lecture outside Andhra. My OU class did manage to discuss *A Raisin in the Sun* and Langston Hughes' poems in depth—rich material on race, gender, and class—even if we never got to *The Sunshine Boys*. We could afford the loss of that play, I felt, though not the teaching time this group of students desperately needed. They were so much less privileged than those at UHyd, so much weaker in preparation, and I could do little to help them catch up. There was an urgency to their eagerness to study with me quite different from the carefree curiosity of their peers at UHyd. The two Iraqi students in particular, who seemed older than the others, were anxious to learn English:

--- *"Please, Professor, Ma'am. I must learn English. I'll work hard!"*

--- *"Please, Professor, Ma'am. I don't want to go back to Iraq. I want to study in America. Please help me. I need good English."*

--- *"Yes, Professor, Ma'am. It's so important!"*

--- *"OK," I say, trying to be reassuring. "I understand. We can't do much in just one semester, but come see me out of class at the campus guesthouse. I can meet you every day. Just come see me at my guesthouse."*

They never came. Nor did the others. There was a pall on campus that wouldn't lift. Yes, there were riots, closures, and cancelled classes, but that could have been an opportunity to meet one on one and work in small groups, without time limits. I think their not coming despite my urging had more to do with their uncertain prospects, depleted faith, and a weakened sense of agency than with the riots. In fact, in 2009-2010 OU's English Department itself seemed depressed beyond the immediate crisis. At issue, I think, was self-image and motivation, pivoting on questions of economics, social class, gender, and a community short-changed by the State.

The one time I saw OU students outside of class was at the end of my stay, at the staff's farewell party for me. I did not expect them to show up, yet students arrived carrying cards and bougainvillea branches they picked on the way. Given how little work we did together, I did not expect them and was shaken to see them arrive. The gap between their appreciation and my meager teaching was immense, as I saw it. Not only did I fail to do ESL triage for the Iraqi students, but I hardly had a chance to work with them on their critical thinking, let alone help them trust their competence. How *could* they be so grateful for receiving so little?

The more I think of it the more glaring the differences between the two institutions. In contrast with the need conveyed by the OU students in 2009-2010, I see a mini-rebellion that occurred towards the end of the semester at UHyd in 1995 as a measure of this select group of students' empowerment. We were discussing Cisneros' story, "Woman Howling Creek," when two students at the back of the class, a male and a female, stood up to protest:

--- "I'm tired of reading about how women are oppressed by men," exclaimed Alita, from the back of the class. "I'm tired of all this complaining. Can't we read something about strong women for a change? Something positive?!"

--- "This is really offensive!" added Prasad, who always sat next to her. "It's so depressing, and bad politics too! We know about women's oppression! We know all that. We need to read about empowerment, about liberation!"

--- "Yes, all this whining and self-pity doesn't help us move forward. This is reactionary material," comes from an agitated voice somewhere closer to the front.

And so it went for a while, with a few other students tentatively nodding in agreement, some shifting uncomfortably in their seats.

I was stunned. Cisneros was to be our last reading for the semester; I had placed her story as our final reading very deliberately, wanting to end the course on a liberatory note, depicting empowered minority women coming together to smash male authority. By now, I had assumed, after four months of close readings informed by progressive egalitarian politics, surely we will not fall back on formulas. For a moment hushed uncertainty reined in the classroom. Nobody expected this. For years these students have been standing up every time a teacher entered a class, and now this rebellion, and against this foreign, white, American woman no less! "I mustn't feel attacked," I reminded myself. "This is political, not personal."

--- "No, no," I said, gesturing for them—and myself—to calm down. "You are misreading the story. Let me explain...."

What followed was a lecture on "Woman Howling Creek" as an *emancipatory* story about cross-border

migration, about gender and patriarchy and poverty, and about women uniting in "sisterhood" to rescue one of their own. For all of the protagonist's abuse and suffering and the narrative's hinting that she may drown herself in despair, the story ends triumphantly with two other women deftly arranging her escape. The symbolic details are important too: the clinic as a site of sisterhood and communal empowerment; a woman-owned pickup truck as appropriation of masculine prerogative; the power of the other two women as independent, experienced, wage-earning Latinas; the truck speeding over a bridge that arcs above the creek's as it transports Cleofilas to freedom; and the triumphant shout of victory in the end as a response to the wail of *la llorona* ("the weeping woman") who, legend tells, drowned herself in this creek.

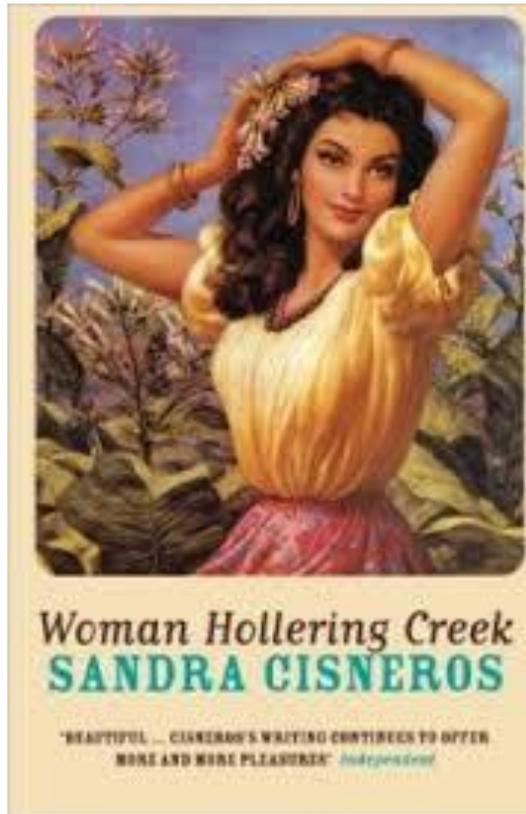
In retrospect, I wish I had read Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, before coming to India. Nafisi had the inspired idea of putting *The Great Gatsby* on trial (complete with students as judge, prosecutor, defense lawyer, and jury) when ideological objections to the text arose in her class. But Nafisi's memoir had not yet been published when I taught at UHyd, and I fell back on the more trodden path of lecturing to counter the students' misinterpretation. The lecture just poured out as of its own momentum.

It "took," perhaps because it so clearly built on our entire semester's work, though not without leaving me with residual questions. While I believe that the students' "uprising" was political, not personal, in what ways was it "political" and how do the two interact?

In retrospect I can see that that incident summed up a lot more than any of us had time to digest. It felt like an ordinary

misreading of the text that became a "teachable moment," but wrapped into it was the need to challenge a professor who was selected as representative ("cultural diplomat") by the U.S. government and was enjoying privilege as a white American. "Who is *she* to tell us? Can we trust anything *she* offers as not implicated in oppression—oppression of women, of dark skinned people, of the poor and disenfranchised?" At my end I also wondered, not without some satisfaction, whether the objection to Cisneros' story as reactionary reflected these two students' need to challenge the hegemonic power lodged in me as an emissary of a world they at once resented and craved?

It was good to end my first semester in India this way—after four months of discussing the importance of critical thinking. I am encouraged by UHyd's students' assertiveness, their standing up to me, "Linda Ma'am"



(rather than OU's "Professor Ma'am" ten years later). Here are students who arrived with exceptionally high grades and mostly economic comfort. In reality, some were Dalit, though I refused to be told who. Those were admitted under the affirmative action "reservation" laws that require universities to set aside a certain proportion of places for "scheduled" students and faculty, except that here, at UHyd, unlike OU, the mood was sunny. Whatever disadvantages certain students brought with them, they were part of a movement forward.

For my OU students, they told me in parting, the two things that stood out were the poems by Langston Hughes and the way I kept clambering up and down the high dais where the teacher's desk and blackboard were anchored. "Thank you, *thank* you for teaching us Langston Hughes," one of them said with deep feeling. Another commented with a smile about all this up and down, which demystified the usual professorial demeanor of bestowing wisdom from the heights of a raised desk. I hope there was something liberating about these graceless efforts, a sense that what we are doing is important!



COURTESY OF LINDA DITTMAR

### Coda

Whatever progress might have occurred in the sheltered pods that were my classrooms at UHyd and OU does not finally address the questions with which I started this discussion, notably, What was I doing in India as an American outsider sponsored by the U.S. Government's State Department? and, underlying it, Is it at all possible to teach radically in a situation where the visiting foreigner wields excessive power? Isn't the "cultural ambassador" position neo-colonial a-priori?

Though I addressed variants of these questions head on whenever possible, Indian colleagues on the left, especially the younger ones, were not quick to take my outstretched hand. At the Himalayan resort conference which I attended early on in my first "tour of duty," in 1995, it took three days of hard work for me to prove myself, provisionally. In 2010 a man I considered a friend introduced me on a panel as editor of "Radical Teacher" with a skeptically raised eyebrow. In 1995, a female colleague who had long ignored me, invited me to Hyderabad's hallowed Urvashi's Centre for Women's Studies and responded to my affirming that I felt at home there with, "I am not sure I can take that as a

compliment." Another woman, chairing a plenary at a national conference at OU's Center for International Programs, 2010, ignored my very visibly raised hand (though not the one white *man's* present) as long as she could, letting me speak only after another woman in the audience called out, "What's going on? You are calling on everybody except Professor Dittmar."

I don't take any of that personally; these people didn't know me. At issue is my privileged position as a visibly "white" American, supposedly Christian and heterosexual, stamped with the Fulbright's seal of approval, at times further inflected through my gender. I do cringe at the unearned honors I received, but I also understand the distrust and resentment. Being an American teaching in India is not the same as an American teaching in France or Germany, and even in those countries cross-national problems can arise. In an India that is at once "developing" and keenly aware of its distinguished heritage, at once struggling toward power and boasting great gains, at once bound to British (and now American) colonialism and resentful of it, at once proud and vulnerable, my American privileges were especially palpable. At issue is not just the content and method of teaching. At issue is also power, made all the more explicit when the teacher is a privileged outsider.

In this respect, I remember with special pleasure my invitation to lecture at St. Xavier College in Mumbai close to the end of my 2010 assignment. When I offered to talk about representations of organized labor issues and the working-class in American films my hosts paired me with one of their own faculty who lectured about that topic as treated in Bollywood films. What was to be a one-hour lecture turned into a fascinating half-day exchange. In his introduction to the program the Provost, a Jesuit priest in clerical garb, told the students to look out the window. The problems raised by our discussion, he emphasized—Indian and American *alike*—are lived day in day out in the streets below.

As I think back to the power relations enacted so blatantly at the Himalayan conference I attended early on in 1994, I wonder about what the black American poet/writer who also participated felt during those three days. Given the developing buzz around "black women writers," she stood out, ironically, because she was privileged as subaltern, privileged because not-privileged. That she also happened to be a rather shy person coming down with a severe respiratory infection (she ended up hospitalized) only made matters worse for her. Our other American colleague in that conference, a white male, was an opposite case. He made the mistake—big mistake—of lecturing on postcolonial studies *to Indians!* Under vigorous cross-examination it turned out that he never heard of Aijaz Ahmad, whom all the young Bengali leftists were reading at the time, nor read Fanon, for that matter!

That I did win provisional acceptance from my Indian colleagues at that conference was not because I joined them at mealtime. The test was in my own presentation, informed, as luck would have it, by an essay I had just read, written by the Indian political theorist, Ashis Nandy. I had already planned to problematize my own pre-assigned

topic—the predictable “Black Women Writers”—by emphasizing diversity and differences among them, but Nandy’s analysis of Gandhi’s and Tagore’s positions on national emergence led me to frame the intra-American concerns in Indian ones. Nandy’s dismantling of homogeneity regarding India’s liberatory struggles tied into my own challenge to homogeneity across the work of “black women writers.” Though I was still new to India at the time and had no idea who would be at the conference, this ended up addressing our black poet/writer colleague on the one hand and signaling to our Indian colleagues, on the other, the possibility of some shared exchange.

