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RADICAL TEACHER

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

# Introduction: Radical Inspiration in Dark Times

by Neil Meyer


"TODAY COPY" BY DAVE LOEWENSTEIN VIA JUST SEEDS OPEN ACCESS GRAPHICS COLLECTION

The most recent issues of *Radical Teacher* ("Critical DEI," "Dispatches from the Encampments and Beyond" and "Teaching Reproductive Justice") have centered on specific themes that have taken on additional importance in the face of the current Trump administration and its authoritarian actions. During the creation of those issues, we at *RT* have continued to receive individual submissions of impressive quality and contemporary relevance to our audience. We gather those here for issue 132, "Radical Inspiration in Dark Times."

The publishing calendar of an academic journal makes responding to whip-lash news developments and events challenging. The contributions in this issue began at various points in the last two years. They do not directly cite the immediate crisis we find ourselves in; targeted deportations, the weaponization of antisemitism against colleges and universities, the mass deregulation of the U.S. government around the environment and worker's rights, and the dismantling of the social safety net, to name only a few of the most alarming trends of the second Trump administration. Yet the essays, reviews, and poetry gathered here offer critical reflection, action, and inspiration for these uniquely difficult times.

This issue begins with the first article published at *Radical Teacher* to address Large Language Models (LLMs) and their relationship to the classroom. "AI, Ai, and I: Mapping Marxist and Afrofuturist Approaches to Plagiarism and ChatGPT Through Pauline Hopkins" by Len von Morzé analyzes the theft of labor that undergirds recent advances in A.I. writing technology. Von Morzé does this by historicizing A.I. as part of capitalism's long pattern of exploitation and the mystification of the commodity. The outputs produced by LLMs (such as ChatGPT) hide the words and labor stolen to produce that work. Von Morzé develops this analysis with students via an unconventional path—the Pauline Hopkins novel *Of One Blood* (1902) and the recently discovered "plagiarism" that went into its creation. Analyzing Hopkins's use of other texts alongside their own engagement with software like ChatGPT, von Morzé discusses the ethics of plagiarism in the era of A.I. mass theft of intellectual work.

In "Collaborative Course Design: A Contribution Toward a Radical Food Systems Pedagogy" by Michael Classens, Amara Digout, Aden Fisher, Madaleine Frechette, Nadia Gericke and Christina Wong, the authors describe how they brought the radical politics of critical pedagogy to bear on the development of a new course in critical food systems pedagogy called "The Edible Campus." They worked with students to develop the content of the course and used the campus itself to better analyze how imperialism, capitalism, the climate crisis, and other forces shaped and continue to shape the food cultures of the modern world as manifested on campus.

The next essay, "Can There be a Feminist Pedagogy within the e-Learning Industrial Complex?" by Nafisa Nipun Tanjeem and Michael J. Illuzzi, asks important questions about the role of education technology, a role that has grown exponentially in the wake of the pandemic. The authors here first theorize an "e-Learning industrial complex," a network of private interests and college leaders that use the rhetoric of access and affordability to dismantle the intellectual, political, and material ties of college campuses by outsourcing coursework and technological control to private e-Learning corporations. The authors describe how their own university doubled down on the platform Blackboard and newly remodeled "hyflex" classrooms, while laying-off staff and faculty and letting the physical plant of the school deteriorate, among other failings. This newest phase of the neoliberal university makes more difficult the radical, liberatory politics of feminist pedagogy but, as the authors describe, that pedagogy and its principles are tools to look beyond the atomized classroom to forge intellectual and political connects across institutions and their larger communities and networks. The essay shows some of this resistance work in action on their own campus.

This is followed by Anne Marie E. Butler and Mazey Perry's "Expansive Gender Pedagogy in the Undergraduate Classroom: The Gender and Sexuality Galaxy." Their essay describes the theoretical underpinnings and process of creating the "Gender and Sexuality Worksheet." This document is meant to help students (and others) learn about multiple and intersecting identities and the affirming language used to understand and describe those identities, and gives participants the chance to reflect on their own identities. The authors consider the worksheet as more than a final production, lesson plan, or evaluation tool, and their essay here serves as a theoretical framing of the "Gender and Sexuality Galaxy," as well as a thorough narrative of its creation with students, for students. It is a model of theory and practice in the classroom that speaks to the values of our journal and its readers.