Did my students at UHyd or OU sense any of these issues, as some of their teachers, perhaps all, obviously did? Taught as these students were to respect and admire all teachers, were they aware of the undercurrents of distrust and antagonisms that run so close to the surface in our supposedly “post” colonial situation? As we got to know one another I was mostly “teacher.” My being a “white American” and a “cultural ambassador” mattered most to those who knew me least, not those who worked with me day in day out. I cherish the work with the students, both at UHyd and OU. I am moved by their curiosity, enthusiasm, and need. But as I leave them to their own lives now, I’m especially aware of the more ineffable consequences of my presence in India. What was radical about my teaching them? Was my colleague’s raised eyebrow, when he introduced me at that 2010 conference as an editor of *Radical Teacher*, justified?

So much that remains unsaid, personal and political, is tangled in such teaching. Clearly the point of teaching Cisneros was not simply to tell students about the “real” America. It was to say something about them and their future, about a world where ethnicity, class and language are partners in a person’s right to her wellbeing, in this case a woman’s. Most importantly, it was also an object lesson about how the story Cisneros tells relates to the work of the Urvashi Center for Women’s Studies, just a short bus ride away, to a rape that happened on the UHyd campus that same semester, and to radical feminist activism as it continues in India and elsewhere. Hopefully the disturbances caused by my privileged post(?)colonial status were useful, finally. In exposing what separates us it also showed possibilities of working together.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



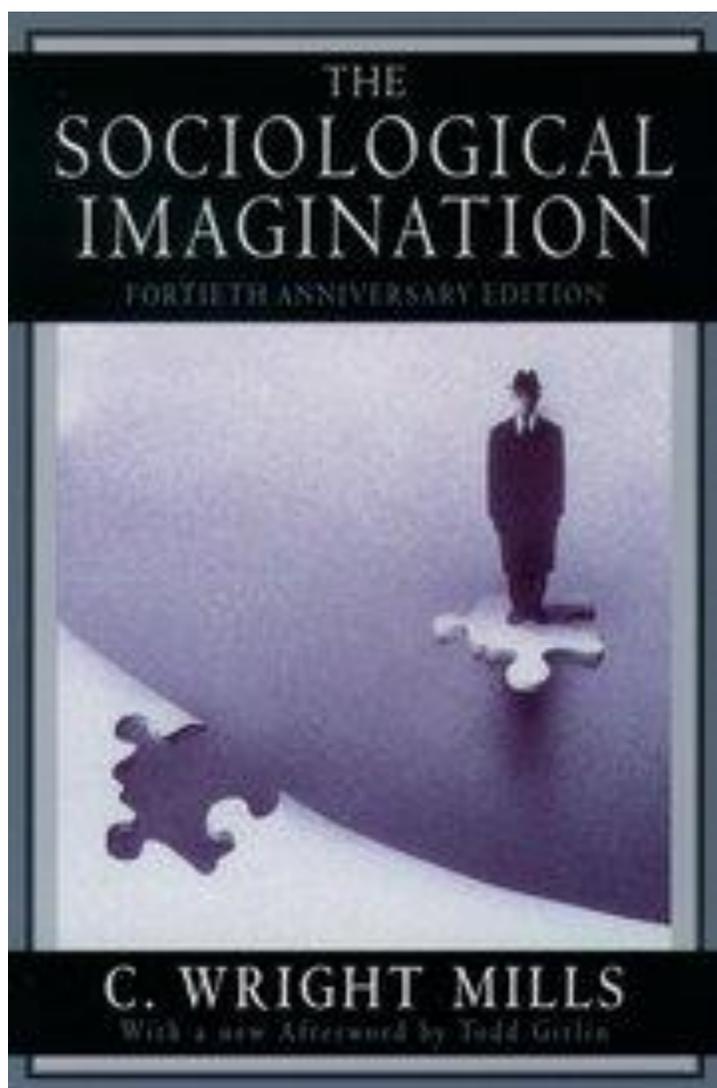
This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://www.library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://www.dscribe.com/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.library.pitt.edu/).

# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Postcolonial Feminisms and Introducing Sociology in the Imperium

by Jyoti Puri



The first week of classes usually surfaces the problem of introductions—how to present myself to students and sociology to neophytes.<sup>1</sup> I have been teaching at a liberal arts and professional studies institution in northeastern United States for many years, but these issues seem more complex than ever in the introductory sociology class that I offer regularly. Mixed in with the excitement and adrenalin rush that usually quicken my walk toward the first class are confounding questions of what and how much to say about myself, how I came to know sociology, what I think sociology is and how it can be useful.

The problem of presenting the self in the classroom is fundamentally about locating it and, as Erving Goffman (1959) anticipated, managing its perception by students. In a setting marked by the imperatives of thinking, learning, and communicating, students' first impressions of the instructor are formed not just in terms of what is said but perhaps more so through expressions that one gives off—through name, race, linguistic accent. As someone born and raised in India, I am never more conscious of my non-Judeo-Christian name, brownness, accented English, and non-verbal self-expression than in the first few minutes of a new class, when it's not clear how best to navigate the differences of race, social class, gender expression, age, sexuality, nation, culture that swirl among us. Would it be more forthright to establish distance from a predominantly young, white, middle-class, U.S.-born, Judeo-Christian student body by noting that I migrated here as an adult and have not been through an undergraduate degree program here? Or, would it be more effective to establish common ground by noting that though my formative experiences were elsewhere, I have lived in this country for many years. Seeking to sidestep the anxious fretting self, elicited by the prospect of introduction, I usually choose to emphasize my affiliation to the institution, the department, and teaching and research interests.

More than these subjective aspects, though, it is the problem of introducing the discipline—what is sociology, how is it defined, what are its objects of study—that I find vexing. My first meaningful engagement with sociology was through the lens of cultural studies, especially the contributions of scholars such as Stuart Hall, foregrounding the importance of colonial legacies particularly in relation to race, representation, metropolitan and postcolonial nationalisms, and questions of belonging. And, it was when I encountered the glimmers of what would be later called postcolonial feminisms through the writings of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Inderpal Grewal, Ann Laura Stoler, M. Jacqui Alexander, and others that my relationship to sociology came to be further modulated through attention to the histories of modernity and their gendered, racialized, and sexualized dimensions. Surely, ambivalence can be generative, but it can also be difficult to communicate to students taking the introductory class in sociology, as they do typically at my institution, in order to either meet a general education requirement or because it looks generally interesting.

The vast majority of introductory sociology texts and readers in the United States resolve this problem of the discipline's presentation by gesturing to or providing excerpts from C. Wright Mills' (1959) concept of the sociological imagination—as the ability to connect the life of an individual with the history of a society or the quality of mind essential to grasp the interplay of man (sic) and society, of biography and history, of self and world (p. 4). Starting with the sociological imagination not only helps distill the discipline for the uninitiated, but it boldly presents sociology as a call to critical awareness and action. Seeking to rescue sociology from its tedium and depoliticization by the 1950s in the United States, Mills' attention to social structures and individual agency, the relevance of history, and analysis of social apathy and unease can be most useful. But, the sociological imagination can also track closely with a conservative, Euro-American-centric sociology, whereby the foundational concepts of self, individual, and the social present pedagogical barriers to fostering a more complex relational perception of the past and the present.

In what follows, I identify the ambivalences implicit in the sociological imagination, especially in the axiomatic weaving of self and society, from the perspective of teaching an introductory sociology course. Reading the sociological imagination from a postcolonial feminist perspective, I note how it can and does encourage an inherently bounded and ahistorical assessment of sociology. Grounding the discussion in a recent iteration of the introductory sociology course, I reflect on the strategies that I use—successfully and unsuccessfully—toward a different and more complex understanding of sociology and its concerns. Keeping focus on especially the first part of the course design rather than the students, my purpose here is to gesture toward the tensions that continue to grip sociology and, more to the point, reflect on the kind of pedagogical labor necessary to connect what I teach to what I write. The first section of this essay briefly reviews postcolonial theory and its tense relationship to sociology in anticipation of the following segment, which offers a close reading of the sociological imagination and concepts of self and society.

## Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Sociology

Although multiple strands of postcolonial studies exist, its signature lies in unraveling histories and legacies of Euro-American colonialisms and imperialisms. For sure, colonial studies has a longer lineage, but setting postcolonial studies apart is a theoretical orientation concerned with the production of self and other—for example, colonizer and colonized, metropole and colony, white men and brown women—during and in the aftermath of colonial and imperial rule. Less concerned with periodizing or describing colonialism and post-colonialism, postcolonial theory is driven by a focus on the *relational*, if unequal, constitution of paradigmatic notions of selfhood as West and its others. Following Edward Said (1978), the emphasis has been on revealing the politics of knowledge production through which relations, practices, and legacies of colonial rule continue to endure (think here not only of

ongoing representations of the West or, for instance, Christianity, but also questionable notions of emerging markets, Islam, yoga, etc.)

The singular contribution of postcolonial feminist scholars has been to disaggregate notions of the self and social (nation, society, colony, etc.) by emphasizing the constitutive effects of gender, sexuality, and race.<sup>2</sup> For instance, postcolonial feminists have routinely called attention to the ways in which the “woman question” powered colonial practices and mediated relations between colonial and native male elites. In her turn, Ann Laura Stoler (2002) has understood the household as social to reveal the interplay of race, gender, sexuality, and nationalism in such intimate spaces. And, not least, postcolonial feminists have questioned Western feminist dualisms of self and other, and “here” and “there”—for example, Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s (1991) indictment of Western feminism’s self-referential productions of “Third World Women.”

Despite its considerable impact on a variety of other disciplines, postcolonial theory’s impress on sociology has been less than encouraging. Mainstream U.S. sociology has remained untouched even as the discipline’s relationship to postcolonial theory is more complicated than might appear at first glance. Julian Go (2013a) notes that from 2003 to 2011 not a single session included the word postcolonial in its title at the annual American Sociological Meetings, except that the assessment is predicated on disregarding the pockets of engagement with postcolonial theory that may not be named as such.<sup>3</sup> What is undeniable, though, is a lack of systematic engagement with postcolonial scholarship, leading Gurminder Bhambra (2007a) to lament the missing postcolonial revolution in sociology and provoking Stuart Hall (1996) to note the lack of global and non-European dimensions in the grand narrative of sociology.

***Despite its considerable impact on a variety of other disciplines, postcolonial theory’s impress on sociology has been less than encouraging. Mainstream U.S. sociology has remained untouched even as the discipline’s relationship to postcolonial theory is more complicated than might appear at first glance.***

Extending such appraisals of the discipline, Bhambra (2007b) argues that relying axiomatically on notions of rupture and difference, sociology frames the West as intrinsically different from so-called traditional and pre-modern societies and fosters Eurocentric assumptions of sociology. This is to say, sociology begins by taking modernity as its disciplinary object and views the West as the autochthonous protagonist of this history, thereby embedding Eurocentrism into its foundations (Bhambra 2007b, Bortolucci and Jansen 2013, Hall 1996). The upshot of such assessments is a more complex and paradoxical

rendering of sociology, whereby Euro-American-centric representations persist even as a variety of critical interventions—through transnational feminist sociology, public sociology, queer of color critique—are pressing against the discipline in ways that cannot be glossed over.

***Despite its considerable impact on a variety of other disciplines, postcolonial theory’s impress on sociology has been less than encouraging.***

Considered from a pedagogical standpoint, especially in relation to the introductory sociology course, the challenges of representing the discipline are manifold. How does one introduce sociology from a postcolonial feminist (and queer) perspective to students at my institution who are either completely new to the field or, when asked about their exposure to it, in a few cases have taken one course during their high school years? Can such a course be taught in a way that doesn’t simply reaffirm select narratives, especially the drama of modernity, the French and Industrial Revolutions, and such, but attempts to remake sociology by integrating the banalities of racial histories and colonial rule. Yet, would including such disciplinary tensions dilute a strong foundation in sociology for students who despite their promise are at an earlier phase of their intellectual development, often in their first or second semesters? Would, in fact, adding postcolonial scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Ann Laura Stoler and others to the syllabus make the course unrecognizable to other sociologists? To what extent does starting with the sociological imagination clear the path or not toward this more complex, relational, and pluralistic view of sociology for students? Carrying forward these difficulties, I begin by engaging Mills’ writings on the sociological imagination, especially the eponymous book’s introductory chapter, “The Promise,” which is typically excerpted in readers, while reflecting on experiences of teaching the introductory sociology course.

## Revisiting the Sociological Imagination, Destabilizing the Self and Society

Students taking the introductory sociology course with me begin with excerpts on the sociological imagination. Tracking Mills’ (1959) depiction of a period of acute social transition and instability, mildly described as “earthquakes of change” (p. 4), they follow his outline of chronic personal troubles and upheavals at the societal and worldwide level. As reflected in the class discussions, students relate easily to his examples of personal troubles, such as unemployment, marriage, and financial instability, if less so to societal issues in the manner of industrialization, the bureaucratization of authority and violence, monumental changes in world history due to decolonization and social revolutions. They respond to his emphasis on the importance of developing connections between individual lives and societal histories, or what he describes as the sociological imagination. Seeing the value

of this approach, these mostly woman-identified, middle-class and upwardly mobile working-class students speak surely in their first written assignment about societal impact on the difficulties of personal relationships, eating disorders, making it to college, bullying, body image, and such. Indeed, as one student said in the most recent iteration of the course, "I like the sociological imagination, I get it."

Effective in fostering a more critical awareness of the impact of social structures and forces on our lives, the sociological imagination for Mills is also an attempt at rescuing sociology from a morass of abstruse theory, vapid empiricism, and pre-occupation with method for method's sake. Perhaps therefore, students taking introduction to sociology respond to his efforts to breathe life into the discipline, make it more socially relevant, and jar them out of a sense of complacency or social paralysis due to what he sees as a loss of moral orientation. Yet, Mills' endorsement of sociology as a means of critically navigating societies and a world amidst monumental changes and crises is discomfiting, for it reproduces what Bhambra (2007b) has identified as sociology's role in defining the social through notions of rupture, modernity, and crisis. Thus, lost in this view of sociology is the discursive production of (perpetual) crises, transitions, and upheavals and, more to the point, the framing of the social along the lines of individual selves and societies! Undoubtedly important about Mills' intervention is that he gives, in the words of Todd Gitlin (date unavailable), human tragedy a social root through the sociological imagination, except that it matters how its constitutive elements—self and society—are being represented.

### **Dualistic Selves and Societies**

Throughout the chapter, Mills speaks interchangeably of the individual, the personal, and the self, which can be read in more than one way—toward a more radical publicly-oriented sociology or one that falsely universalizes a culturally and historically derived discipline. In parts of the book, he gestures toward the self as relational and, ideally, self-aware, which resonates with how feminists and queer scholars of color have used self-narratives and personal histories to rethink the production of knowledge and redefine the meaning of activism. For example, Andrea Smith (2005) centers Native women, interspersing their personal accounts throughout her book, to understand afresh issues of violence, sexuality, and the genocide of American Indians. In his turn, Mills extends the sociological imagination, for instance, to place an Indian Brahmin from the 1850s in relation to a pioneer farmer from Illinois and, in the appendix to the book, he exhorts sociologists in the making toward self-reflexive sociological practice, although these discussions do not figure into the introductory part of the text which gestures toward a universalized vision of the self.

A product of his time and setting, Mills implies a particular view of the self, which in his case, Gitlin notes, was full of "frontier insouciance."<sup>4</sup> As a result of an itinerant history of schooling in Austin, Texas, Madison, Wisconsin, and then living in Maryland and New York, Mills had this to say about himself, "Intellectually and culturally

I am as 'self-made' as it is possible to be."<sup>5</sup> In equal parts brave and lacking in the sociological imagination as Mills' self-characterization might be, the point is that the self is being invoked in ways that is tied to the rise of individualism in U.S. history. Thus, even though the personal may be an obvious starting point in an introductory sociology course, it activates cultural beliefs about autonomous individualism, as has been routinely apparent in class discussions and written assignments and the faultlines of this strategy become evident not just in sociology courses, but in other fields as well.

In an interdisciplinary first-year writing class at my institution, for instance, an assignment on narrating the self served as a means of locating it in preparation for engaging difference—especially along the lines of race, class, and gender. That is, the thinking goes, once we can get students to identify their selves, consider their personal troubles, then not only can we, following Mills, initiate their sociological imagination, but also help them bridge the frequently confounding differences between self and other. But, this view reinforces what Dawn Rae Davis (2010) has called the "mirroring effect," whereby course materials will center the experiences of culturally dominant students. Although drawn from women's studies courses, the insight is relevant to the discussion here, for the sociological imagination, too, presents the personal as the starting point of knowledge and it does not, in the words of Leela Fernandes (2013), encourage students to discover how to suspend their selves when learning about the world. Thus, as evident over and over again, students can be eloquent in class discussions on the sociological imagination about the influences of the family, media on their selves, but can remain unaware of the implications of their lack of interest in social events, such as the Arab Spring.<sup>6</sup>

***In an interdisciplinary first-year writing class at my institution, for instance, an assignment on narrating the self served as a means of locating it in preparation for engaging difference—especially along the lines of race, class, and gender. That is, the thinking goes, once we can get students to identify their selves, consider their personal troubles, then not only can we, following Mills, initiate their sociological imagination, but also help them bridge the frequently confounding differences between self and other.***

Taken further, this notion of the self reactivates binaries of self and the constitutive other. Reading the work of prominent symbolic interactionists from a Buddhist theoretical lens, Matthew Immergut and Peter Kaufman (2014) compellingly note that sociology is shaped by a self-other dualism due to which the self is inherently and implicitly conceptualized as threatened and anxious; this,

despite Mead's notion of the self as socially constructed and interdependent. Immergut and Kaufman's take could benefit from engaging questions of power in their assessments of the self-other dualism, which would help explain why the anxious self often shows up in the classroom, especially around questions of racism and racial differences. Consider here the tensions, both overt and especially the awkward silences, discomforts, and unease that bubble up when attempting to come to grips with race, racial privileges, immigration into the United States from Central America, and such. Animating the apprehensive self through the sociological imagination in class or through an assignment is likely to imperil it further once questions of privilege and inequality are centered, thereby hardening the barriers to confronting self and racialized others.

Further, the sociological imagination, the ability to "achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within themselves" (Mills, 1959, p. 5) can be interpreted to connect the individual self to society and, implicitly, the national state. "The Promise" largely links the individual to society and societally bound social structures, even as it weaves in the language of milieu here and there, which is to say, notions of historical and social context emphasized in the sociological imagination need not be limited to national states. Indeed, as a later chapter, "Uses of History," in the book attests, Mills (1959) took a skeptical look toward nation-states, seeing it as a humanly created history-making unit. Yet, a previous chapter, "The Human Variety," also unambiguously states that even though social scientists do not always limit themselves to national social structures, this focus provides a suitable level of generality.

Insofar as society is understood as an aggregate of associated persons (institutions and structures), the national state is not the only or even the obvious meaning of society. Still, sociology has a long history of discursively producing the national state through the concept of society, normalizing it as the irreducible container of individuals, and undergirding it with a hierarchical assessment of the world, which syncs with the discussion in Mills' introductory chapter. The point is not to efface the ambivalences and paradoxes in Mills' program for sociology, but to note its dilemmas as a prototype for knowing the discipline. In a rendition of sociology that privileges the self and connects it to society within an international system of states, one that is also devoid of any historical address of the colonial contexts in which nationalisms in the metropolises and the colonies took shape, it becomes harder than ever to dislodge widespread assumptions about the "givenness" of the United States, its inherent distinctions from other nations, or its hierarchical place in the world.

### **Adapting the Sociological Imagination**

That the sociological imagination continues to serve as a cornerstone of a conservative, Eurocentric and modernist vision of the discipline is well evident in the annals of sociology.<sup>7</sup> But, seeking to stretch Mills toward a different interpretation of sociology, in the most recent version of the course I sought to deploy it differently than before.

Instead of muddling through my ambivalence around the sociological imagination, I strove to address head-on its strengths and limitations in setting the stage for a more critical and complicated understanding of sociology. Useful about this concept is that it helps me give students a definitive response to the opening question—what is distinctive about sociology—especially as they begin to encounter the discipline (perhaps for the first and last time). Pairing the excerpts with Donna Gaines' (2013) well-known piece, "Teenage Wasteland: Suburbia's Dead-End Kids," and my institution's version of the "It Gets Better" campaign, notwithstanding the valid criticisms directed against it, seemed to be effective in grappling with the sociological imagination.<sup>8</sup> Illustrating the sociological imagination in these ways reinforced Mills' point about the self as socially influenced, but also honed the awareness that some selves are more vulnerable to the social and the perception that some of us, especially those who conform to dominant expectations of gender and sexuality, are privileged as a result of the social.

Highlighting the usefulness of the sociological imagination, as well as explicitly noting how the concept needs to be extended, I underscored four points during the inaugural discussions. First, selves are not autonomous and that we are relationally differentiated—lesbian identities only make sense relative to what is understood as being gay, heterosexual, bisexual, for instance. Second, every personal story matters (and of course it does), except that some lives are more vulnerable to social effects due to, for example, racial, class, religious affiliations, gender expression and/or sexual orientation. Third, mediating the relationship between self and societies are institutional sites and cultural spaces, such as family, peer groups, and community (where homophobia, transphobia, racism, and such can be most intensely experienced or even mitigated).

Of these, the second and third points seemed to resonate more clearly, provoking lively class discussions and active contributions especially from students who have known marginalization. For example, a queer-identified White student spoke about how growing up in New York City amidst a progressive school environment made life easier for her, while a Muslim-identified student narrated how being part of her religious community helps her navigate anti-Islamic sentiments in the United States. The insights, the personal offerings came fast and thick on these points, while the fourth point—that the social is contingently defined, whereby it can be the national state or a regional context or global circuits and spaces—did not appear to register, for it did not flow clearly from the readings and examples that I had used. Not surprisingly, then, ideas of the self as connected and the social as contingently understood were not reflected in the short assignment asking students to apply the sociological imagination. Rather, this assignment, for which students could use a variety of creative modes such as a poem, an op-ed, short story, among others, was more successful as this mix of women, queer, and transgender-identified, White, Latina, Asian, middle- and working-class students wrote compellingly about how the relations between self and society are modulated by power and privilege.

Continuing the strand about the distinctiveness of sociology, the next segment exposed students to the concept of social constructionism, showing that notions of self, society, institutions, spaces, beliefs, perceptions, the world, indeed our reality, are socially constructed. Assigning readings explaining this concept and also pinning it to a focus on race and gender was designed to complicate received wisdom about nature and biology. More so, seeing race and gender as socially constructed early on in the syllabus not only meant that they did not come in as “add-ons” later in the semester, but this also encouraged students to see the self in terms of groups and collectives—African Americans, women, etc.—and apprehend the social as historically constituted. For instance, it allowed me to note the shifting understandings of race across time and the ways in which these mutable discourses affect people collectively. Through these readings and discussions on race and gender, I could also more seamlessly return to the point that selves are relationally, but hierarchically, produced. One student’s rueful admission, that this was all shaking up her worldview, was more heartening than I was able to express in class at the time.