Jake Mattox's "Friday Night Comics in Dark Times" explores the free, online workshop Friday Night Comics (FNC), where artists in the field discuss their own process and then lead participants in opportunities to make their own comic works in real time. These workshops provide creative, open-access, and free learning spaces, which inspires Mattox to think about how the FNC model can inspire us in these "dark times." The author writes that FNC models a learning environment "free of coercion, ones that contribute to a sense of community often lacking in institutional spaces, insist on the centrality of the arts in creating knowledges, and focus on a medium itself that has strong potential for recognizing and countering dangerous narratives that is, for reflection and resistance." As our institutions become more embattled and upper-level administrators sometimes choose capitulation over the principles of academic freedom, this essay offers readers a chance to reimagine the core values of learning outside of the sometimes-compromised institutions where learning take places.

Our final essay is "Protest Pedagogy" by Beatrice Dias, which describes the intellectual process that went into the creation and teaching of an online, asynchronous graduate-level education course called "Social Context of Education." Seeking to use the course to disrupt the racist and capitalist norms that sustain how education often works, the author and her co-instructor brought the

tactics and values of public protest into their construction of the class. Towards the end of her essay, Dias writes of her pedagogy and practice as "rooted in a collective mindset as a protest of individualism, complexity as a protest of the binary, care as a protest of capitalist productivity, and a protest of the western self to pave the way for a liberated self. These concepts bring the ethos of street protests into the classroom, pushing us to question and challenge dominant framings, and create space for more equitable, just, and liberated possibilities in education."

Trump 2.0 is both a startling expansion of authoritarian impulses and an extension of a long and ugly tradition within imperial right-wing ideologies. And the interrelationship between protest in the streets and critical engagement in the classroom is one of the tools educators have to push back with. Beyond the eager acquiescence of certain elite institutions in education, finance, and law, we see millions of everyday people protesting in communities both large and small. We thank the writers gathered in this issue for their work and for the inspiration it may provide us in these dark times.

**Neil Meyer** is a professor of English at LaGuardia Community College, CUNY and a board member of *Radical Teacher*.

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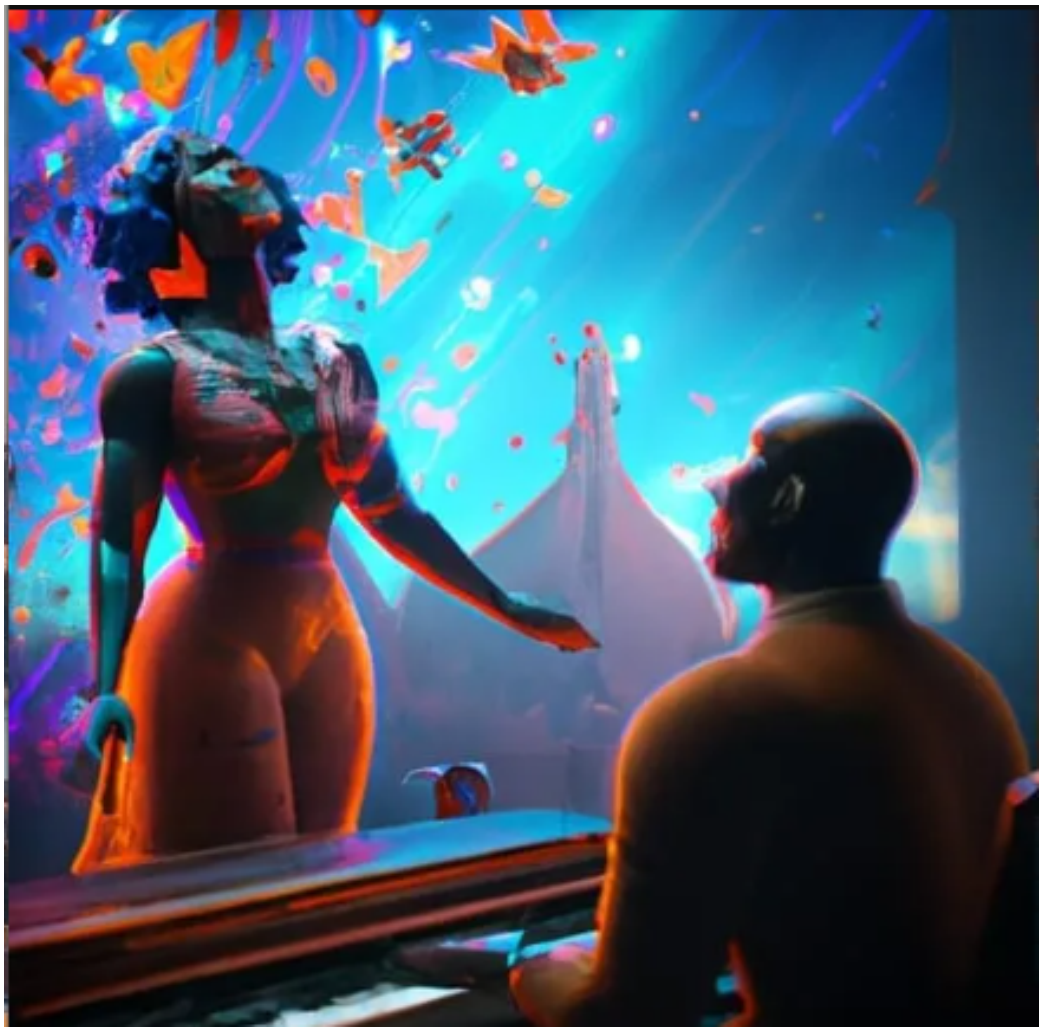
# AI, Ai, and I: Mapping Marxist and Afrofuturist Approaches to Plagiarism and ChatGPT Through Pauline Hopkins