***The recent version of the introductory sociology course was my partially successful effort at presenting students with a living and breathing discipline, centrally concerned with issues of power—race, colonialism, social class, gender, sexuality, and nation.***

If re-positioning the sociological imagination and coupling it with social constructionism aided in presenting a solid though nuanced introduction to sociology, then the next section allowed me to grapple with the dilemmas of historicizing sociology. Departing from the previous iterations of the introductory course, I added a new section, “Histories and Legacies of the Discipline.” Providing students with an overview of the history of sociology and the play of the French and Industrial Revolutions, the readings worked their way to the holy trinity—Marx, Weber, and Durkheim. The glazed looks on students’ faces during this overview, which also included a history of sociology in the United States, gave me pause about the extent to which I ought to delve into these pasts. “The readings were difficult to get through,” they collectively admitted in heavy tones. Their responses also redoubled my efforts to help them see the continued relevance of the early interventions—through connecting Marx to the Occupy movements and connecting Weber to debutante balls that still happen in the United States. Not only did this resuscitate the students, but it also allowed me to engage their attention on the missing histories of race and colonialism in sociology’s nascence.

Laying bare the promise and pitfalls of sociology in its early years, the students and I arrived at the importance of W.E.B. Dubois’ (1903/1996) interventions around race and then turned to selections from Huanani-Kay Trask’s (1999)

writings on the colonization of Hawai’i in the next segment, “Revising the Discipline: Race, Colonialism, Nation.” Bringing “home” the ongoing colonial history of mainland United States and then transitioning to questions of nation, nationalism, and belonging in the contemporary context through a cluster of lively readings were my attempts at illustrating how what counts as the social is both contingent and connected. That is, contemporary discourses of nationalism and belonging play out against the foil of the United States as a settler colonial society, the anxieties of immigration, especially from Mexico, among other things. The extent to which these readings and discussions were effective is unclear since I never tested the students on them, though I take as encouraging the one comment on the evaluations that more coverage of colonialism and race would be welcome. This approach enabled me to make them attentive to the politics of knowledge production that create canons selectively, neglect histories unfolding during the discipline’s heyday, and normalize the national as the social. Most of all, it set the stage for presenting sociology as a complex, relevant, imperfect, and dynamic discipline.

The recent version of the introductory sociology course was my partially successful effort at presenting students with a living and breathing discipline, centrally concerned with issues of power—race, colonialism, social class, gender, sexuality, and nation. It was aimed at conveying understandings of the self—at the individual, collective, even national level—as different but relational, relational but unequal. And, more, it was designed to reinforce the simple point that we—the self, the community, the nation—are all inextricably linked to one another through our pasts and our contentious presents. The purpose was to help students see the social as potentially ranging from communities and neighborhoods (through one of the books assigned) to institutions (such as the media) to nations and transnational circuits of migration. Thus, by the time we got to carework and migration toward the end of class, it was possible to build on the unequal linkages between nations of the global north and south and the (mostly) immigrant women who provide the labor and the (mostly) women whose lives are facilitated as a result.

Did this attempt at presenting sociology through a postcolonial feminist (and queer) framework make a difference in terms of how students understood and will take forward sociology’s promise? I could not tell from the class discussions or the assignments, for they did not seem significantly different compared to previous iterations of the course. It appears, though, that the student evaluations are more enthusiastic than ever (our students tend to be generous to us as instructors), with more specific comments about learning about sociology, becoming interested in the discipline, and understanding sociological concepts. Yet, will students recall these concepts or will they more easily remember the specifics of the examples used to illustrate them? Will this approach energize students to intervene in the world around them? Will any of them ever wish to take another sociology course again? I am not sure, but it felt a lot better teaching a version of the course that is closer to the sociology I know and believe in.

## Coda

The sociological imagination can invoke and encourage different interpretations of sociology. On the one hand, it may herald a notion of the self that is most likely to register with the lives of the privileged, for those who stand most to gain by the discourses of individuality, autonomy, sovereignty. Instead of the counter-potential of the self that is implicit in Mills and well evident in the appraisals of feminist and queer scholars of color, it becomes neutralizing. It is not that other ways of thinking about the self or relating to the self do not emerge in the classroom. Rather, the problem is that the sociological imagination can exhort inferences of the self and society as discrete and autonomous.

Much like the self, society can be implicitly represented through the sociological imagination as self-contained, rather than fundamentally porous and profoundly interconnected. Parallel to the work of having to complicate the self once it is already elicited in a simplistic way, pursuing this line of thinking with issues such as immigration in class presents the problem of having to trouble the notion of borders after having already affirmed them. The crux of the difficulties raised through interpreting the sociological imagination thus is that while it can usefully open up discussions about the impact of society on our lives and the possibility of individual agency, it stops short of laying the foundations for us, as instructors and students, to come to grips with dominant discourses of individualism, racism, nationalism, immigration, and such that are pervasive in the United States.

At the same time, it is possible to teach the sociological imagination differently, but only by pressing against disciplinary legacies. As a visionary sociologist held to be ahead of his time, Mills lays the scaffold for such an endeavor, to an extent. Extending Mills, for example, Michael Burawoy (2008) notes in his "Open Letter to C. Wright Mills" that needed alongside the sociological imagination is a political imagination, one that exhorts sociologists toward engagement with civil society and the creation of a more just social world. At the heart of Burawoy's response to Mills is the spot-on assessment, following Foucault, that knowledge is not liberating. Taking this Foucauldian critique further, other scholars seek a more fundamental disciplinary shift by bringing to bear a postcolonial critique on sociology. Thus, José H. Bortoluci and Robert Jansen (2013) call for a postcolonial sociology that more thoroughly engages, and contributes to, the study of colonial and postcolonial Latin America. In their turn, Sérgio Costa (2007) and Jayati Lal (2008) each calls for (de) provincializing sociology (pace Dipesh Chakrabarty), by way of enriching the discipline and historicizing especially its American roots that appear speciously universal. And, we could take such critical evaluations further still in the vein of what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1990) has described as, "Europe as an Other." This, for Spivak, means uncovering how Europe triumphed as a Sovereign Subject by constituting its others, and offering a critique of imperialism that would, and here is the crucial point, restore a sovereignty for the

lost self of the colonies so that Europe could be put in place of the other that it always was. Decentering Europe and the United States is a challenge that I still have to come to grips with in my introductory sociology class, but it is well worth pursuing, collectively.

## Bibliography

- Bhambra, Gurinder. 2007a. "Sociology and Postcolonialism: Another 'Missing' Revolution?" *Sociology* 41(5): 871-884.
- Bhambra, Gurinder. 2007b. *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bortoluci, José H. and Robert S. Jansen. 2013. "Toward a Postcolonial Sociology: The View From Latin America" *Political Power and Social Theory*, 24:199-229.
- Burawoy, Michael. 2008. "Open Letter to C. Wright Mills" *Antipode* 40(3): 365-375.
- Costa, Sérgio. 2007. "'Deprovincializing' Sociology: The Post Colonial Contribution" Translated from *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais*. São Paulo, 21(60):117-134.
- Davis, Dawn Rae, 2010. "Unmirroring Pedagogies: Teaching with Intersectional and Transnational Methods in the Women and Gender Studies Classroom" *Feminist Formations*, 22 (1):136-162.
- Dubois, W.E.B. (1903/1996). *Souls of Black Folk*. Penguin Classics.
- Fernandes, Leela. 2013. *Transnational Feminism in the United States: Knowledge, Ethics, Power*. New York and London: New York University Press.
- Gaines, Donna. 2013. "Teenage Wasteland: Suburbia's Dead-end Kids" in *Mapping the Social Landscape: Readings in Sociology*, edited by Susan J. Ferguson. McGraw Hill, 7th edition.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1990. *Sociology: A Brief but Critical Introduction*. Second Edition. Macmillan.
- Go, Julian. 2013a. "For a Postcolonial Sociology" *Theory and Society*, 42:25-55
- Go, Julian, ed. 2013b. *Postcolonial Sociology*. Emerald.
- Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books.
- Grewal, Inderpal. 1996. *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire, and the Cultures of Travel*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Grzanka, Patrick and Emily S. Mann. 2014. "Queer Youth Suicide and the Psychopolitics of It Gets Better" *Sexualities*, 17 (4):369-393.
- Hall, Stuart. 1996. "When was the Post-colonial? Thinking at the Limit" in *The Post-colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, edited by Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti. London: Routledge.
- Immergut, Matthew and Peter Kauman. 2014. "A Sociology of No-Self: Applying Buddhist Social Theory to Symbolic Interaction" *Symbolic Interaction*, 37(2):264-282.
- Kim-Puri, H. J. 2005. "Conceptualizing Gender-Sexuality-State-Nation: An Introduction" *Gender & Society*, 19 (April):137-159.
- McLennan, Gregor. 2000. "Sociology's Eurocentrism and the 'Rise of the West' Revisited" *European Journal of Social Theory*, 3:275.
- Mills, C. Wright. 1959. *The Sociological Imagination*. London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 1991. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, edited by Chandra Talpade

Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres. Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press.

Patil, Vrushali. 2007. *Negotiating Decolonization in the United Nations: Politics of Space, Identity, and International Community*. New York and London: Routledge.

Rodriguez, Encarnación Gutiérrez, Manuela Boatcă and Sérgio Costa, eds. 2010. *Decolonizing Sociology: Transdisciplinary Approaches*. Ashgate.

Said, Edward. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.

Smith, Andrea. 2005. *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1985. "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (1):243-261.

Spivak, Gayatri Charavorty. 1990. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: Harvard University Press.

Stoler, Ann Laura. 2002. *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of Berkeley Press.

Trask, Huanani-Kay. 1999. *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'i*. University of Hawai'i Press.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This paper is indebted to the rich conversations with Hyun Sook Kim, comments from Vrushali Patil, and feedback from the editors, Frinde Maher and Linda Dittmar.

<sup>2</sup> Questions of race and racialization were always at the heart of postcolonial theory due to the influences of pioneering scholars such as Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, and Edward Said. Feminist scholars, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Ann Stoler, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Audre Lorde, among others, variously honed thinking on the co-constitutions of colonial rule, anti-colonial nationalism, race, gender, and sexuality.

<sup>3</sup> For example, the Caucus on Transnational Approaches to Gender and Sexuality, part of the American Sociological Association, includes a number of feminist scholars who routinely pay attention to the imperatives of post/colonialism. For example, see the work of Vrushali Patil (2007) or the piece by H. J. Kim-Puri (2005). Further, some sociologists engaging postcolonial theory have sought refuge outside the discipline's professional organizations. More recent work on sociology and postcolonial theory includes volumes by Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez, Manuela Boatcă and Sérgio Costa (2010) and Julian Go (2013b).

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.uni-muenster.de/PeaCon/dgs-mills/mills-texte/GitlinMills.htm>, consulted on September 15, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Gitlin, *ibid*.

<sup>6</sup> It is not that students are uninterested in other cultures, such as when several of them recently asked to read about gender in other contexts. But, when probed further, the interest was motivated less by learning and curiosity and more by the desire to encounter the unusual, the different, or what they see as the precursors to modern notions of queer and transgender identities. Davis (2010) also calls this the touristic imaginary, through which students wish to encounter a racial and/or global other in ways that do not unsettle or critically engage their privilege; p. 145.

<sup>7</sup> For example, see the numerous editions of introductory sociology textbooks by the eminent sociologist, Anthony Giddens, including his book, *Sociology: A Brief but Critical Introduction*.

<sup>8</sup> "It Gets Better" was an internet-based video project initiated by Dan Savage and Terry Miller in September 2010 to combat despair and suicide among LGBT youth, who are socially isolated and vulnerable to bullying or harm. This inspired hundreds of versions disseminated through YouTube, including one from my institution, aimed at showing support for LGBT youth. For a particularly useful critique of the "It Gets Better" project, see Grzanka and Mann (2014).



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://www.library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://www.library.pitt.edu/dscribe/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.pitt.edu/press/).

# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Fishing

by Danielle Legros Georges



DANIELLE LEGROS GEORGES  
PHOTO CREDIT TO PRISCILLA HARMEL

## Fishing

*Psychoalphadiscobetabioaquadooloop*

—George Clinton, Aquaboogie

and don't

"close"

The first word learned

In this language: fish.

turn

notions

My eyes: sharks poised

at mouth openings

returns dissolves

to stir a tango

to feed when lips and teeth

engaged tongue to propel

of idiom. Each flip

of his foot grounds

sound forward. I gulped

greedy for decoding,

each flip of my foot

seeking ground, I say:

my new world

tongue coated

*fout!* He says:

Now the dance.

curled about

inflexible consonants

© Danielle Legros Georges

"Fishing" was first published in

*Ma Come`re*, Volume 1, 1998

like a great whale exerting

Its continental tail.

Here lights that

"turn off"



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



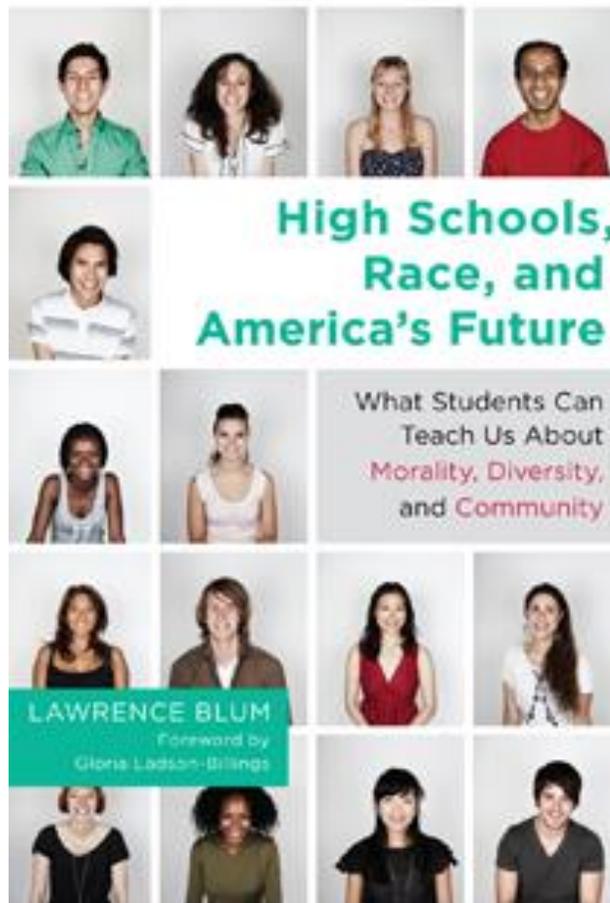
This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://www.library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://www.library.pitt.edu/dscribe/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.library.pitt.edu/).

# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Review: High Schools, Race, and America's Future: What Students Can Teach Us About Morality, Diversity, and Community by Lawrence Blum

Reviewed by Sophie Bell



## **High Schools, Race, and America's Future: What Students Can Teach Us About Morality, Diversity, and Community by Lawrence Blum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2012)**

Lawrence Blum, a UMass Boston professor and the author of a memoir about teaching a course on race and racism to high school students, has great faith in the moral reasoning of young people who learn about the truthful history of race in the Americas. In his teaching memoir, *High Schools, Race, and America's Future: What Students Can Teach Us About Morality, Diversity, and Community*, Blum argues that young people develop as civic, moral, intellectual, emotional, and social beings when presented with accurate information on race. When this information is shared in a mixed-race classroom, they develop a "civic attachment to a broader group of future fellow citizens of our national political community" than most students encounter in mixed-race classes and schools (187). According to Blum, "racial literacy"—the reasoned moral discussion of race in a mixed-race group—should be a part of every high school curriculum. Indeed, his vision of racial literacy appears just as urgent and compelling an "outcome" of secondary education as other competing literacies measured on increasingly high-stakes tests.

***Blum's deep curiosity about the moral thinking of his students serves him especially well in the classroom and on the page. His habit of not speaking when he is not sure how to help students move forward in their thinking is one of his most powerful pedagogical tools.***

Blum's teaching experience makes a great story for Americans interested in learning and teaching about race in a clear-headed and collaborative way. In this review, I will distill Blum's story into a few principles that his course put into action, explicitly or implicitly.

### **Teach race locally.**

Blum concretely identifies the diversity of the urban high school where he taught his class, the Cambridge Rindge and Latin School (CRLS), as the result of progressive housing laws. These laws created affordable housing in Cambridge, a city with extremely high housing prices, and ensured that students of diverse household incomes were sent to school together in the same buildings. Following a national pattern, students of color are underrepresented in advanced classes despite the overall integration of the school. Blum's goals at CRLS were two-fold: 1. He wanted to teach high school students about the historical roots of racial inequality in the United States in order to increase their "racial literacy"; 2. He wanted to

teach an "advanced," "college-level" course on race to a group of students whose racial demographics mirrored that of the larger school. (Black and Latino students are 52% of the student body, but only 28% of the students enrolled in advanced classes.)

### **Don't teach race alone.**

Blum's course took place at the same high school that his own children attended. One was a student and another a teacher at the time of his teaching. Added to this family and community network, the high school partnered with the college where Blum teaches moral philosophy, through the college's "urban mission." People at both institutions pushed to make the course happen and keep it going. Blum mentions key roles played by administrators, other teachers, teaching assistants, graduate assistants, security guards, and other parents. This is not the Hollywood movie about the lone white teacher who arrives out of nowhere with a leather jacket and a couple of broken rules to overcome all the social barriers his students of color have previously encountered. (It would, however, be fun to watch the movie version of this teaching memoir with Ed Harris as Blum.) Blum was deeply embedded in a community both fractured by racial divisions and determined to keep fighting back against them.

### **Teach race historically.**

Blum's course focused on the development of eighteenth-century concepts of race in the context of New World slavery, up through nineteenth-century critiques of it. (He spells out the sequence of readings and assignments in detailed appendices.) This opens the course up to charges of a "black-white" lens that obscures the experiences of other Americans of color, a charge Blum doesn't address. If he did, I'd guess he would refer readers to the line from his introduction when he calls slavery "a central idea in the course and in the development of the American idea of race" (15). His gamble appears to be that a strong sense of the history of slavery can provide tools for examining other manifestations of racism in history and contemporary life in the Americas. He also punctuates the long historical narrative of the course with occasional contemporary materials—articles and films that draw on current racial controversies and incidents. He depicts many conversations with students in which he tried to help them use their historical knowledge to evaluate contemporary situations, such as use of the n-word, or ideas about "good" and "bad" hair and skin tone discrimination.

### **Listen to young people talk about race.**

Blum's deep curiosity about the moral thinking of his students serves him especially well in the classroom and on the page. His habit of *not* speaking when he is not sure how to help students move forward in their thinking is one of his most powerful pedagogical tools. In chapters 5 through 12, Blum takes on tough issues for a white teacher, like internalized and horizontal racism among people of color. In these sections, the book fleshes out what I think he means by phrases like "moral self-concept," "racial literacy," and "civic attachment" that weave together the full complexity of his intellectual, moral, emotional, and social goals for the course. Blum

thinks it matters that students work out their moral and civic positions together through dialogue. And he apparently possesses the patience and respect to listen while they do it. He spends pages unpacking transcribed conversations, reflecting on the moves students made and their possible meanings. He describes a classroom conversation about whether the n-word can have a subversive or even positive connotation, which he feels out of his depth facilitating. Having decided (ambivalently) not to initiate the conversation himself, it comes up in class anyway. In his agonized account of the conversation, he ends up listening his way through the exchange and determining that students actually built community through the process of reasoning their way through the topic. He is also a canny observer of students' minds, noting one student's ability to bring old points into fresh conversations to expand the scope of the class's thinking, or another student's habit of welcoming corrections to his viewpoints to build his own understanding.

**Teach race as a moral question (as well as a civic, emotional, intellectual one).**

Blum is unequivocal in his own opinions on the racial questions with which his students struggle. In fact, his commitment to the morality of issues related to race reverberates in powerful, even unexpected ways. Zooming in on the historical origin of what people skirt around in the "achievement gap" conversations—the "ideology of black inferiority" (113), Blum takes his students to an historical text many educators avoid due to its naked, disturbing articulation of white racism against African Americans—Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Blum is concerned that sharing this text with students could deepen their cynicism about white racism or paralyze them in other ways. Jarringly, Blum states, "I wanted to help students understand 'black intellectual inferiority' as an idea— an evil idea, but an idea nevertheless" (90). You don't hear much about evil, let alone evil ideas, in most

educational or social science publications on race in schools. As a moral philosopher by training, this is a legitimate and refreshing move. Establishing that the notion of black intellectual inferiority is evil, he can invite students to engage Jefferson's racist assessment of black intelligence complexly. Blum "wanted students to see that ideas could be examined, analyzed, broken into parts, and further scrutinized— even when the ideas themselves were very emotionally charged" (101). He shows them how this was done by two African American contemporaries of Jefferson as well, Benjamin Banneker and David Walker. He then asks his students to garner not only moral and civic, but also psychic and collective benefits from their own head-on intellectual engagement with unbridled racism, using the tools of history, critical reading, and community that the class offered them. As he explains, "Although blacks are most damaged by the failure to reject inherent black inequality, all students are morally, civically, and personally damaged by an inability to see those of all other groups as equals" (113). To avoid the "colorblind" response to the poisonous logic of Jefferson's racism, Blum guides his students on a kind of intellectual exorcism of the legacy of such thinking in our minds.

Blum's good ideas should get in the hands of many teachers, administrators, and parents who want to try such things in schools, or to evaluate or rethink their current practices. His critiques of segregated schools and classrooms, and the emptiness of "high expectations" in serving students of color, mean that he should be read by the architects of policies like Race to the Top and assessment regimes like the Common Core standards. Further, the university-high school collaboration he was part of makes participants in the Early College movement into good audience members as well. This class is a powerful metaphor for a racially literate society, as well as a thoughtful narrative of a valuable educational experiment.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



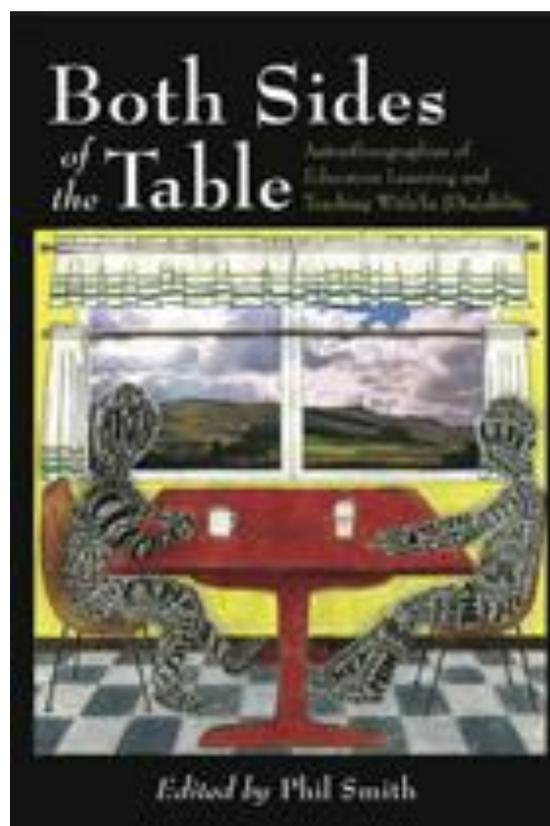
This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://www.library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://www.library.pitt.edu/dscribe/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.library.pitt.edu/).

# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Review: Both Sides of the Table: Autoethnographies of Educators Learning and Teaching With/In [Dis]ability by Phil Smith

Reviewed by Josh Lukin



## **Both Sides of the Table: Autoethnographies of Educators Learning and Teaching With/In [Dis]ability by Phil Smith (Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2014)**

In Phil Smith's anthology *Both Sides of the Table: Autoethnographies of Educators Learning and Teaching With/In [Dis]ability*, twelve education scholars recount the experience of disability in their lives and those of their families. Smith's goal is to challenge conventional approaches to education and disability by presenting a wide range of autoethnographies, creative memoirs that seek to locate the self within and against its surrounding culture. The narratives challenge the expert wisdom of educational, legal, and medical bureaucracies; they offer, or encourage us to imagine, alternatives to conventional relationships between doctor and patient, teacher and student, or service provider and client. Their settings range far beyond the classroom to encompass many realms in which the scholars have dealt with disability in their lives and those of their families and students — the book's scenes span hospitals, jail, kitchens, swimming pools, departments of social services, literal and figurative closets, and the streets of 1980s Portland.

***Despite the anthology's focus on the field of education and the personal narrative, Smith's contributors cover an immense range of perspectives.***

Despite the anthology's focus on the field of education and the personal narrative, Smith's contributors cover an immense range of perspectives. U.S. graduate student Dené Granger writes of her struggles with ableism, class oppression, and the pressures of diagnoses and disability disclosure, offering a powerful critique of "the myth of meritocracy." New Zealand scholar Bernadette Macartney paints a disconcerting picture of the contrast between her daughter's creative and ebullient personality as perceived by her family and the endless disappointments the child experiences in an educational system supposedly designed to accommodate her. City University of New York professor David J. Connor writes conscientiously and movingly about the role disability plays in his large British family, dramatizing the tension between working-class and professional values and modeling how he prompts his students to reflect on who has shaped their understanding of disability. All the contributions argue, implicitly or directly, that disability justice requires respect for personal experience, dialogue among the disabled and those affected by their loved ones' disability, and a radical re-envisioning of the relationship between professionals and laypersons.

*Both Sides of the Table* promises to use the openness of personal narrative — its resistance to quantification, categorization, and reductivism — to combat the

oppressiveness of expert wisdom and discourses that objectify disabled people. The risks inherent in such a project are that the narratives will reproduce the hierarchies they hope to contest. No one, after all, invents a completely novel account of their personal experience: we use narratives that are already present in the discourse to make sense of what we live through. In particular when one criticizes professional training, the temptation is to create a narrative that culminates in self-congratulation and complacency, so that one can celebrate having humanized the profession when one has in fact reinscribed its authority. The fields of Medical Humanities and Narrative Medicine, for example, try hard to make medical students compassionate and critical; but sometimes their work reinforces the professional/layperson binary, enabling physicians to see themselves as possessing one more set of professional skills, with which they can frame patients as heartwarming objects of their benevolence. What mitigates the risk of these narratives being assimilated into existing power dynamics is the range and openness of the contributions to Smith's anthology: each is in a very different style, and most strive to be open to interpretation — as Elizabeth Grace's elegant "Autistethnography" puts it, "Maybe the reader can make inferences."

***The book's range of perspectives also challenges any tendency to draw pat or comforting conclusions from its narratives.***

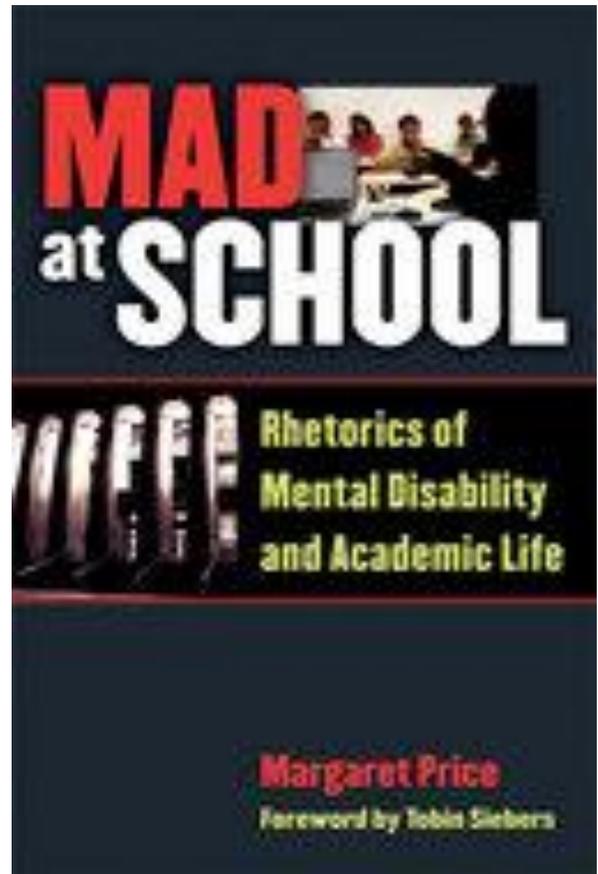
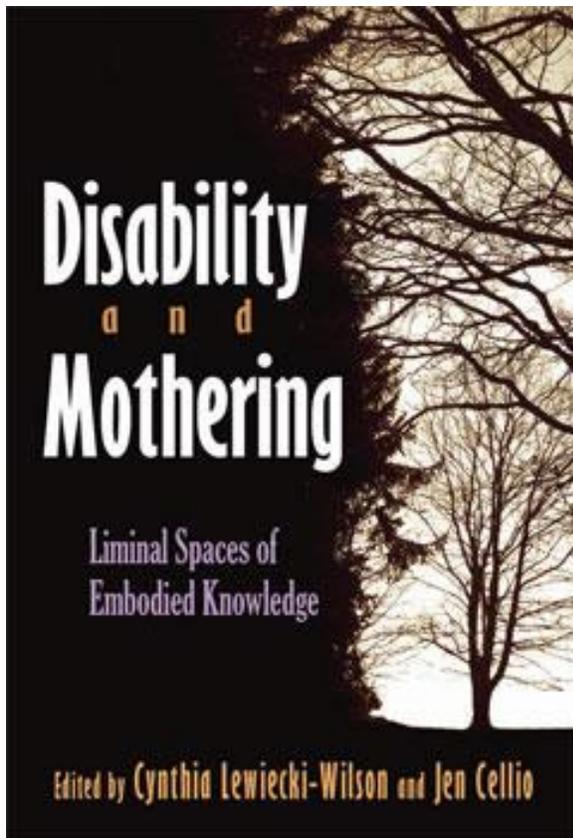
The book's range of perspectives also challenges any tendency to draw pat or comforting conclusions from its narratives. The title, *Both Sides of the Table*, refers to the table at which educators and parents negotiate an Individualized Education Plan for disabled students; but given that the book gives voice to disabled scholars and students, parents with disabled children, children of disabled parents, university educators, K-12 educators, special ed teachers, and disability scholars, that table's got to be at least an octagon: the book renders it impossible to disentangle all those identities and turn the stories into parables of how We should deal with Them. The diversity of genre and tone among its contents is another of the book's many strengths. Michael Peacock's "The Bad Apple" is a lengthy poem that dramatizes his life as a gay American man with bipolar disorder, citing entomology, myth, musical theatre, and history to render his struggles and what he hopes to bring from them to the classroom. Erin McCloskey's "An Open Letter to Wyatt" is, like Macartney's piece, an account of a mother dealing with the educational system's treatment of her disabled child. McCloskey explains how her own experiences as a special educator led her to resist labeling students and to resist the school's pressure to classify her child as autistic. Liz McCall begins her beautifully-written and grueling "A New Chance to Matter" with her first experiences teaching in a special ed classroom and then recounts how her commitment to that field, and her conviction that she's the right person to be there for "difficult" students, has roots in her solitary battle to get the system to care about her father's psychoses. Ultimately, both the bleaker and the

more joyful essays remain open-ended: the emphasis on the personal never turns them into cheery tales of therapeutic individualism .

One of the book's great successes is that its contents exceed the claims Smith makes for them in his introductory and concluding chapters — as he implies when he argues that the "identity" that autoethnographies present is innately too elusive to pin down. Smith hopes to redefine educational research in ways that attend to the voice of its "subjects"; he aspires to criticize scientism and the Enlightenment-based mission of the educational system, with its need to categorize and judge everyone it can absorb. The book does both well. And it also addresses issues of gender — the majority of the authors are women, and the most dramatic indictments of the system are tales of women interacting with unyielding authority figures on behalf of their parents or children. It also raises questions about the social model of disability: that model's claim to foreground the subjectivity of disabled people is tested when a mother makes decisions on how to represent her developmentally disabled child or a daughter her terminally ill father. Indeed, Connor and McCloskey specifically address their concern about whether their representations of their family are just. The contributors' sensitive and provocative approaches result in a book that exceeds the

sum of its parts.

As a scholarly source and a classroom resource, *Both Sides of the Table* could be put into dialogue with other disability studies texts that emphasize parenting or educational institutions, such as Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson and Jen Cellio's anthology, *Disability and Mothering: Liminal Spaces of Embodied Knowledge* or Margaret Price's *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life*. The experiences and arguments it presents deserve attention well beyond the walls of education colleges.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://www.library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://www.dscribe.com/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.press.pitt.edu/).

# RADICAL TEACHER

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

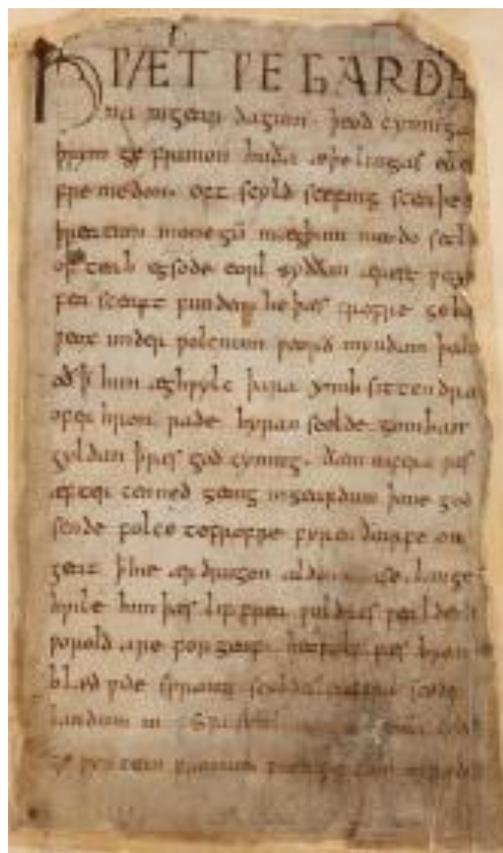
No new Teaching Notes have come in over the transom in the last few months, so I decided to re-publish two oldies.

— Bob Rosen, Teaching Notes editor

## Teaching Note: Reflections of a Transgender Medievalist

by Angelique Davi

from *Radical Teacher* #77 (2006)



FIRST PAGE OF BEOWULF IN COTTON VITELLIUS A. XV

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.

***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.***

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 were 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.

***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.***

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 for 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.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://www.library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://www.library.pitt.edu/dscribe/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.library.pitt.edu/).

# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Teaching Note: Mad at History

by Robyn C. Spencer

from *Radical Teacher* #85 (2009)



STONO REBELLION  
COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

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 didn't 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'd ever encountered. Although his work had structural issues, the content was thoughtful and sincere. I didn't "get it" until the day he raised his hand and asked: "Now that 'we' have the chance should Obama enslave white people?"

I'd 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.

***"Now that 'we' have the chance should Obama enslave white people?"***

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 didn't 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 hadn't 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.

***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."***

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." [i] 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." [ii] 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." [iii] 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.

\* Name changed.

#### Notes

- i Alice Walker, *Her Blue Body Everything We Know: Earthling Poems 1965-1990* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004), 374.
- ii Nell Painter, *Southern History Across the Color Line* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, April 2002), 6.
- iii James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial Press, 1963), 95.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://www.library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://www.dscribe.com/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.pitt.edu/press/).

# RADICAL TEACHER

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

News for Educational Workers

by Leonard Vogt



TWITTER LSE STUDENTS' UNION

## Student Protest

Students joined teachers, parents, and workers on December 2, 2014 in a nationwide walkout honoring Michael Brown, shot down by officer Darren Wilson on August 9 in Ferguson, Missouri. The walkout occurred in over 80 cities, in 30 states, and on 40 college campuses at 12:01 P. M., the exact time of the shooting. The walkout also occurred exactly one week after a Ferguson grand jury announced its decision not to indict officer Wilson for the death of Michael Brown (portside.org, December 5, 2014).

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar writes ([www.jacobinmag.com](http://www.jacobinmag.com), November 12, 2014) about his college athletic career forty years ago when bringing fame and money to UCLA left him "too broke to do much but study, practice, and play." Any extra money he could make had to come from spring break and summer low level jobs. He writes that little has changed in 40 years, except that the NCAA, television broadcasters, and colleges and universities are making more money than ever before. For examples, the NCAA makes \$1 billion annually from their March contracts with CBS and Turner; the NCAA president makes \$1.7 million a year; and the ten highest paid coaches make between \$2 million and \$9 million a year. At the same time, college athletes on scholarships, unlike students on academic scholarships, are not allowed to earn money beyond their scholarships; athletic scholarships often fall about \$3,200 short of the financial needs of the students; and athletic scholarships can be taken away if the players are injured and can no longer contribute to the team. With this in mind, it is entirely possible that a student on athletic scholarship might end up without an education at all.

On November 19, 2014, students in the United Kingdom marched in the thousands for "Free Education" as a direct challenge to austerity cuts to higher education imposed by the conservative government led by David Cameron. A coalition of student-led groups published a letter in *The Guardian* explaining their demands: "Today we are stepping up our campaign against tuition fees and education cuts with the biggest student national demonstration for years. As student debt soars and staff working conditions deteriorate, it is clear that the marketization of education is failing students and workers alike." Using Germany's elimination of tuition fees a months earlier as an example of the possibility of "free education", the UK students suggested "increased tax on the rich [and] scrapped Trident or reduced military spending" would free up billions of pounds to fund education and other public services (portside.org, November 24, 2014).

In Jefferson County, Colorado, a newly conservative school board instituted a review to ensure that the Advanced Placement History curriculum "promote citizenship, patriotism, essentials and benefits of the free-market system." Students and their teachers would have nothing to do with it. Organizing on Facebook, students walked out of schools in suburban Denver by the hundreds. One of the conservative members of the school board, who admitted she did not know much about U. S. history, confirmed it when she publicly declared that the United

States freely gave up slavery (*Denver Post*, September 24, 2014 and [portside.org](http://portside.org), October 11, 2014).

When the Philadelphia School Reform Commission canceled the teachers' contract and announced changes including teachers having to pay part of their health insurance premiums, hundreds of students from the Philadelphia area went on strike to support their teachers (*Philadelphia Enquirer*, October 8, 2014).

## Unions

Members of Madison Teachers, Inc. voted by a majority of 88 percent to recertify their collective bargaining units, according to the Wisconsin Employment Relations Commission. Annual recertification of public workers' unions is required by Act 10, Governor Scott Walker's legislation curbing the collective bargaining rights of public workers (portside.org, November 28, 2014).

Teachers in the sprawling Los Angeles Unified school system are asking for a one-year, permanent 10% raise but also looking beyond money to issues like staffing levels, classroom conditions, and policies aimed at improving academic results. The union wants computers integrated into classroom instruction, student participation in teacher unions, a full time nurse at every school five days a week, increased counseling staff, significant reduction in class size, and more oversight over independently managed charter schools (*Los Angeles Times*, November 21, 2014).

Los Angeles teachers and their new unions are trying to end what is called "teacher jail," a system whereby teachers accused, but not proven guilty, of immorality or misconduct are on paid leave and not allowed to enter the classroom. Hundreds of L.A. teachers are in this situation and most of them have no idea what they are accused of. No one from the United Teachers Los Angeles disputes that allegations from students should not be taken seriously, or that real misconduct should not be cause for dismissal, but many of the teachers in "teacher jail" have had no charges brought against them (Labor Notes, November 24, 2014).

The recent success of the British Columbia's teachers' strike is attributed to three things: 1. union solidarity made the difference; 2. people will back unions and parties that stand up for progressive programs; and 3. strike first since offense is often the best form of defense (portside.org, September 19, 2014).



WINNOVATING.COM

Karen Lewis, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) President, will not run for mayor of Chicago because of the

diagnosis of a cancerous brain tumor. For a review of her wonderful work with CTU since she became president in 2010, see *In These Times*, December 2014.

## Charter Schools

The Education Opportunity Network's Jeff Bryant was awarded one of the "top 25 most censored or underreported news stories of 2014" by Project Censored, "a media research, literacy, and education organization established in 1976." Bryant's award was based upon his article questioning the charter school hype ([educationopportunitynetwork.org](http://educationopportunitynetwork.org), December 5, 2014).

## K-12

Teachers fought back against Wal-Mart's September 2014 back-to-school marketing efforts which included a series of teacher appreciation videos, ads, hashtags, and discounts. Even though teachers often dig into their wallets to pay for supplies for their students, these Wal-Mart discounts were offensive since they come from a company that since 2000 has given more than \$1 billion to destabilize public education. One teacher launched a petition calling on his fellow teachers not to shop at Wal-Mart and over 5,000 teachers signed the pledge (*Huffington Post*, September 3, 2014).

At a Teach for America (TFA) open meeting in Manhattan on November 13, 2014, United Students Against Sweatshops activists condemned TFA for bringing inadequately trained students, mostly from elite universities, into some of the country's poorest school districts to teach for short periods of time and for promoting a for-profit, anti-union education reform agenda (*In These Times*, November 14, 2014).

Texas wants to rewrite school text books to incorporate passages denying the existence of climate change and reflecting the views of the ultra-conservative think tank, the Heartland Institute, funded by the Koch oil billionaires (*The Guardian*, September 16, 2014).

The Huntsville, Alabama, school district paid an ex-FBI agent \$157,000 to monitor the social media activity of its 24,000 students. The most alarming part of this violation of students' rights is that at the end of the year, of the 14 students expelled, 12 were African American, even though only 40 percent of the district's students are from that group ([portside.org](http://portside.org), November 4, 2014).

A Catholic school student who goes by the name "Nekochan" started an official library of her school's banned books (including *The Canterbury Tales*, *Paradise Lost*, *Animal Farm*, and *Catcher in the Rye*) that she runs out of her school locker. The student now has 62 books in her locker for loan and says, "Almost no kid at school but myself took an active interest in reading! Now not only are all the kids reading the banned books, but go out of their way to read anything they can get their hands on" (<http://www.care2.com>, August 28, 2014).

*The Nation's* October 13, 2014 issue highlights "Saving Public Schools: A Growing Movement Confronts the Failure of 'Reform'" with articles by such notable educators as Diane Ravitch, Pedro Noguera, and Michelle Fine.

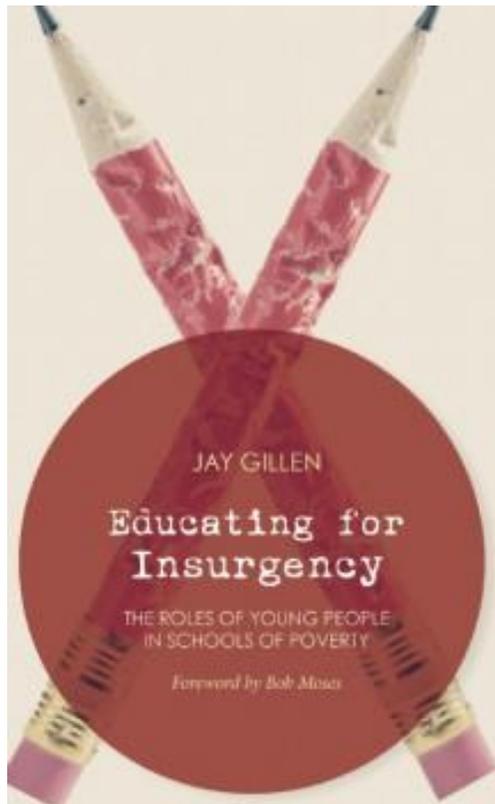
## Education in Mexico

On September 26, 2014, over 40 students were kidnapped from the teachers' college of Ayotzinapa, Guerrero, Mexico. These rural students are mainly from poor families and were being trained to teach other poor and indigenous students. For decades, their school has been subjected to political attack by the state and powerful business interests (Campaign for Peace and Democracy, November 13, 2014). For a more thorough understanding of these student abductions, and the struggle of teachers and their unions against the Peña Nieto administration's growing authoritarianism, see "The Struggle to Democratize Education in Mexico" (NACLA—Report on the Americas, Fall, 2014).

## The Educational Caste System

"Schools, Parents Sue Pennsylvania Over 'Educational Caste System'" (*Common Dreams*, November 11, 2014) describes how six school districts, seven parents, and two statewide educational associations sued Pennsylvania for failing "to meet state-imposed academic standards" and "participate meaningfully in the economic, civic, and social life of their communities." For additional information on America's inequitable educational class structure, from colonial times to the present, see [portside.org](http://portside.org), December 17, 2014.

In "Higher Education and the New Brutalism" (Truthout, October 28, 2014), Henry Giroux places higher education within the broader historical context of attacks on democratic institutions and dissident voices in general. Attacks on academics like Ward Churchill and Steven Salaita are matched by even more vicious attacks on whistleblowers like Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden, and James Risen. "Viewed as a private investment rather



than a public good, universities are now construed as spaces where students are valued as human capital, courses are determined by consumer demand and governance is based on the Walmart model of labor relations.”

“Making Top Colleges Less Aristocratic and More Meritocratic” (*The New York Times*, September 12, 2014) might help even out the U. S. educational caste system, but that may not be so simple since “at the nation’s most selective 193 colleges and universities, affluent students . . . outnumber economically disadvantaged students . . . by 14 to 1.”

## Resources

### Books

Jay Gillen’s *Educating for Insurgency: The Roles of Young People in Schools of Poverty*, with a forward by Bob Moses, describes the daily lives of poor students trapped in institutions that dismiss and degrade them. Gillen explains what sort of insurgency is needed and how to create it. AK Press, \$15.95, 192 pages, <http://www.akpress.org>.

The voices in *More Than a Score: The New Uprising Against High-Stakes Testing* (Haymarket Books) present an action plan to combat the increase in high-stakes standardized testing currently pervading K-12 education.

### Journals

*Socialism and Democracy* published a special issue focusing on the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the First Workers International and explores this legacy in terms of working-class struggles today. The introduction to the volume can be read at <http://sdonline.org/65/introduction-24/>.

*Socialism and Democracy’s* more recent issue is “The Roots of Mass Incarceration in the US: Locking Up Black Dissidents, and Punishing the Poor.” This issue is co-edited by Mumia Abu Jamal, has contributions by Angela Davis, and a critical reflection on reading and teaching Assata Shakur’s biography *Assata* by Joseph Ramsey.

The new issue of the arts and politics magazine *Red Wedge* is up and online at <http://redwedgemagazine.com>.



### Film

Bullfrog Films has three new documentary releases.

*The Allergy Fix* explores the science behind the tripling in childhood food allergies over the last twenty years.



THE ALLERGY FIX

*A Fragile Trust: Plagiarism, Power, and Jayson Blair at the New York Times* tells the story of Jayson Blair, the most infamous serial plagiarist of our time, and how he unleashed the massive scandal that rocked the entire world of journalism.



A FRAGILE TRUST

*Groundswell Rising: Protecting Our Children’s Air and Water* shows how fracking has contaminated drinking water and jeopardized health and quality of life.



GROUNDSWELL RISING

For details on these three films, trailers, and pricing for educational institutions, go to <http://www.bullfrogfilms.com/catalog/gsr.html>.

*Sir, No Sir* (2005) is a 49 minute documentary of GI resistance during the Vietnam War, available free at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3nPJgeg6hpA>.