by Len von Morzé



"REUEL AND DIANTHE," IMAGE GENERATED THROUGH DALL-E BY UMASS BOSTON STUDENT GEORGIA BERRY, 6 APRIL 2023, AND USED WITH HER PERMISSION.

## 1. It's Not a Tool: Teaching Generative AI as Expropriated Labor

The sudden rise of ChatGPT and other generative AI language platforms is shaping the writing classroom in ways that have yet to unfold let alone to be fully understood. The AI revolution appears to put the value of writing instruction into question once again, amplifying a broader crisis of confidence among students and teachers. Even the most student-centered of us writing instructors cannot help but feel the effects of ChatGPT in sowing suspicion and distrust in our evaluation of student work. Students, for their part, wonder how the technology may help or hinder their work at a time when many of their peers are using it. While writing that seems too "perfect" has often attracted the suspicion that it was authored by another person, questions are now inevitably raised about whether those words have been made by humans at all. I've found that informal conversations with my colleagues in English Studies now hinge on what we think to be telltale evidence of AI-generated prose, but a worry always haunts these conversations: that the technology will outpace our experienced eyes. Along similar lines, public commentary often turns on enumerating stylistic criteria that only humans can (as of 2025) produce, such as "burstiness"; but these often witty efforts to distinguish self from machine may serve, as Henri Bergson said of humor in general, the purpose of reassurance. Like those informal hallway conversations, funny send-ups of AI-assisted student prose (see Naiman) leave one feeling better about our profession, but the bots seem certain to produce ever spookier and more convincing imitations of "human" writing.

Most university writing programs have responded by publishing guidelines that are packed with valuable suggestions for students and teachers about responsible use of the technology, alongside admonitions not to short-cut the thinking process with AI. This essay endeavors to do something quite different. Rather than discussing how to prepare our students to use AI more effectively, let alone (misguidedly, in my view) to argue for banning its use in the classroom, I describe how I used the ChatGPT moment at my institution, the University of Massachusetts Boston, to teach the technology not as a tool but as a product of our culture. I suggest ways of historicizing AI for students by pointing to the ways that race and class have figured in the broader privileging of originality in literary culture. Instead of emphasizing distinctively human qualities within thinking and writing, I used the controversy around the partially-plagiarized novel *Of One Blood*, authored by Pauline Hopkins over a century ago, to put concerns over AI into historical perspective, and to encourage students in my "Experiencing Boston" first-year advanced composition course to think through definitions of voice and originality that have been historically been used to exclude those deemed less-than-human. At the same time, ChatGPT's massive theft of centuries of writers' work provides the key discursive overlap between large language models and plagiarism: Who has been entitled to steal from whom, and why? I suggest that these class discussions can generate more socially critical accounts of plagiarism while also addressing the self-critical feelings of students who think they cannot "say something original."

My starting assumption for this pedagogical approach is that ChatGPT is, for all of its novelty, simply another phase in the expropriation of labor, in this case the intellectual labor of millions of writers. The 300 billion words that ChatGPT-3 has "read" in order to remix them constitutes a particularly indiscriminate form of robbery. The flip side of this theft of labor, however, is that AI provides a teachable case for thinking through the limitations of language as individually owned property. AI implicitly undermines the idea of the writing self as the owner-proprietor of its own discourse. ChatGPT incarnates, in this sense, the insights of the discourse analysis school of composition theory, which attended to how language does not originate in the individual writer, but "come[s] *through* the writer and not from the writer" (Bartholomae 8). Good student writers, according to this approach, become better able to manipulate discursive conventions, and more aware (and wary) of "the pre-packaging feature of language, the possibility of taking over phrases and whole sentences without much thought about them" (19). Nearly forty years after David Bartholomae published these words, students are more likely to think of AI than ideology as a source of "pre-packaged" discourse, but teachers might point out to them that AI algorithms simply shortcut the language-to-cash nexus, finding a way to generate private capital out of an inherent feature of language as a social phenomenon.

To make AI-generated prose something to think about, rather than a substitute for thinking, we needed to go beyond a conception of ChatGPT as a tool to use responsibly, as so many writing centers have been suggesting. Instead we need a more radical approach that frames AI as a dramatic new stage in the expropriation of labor. To understand ChatGPT simply as a tool, or something external to the human, is to accede to the logic of capital, which, as with previous industrial processes, seeks to separate craft knowledge from the laborers who honed it through their blood and sweat, and through this separation to alienate this knowledge from its owners by making it available for a managerial capitalist class (Allison). Writing students often express their fear that what they are learning in my class is becoming useless, as ChatGPT composes essays more quickly and perfectly than they can. But I show them the latest data suggesting that rather than replacing human beings, ChatGPT has actually spurred rapid increases in writing jobs. This is not necessarily reassuring, however: those new employees are working cheapened versions of the old writing jobs. The number of administrative service positions, a recent observer notes, has skyrocketed even as artificial intelligence is on the rise, pointing to the debasement of intellectual labor through the proliferation of what David Graeber calls "bullshit jobs" (Brentler). Rather than stoking fears that their writing skills will no longer be useful, in other words, I advise students to worry about the degradation of work. Students readily noted this in

their own courses, telling me about professors whose assignments include querying ChatGPT with the aim of training student-writers to compose better prompts for the bot.

But before we bravely embrace a new world in which "prompt engineering" takes its place along the compare-and-contrast essay or the personal narrative, should writing instructors not use this moment of distrust on all sides to historicize generative AI? While writing programs everywhere are publishing guidelines for the "responsible use" of generative AI, there seems to be notably little attention to putting the technology into critical historical perspective. Students and indeed writing instructors may think that ChatGPT is a tool that can serve them, but if the object is simply to write better ChatGPT prompts, we are merely serving the new tech factories. *The Communist Manifesto* famously noted that industrial production, having learned from centuries of labor, now makes the laborer "an appendage of the machine" (qtd. in Lovely 74). Along similar lines, we should think about ChatGPT's large language model as an extension of human life, rather than simply a tool that can enrich or impoverish it.

Struggling to find a way to frame this insight for the class, I found in composition scholar Salena Sampson Anderson's essay on generative AI a teachable metaphor to understand the new technology. I asked students to read Anderson's suggestion that the "large language model" from which ChatGPT feeds is better understood as a blood bank than as a toolbox:

> To facilitate the understanding of this aspect of ChatGPT's design and output, metaphors that combine human and technological elements may be useful. Consider, for example, blood products, which—like ChatGPT's training corpus and output texts—are composed of human elements that are taken from their natural context, aggregated, and then stored and processed by various technologies for use by another person. [...] This dense aggregation and mixing of a precious human resource—whether blood or words—is both priceless and costly. [...]
>
> The metaphors of tools and collaborators are much more comfortable: they are in line with our current culture of writing. We use tools, like word processors and dictionaries; and we coauthor with collaborators, whom we can name and credit (though even what counts as "word processing" becomes murkier with predictive text). But as ChatGPT becomes more mainstream, interfacing with Microsoft products, this technology challenges the boundaries of tools and coauthors, asking us to forget the human components of the machine. (9-10)

A particularly rich point in our discussion of Anderson's metaphor is her consideration of similarities between the corpus of text with which ChatGPT trains its writing bot and the experimental subject as constructed by twentieth-century medicine. Researchers used the blood of the African American cancer patient Henrietta Lacks to develop the immortal HeLa stem line which has resulted in many of the most dramatic medical advances of the twentieth century. Unable to pay for medical care or to offer free consent, the dying Lacks unknowingly gave her blood to a corporation that can reproduce and sell her cells for all eternity. In Lacks's case, the expropriation of her blood literalizes Marx's well-known image of capitalism as a vampire, as it compulsively sucks from the living to keep itself alive (342). If we combine Anderson's and Marx's images, does not ChatGPT seem to depend both on its existing corpus of texts and on the next generation, those living students whom writing teachers may be training to become its new appendages?