Tami Gold has produced two new films for GLBT, Feminist and Gender Studies classrooms. *Passionate Politics* explores Charlotte Bunch’s life from young civil rights organizer, to lesbian activist, to international leader of a campaign to put women’s rights on the global human rights agenda. *Puzzles* explores the roots of hate crimes and the intersections between joblessness, homophobia, intolerance, alienation, and violence. For more information

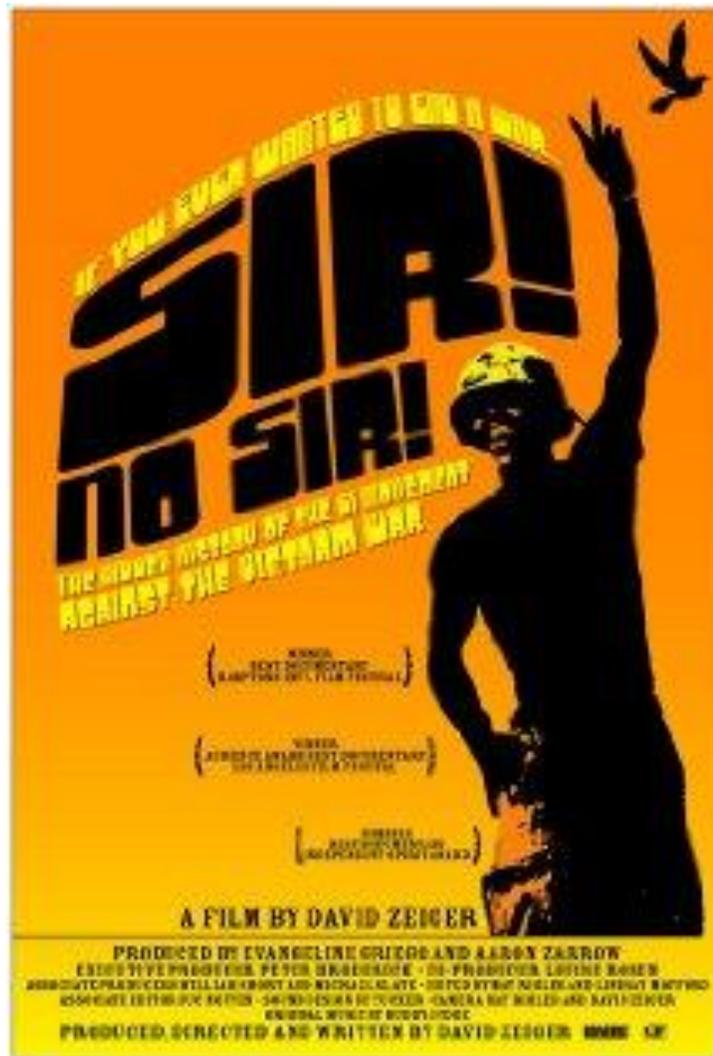
on either of these films, go to <http://andersongoldfilms.com/films/documentaries,puzzles.htm>.

## Curriculum

The Labor and Working-Class History Association launches a teachers/public sector toolkit, a set of resources to help foster dialog on teacher and public sector unionism consisting of a short history of teacher organizing and unionism and sources for teaching and learning more about the subject.

*Is there a news item, call for papers, upcoming conference, resource, teaching tool, or other information related to progressive education that you would like to*

*share with other Radical Teacher readers? Conference announcements and calls for papers should be at least six months ahead of date. Items, which will be used as found appropriate by Radical Teacher, cannot be returned. Send hard copy to Leonard Vogt, Department of English, LaGuardia Community College (CUNY), 31-10 Thomson Avenue, Long Island City, New York 11101—or email items to [lvogt@nyc.rr.com](mailto:lvogt@nyc.rr.com).*



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://www.library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://www.dscribe.com/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.library.pitt.edu/).

# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Contributors' Notes



COURTESY OF AARON BURR SOCIETY  
JIM COSTANZA



ONE WORLD MANY PAPERS  
COURTESY OF JANE ALLEN INGRAM

## Authors

**Sophie Bell** is an Associate Professor at St. John's University's Institute for Writing Studies. She teaches a first year writing course titled Race, Language, and Writing. She is currently working on essays about her students' writing on colorism, whiteness, and Islamophobia in their lives.

**Wiley C. Davi** (Angelique Davi) is Associate Professor of English and Media Studies at Bentley University.

**Linda Dittmar**—a long-time member of *Radical Teacher's* editorial group—had two Fulbright teaching assignments to India, taught twice as a visiting faculty at Tel Aviv university, and was a visiting lecturer at the University of Paris (Paris VII) and the Ecole Normale des Hautes Etudes. Now Professor Emerita, she taught literature and film studies at the University of Massachusetts—Boston. Her books include *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film* and *Multiple voices in Feminist Film Criticism*. Most recently she's been teaching and writing about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

**Marcial Gonzàlez** is associate professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley. He is the author of *Chicano Novels and the Politics of Form: Race, Class, and Reification*.

**Tamar Hager** teaches in the Department of Education and Gender Studies at Tel Hai College, Israel. Critical education, feminist pedagogy, education for peace, critical feminist methodology, art sociology, fictional and academic writing are core issues of her academic teaching, research and writing. She published in 2000 a book of short stories *A Perfectly Ordinary Life* (in Hebrew) and in 2012 she published another book, *Malice Aforethought* (in Hebrew), in which she attempts to reconstruct the elusive biographies of two English working class mothers who killed their babies at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**Amy Levin** is Professor and Chair of English at Northern Illinois University. In 2013, she was the first United States scholar to complete a Fulbright fellowship at a public university in Myanmar in thirty years. Her four books include two literary monographs and two collections of articles on museums, the most recent of which is *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums: A Routledge Reader*.

**Danielle Legros Georges** is a professor in the Creative Arts and Learning Division of Lesley University. Her areas of academic interest include arts and education, contemporary American poetry, African-American poetry, Caribbean literature and studies, and literary translation. A writer and poet, Legros Georges has been recognized for her poetry and scholarship with awards including a recent Massachusetts Cultural Council Artist Fellowship in Poetry. Her poems have appeared in numerous literary journals and anthologies, and a book of poems, *Maroon*, was published in 2001. In 2014 she was appointed Boston's Poet Laureate. The City's Poet Laureate is tasked with raising the status of poetry in the everyday consciousness of Bostonians, acting as an advocate for poetry, language

and the arts, and creating a unique artistic legacy through public reading and civic events.

**Josh Lukin** teaches in the First Year Writing Program at Temple University. His essays and interviews have appeared in such venues as *minnesota review*, *Journal of Modern Literature*, *The Encyclopedia of American Disability History*, and *The Disability Studies Reader*. Dr. Lukin is the editor of *Invisible Suburbs: Recovering Protest Fiction in the 1950s United States* (University Press of Mississippi, 2008).

**Frinde Maher** is Professor Emerita of Education, Wheaton College, and a Resident Fellow at the Brandeis Women's Studies Research Center. She has published, with Mary Kay Tetreault, *The Feminist Classroom*, (1994), and *Privilege and Diversity in the Academy*, (2006.) She has returned to South Africa many times, most recently in March of 2013. She is on the Editorial Board of *Radical Teacher*.

**Greg Meyerson** is associate professor at North Carolina A and T State University and coedits *Cultural Logic: an Electronic Journal of Marxist Theory and Practice*. He is working on a Marxist defense of nuclear power with Bill Sachs.

**Richard Ohmann** has been on the editorial collective of *Radical Teacher* since 1975. He is tired, but happy that the capitalist system is near collapse.

**Justin Podur** is the author of *Haiti's New Dictatorship* (Pluto Press 2012). He has contributed chapters to *Empire's Ally: Canada and the War on Afghanistan* (University of Toronto Press 2013) and *Real Utopia* (AK Press 2008). He is an Associate Professor at York University's Faculty of Environmental Studies. He has reported from India (Kashmir, Chhattisgarh), Afghanistan, Pakistan, Haiti, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Columbia, Venezuela, Mexico (Chiapas), and Israel/Palestine. He is also the author of the novel *The Demands of the Dead* (2014).

**Jyoti Puri** is Professor of Sociology at Simmons College. She writes and teaches at the crossroads of sociology, sexuality and queer studies, and postcolonial feminist theory. Her books include *Woman, Body, Desire in Post-Colonial India* (Routledge 1999) and *Encountering Nationalism* (Blackwell Publishers 2004). Her current book, *Sexual States: Governance and Anti-Sodomy Law in India's Present*, is under contract with Duke University Press. She is the recipient of a Rockefeller Research Fellowship and a Fulbright Senior Research award. She is currently a co-editor for the journal, *Foucault Studies*.

**Robyn C. Spencer** is Assistant Professor of History at Lehman College and does research on post-1945 social movements, on urban history, and on gender.

## Graphic Artists

**Sarah Chavarría** Portrait of Maya Angelou (2014)

Sarah Chavarria is an artist and educator currently pursuing her BFA in art and design education at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York.

**Jim Costanzo**, with Aaron Burr Society *Free Money Movement* (2009 to present)

Jim Costanzo is an artist and educator living in Brooklyn, New York. He is the founder and director of The Aaron Burr Society which is dedicated to exposing the myths of Free Markets & Free Trade while challenging the integrity of Wall Street & their Corporate Cronies.

**Jane Ingram Allen** *One World - Many Papers* (2008)

Jane Ingram Allen is an American sculptor/installation artist and hand papermaker living in New York State since 1988. *One World - Many Papers* is a site-specific mixed media art installation representing the world as one, and composed of unique pieces of paper art contributed by 42 artists she selected, representing 38 different countries around the world. Each artist made a piece of paper from a plant fiber in his own country and created a paper artwork to represent their country. The literal and symbolic joining together of these unique handmade paper artworks create a map of the world with no borders vividly shows that the earth is one, made up of many joined together. <http://janeingramallen.wordpress.com>

**Heath Schultz, with Self-Organized Seminar Collective** *In the Shadow of Debt: Participatory Relief!* (University of Iowa, 2012)

Heath Schultz is a researcher interested in intersections between radical politics and culture. He is a member of the Self-Organized Seminar Collective, which was formed at a printmaking conference at the University of Iowa in December 2012. During a collaborative workshop they asked participants to "print their debt", to proclaim their burden publicly. <http://selforganizedseminar.wordpress.com>

**Cassie Thornton** *The Communal Sound of Debt* (2012) [Photo by Michelle Levy] *Richard Serra Urgent Debt Tour* (2012) [Photo by Cara Levine]

Cassie Thornton is an artist who is sometimes referred to as the Feminist Economics Department (the FED), and who works in collusion with Strike Debt in Oakland, California. Her work investigates and reveals the impact of governmental and economic systems on public affect, behavior, and unconscious, with a focus on debt and security. *The Communal Sound of Debt* was a project included in the exhibition *To Have and To Owe* at the Elizabeth Foundation Project Space curated by Laurel Ptak and Leigh Claire La Berge. In January 2012, Thornton also began giving "Urgent Debt Tours" during the Richard Serra: Drawing Show at SFMoMA where crowds of people were lead through the exhibition, discussing the state of debt and using Serra's works as opportunities for discussion.

**Caroline Woolard**, with BFAMFAPhD *Statements* (2012-present)

**Caroline Woolard** is an artist and organizer based in Brooklyn, New York who works between the solidarity economy and conceptual art. Woolard is a member of BFAMFAPhD, a collective of artists, designers, makers, technologists, curators, architects, educators, and analysts who ask: What is a work of art in the age of \$120,000 art degrees? <http://bfamfaphd.com/>

**Shina Yoon** *Free Education?* (2014)

Shina Yoon is an Art and Design Education major at Pratt Institute, planning to pursue a teaching career in the visual arts. This collage graph represents the wealth inequality in America, also referencing the social inequity in the classroom today.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://dscribe.org/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.pitt.edu/).