Blood banks are also, of course, sources of great social benefit, so the question raised by the Lacks case is *who* benefits from *whom* as technology advances. Generative AI can scrape at will from the mass of no-name writers on the internet while the *New York Times* can fight back with lawsuits to exclude its text from the corpus. This phenomenon is illuminated by Marxist critic Yasmin Nair's series of essays on plagiarism, which are notably unsparing in their denunciation of any theft of words—a point for hot student debates—while also showing that the real problem with plagiarism is its economic dynamic, which turns not on the theft of individual property but on the systematic exploitation of labor (as more socially powerful writers, such as senior scholars, typically steal with license from the more vulnerable, such as graduate students). This insight helped us to think about the way that ChatGPT and related bots are raiding the dead labor of centuries of writers. At this stage, I decided that we needed to consider race in addition to class as a key factor in the expropriation of labor. After all, the alienation of working people's labor during the Industrial Revolution was preceded, indeed enabled, by the prior dynamics of Atlantic chattel slavery. So I reconsidered an African American novel that would help us put generative AI into historical perspective—and did so, moreover, by exploring the metaphor of blood.

## 2. Introducing Ai as Embodied Knowledge

If AI is not just a shiny new invention, but a phase in the expropriation of labor, then we need to find ways to put it into historical context for our students. If nothing else, historicization can put both apocalyptic and utopian conceptions of AI to rest, and focus our critical attention on its real place in our creative economy. Here I found it useful to connect generative AI with the ancient discourse of plagiarism with which all students are familiar. I wanted to show that plagiarism has a long and controversial history, and decided to assign a canonical work as a test case in literary controversy. In its titular thematic as well as (I will suggest) its method of composition, Pauline Hopkins's magazine novel *Of One Blood* (1903) offers an Afritopian locus for the large language models that we are grappling with 120 years later. The novel tells the story of Harvard students who stumble upon the ancient East African city of Telassar, whose residents, they discover, possess a capacity for universal knowledge that transcends time and space.[1] That the novel was probably the unacknowledged inspiration for Ryan Coogler's *Black*

*Panther* (2018) adds a prophetic dimension to its place in cultural history. By setting a pivotal scene in MIT, the sequel *Wakanda Forever* (2022) perhaps belatedly nods to Hopkins, who worked at the university over the last decades of her life. That the filmmakers failed to credit Hopkins makes her, perhaps somewhat like Henrietta Lacks, an unacknowledged foremother, in this case of a line of seminal films. Similarly, the Smithsonian Museum of African American History's otherwise admirable exhibit on Afrofuturism traces its genealogy to W.E.B. DuBois's "The Comet" (1920), which enjoys a poster in the gallery, without any equivalent for Hopkins's earlier novel.

Before introducing the book, I showed the students the MIT clip from *Wakanda Forever* as well as the Smithsonian website in order to provide deeper context for the turn our discussion would take. Lest the students see Hopkins principally as a plagiarist, I wanted to suggest that she was more stolen from than stealing. This was in service to my case that not only the novel's content, but its form of composition and its subsequent legacy are prophetic in our historical moment. Though indisputably an ur-text of twenty-first-century film and fiction, *Of One Blood* can also be presented to students as a case study in which the author raids the corpus of nineteenth-century literature, helping herself to any verbiage that was useful to her composing process. If the novel's plot demonstrates that the characters who inhabit both sides of the color line actually share "blood," then Hopkins's freewheeling plagiarism from other writers treats literary tradition as a blood bank of words. Plagiarism, as I've suggested, works both ways with Hopkins; the dispossession of her enslaved ancestors' labor, which depended on the dehumanization of Africans, produces its inversion in Hopkins's creation of a robot-text that remixes the words of hundreds of other authors in ways strikingly reminiscent of ChatGPT.

I had taught *Of One Blood* before because it is so compellingly original and weird, but came back to it more reluctantly now, feeling initially dismayed by the discovery that its language, though not the story, is highly derivative. Between 2015 and 2020, the scholar Geoffrey Sanborn showed, in a series of articles and chapters, that *Of One Blood* contains unacknowledged borrowings from hundreds of other authors: at least 20% of the novel's text consists of these other authors' words, for which the term plagiarism would not have been too severe a designation. Even at the time of its publication, Sanborn shows, such extended borrowing would have been rare, and the consequences might have been severe for a vulnerable African American woman writer, as the career-ending charges against Nella Larsen would show a generation later. Every chapter of Hopkins's novel contains dozens of words from other writers; in some parts, the theft underlies almost half of Hopkins's finished product (46% of chapter 10, for example, comes from 6 sources).[2] These revelations gave me pause about revisiting Hopkins's text, which is surely based on a writing practice that I would ordinarily deplore in my students' papers.

Although Sanborn thoughtfully explores the implications of plagiarism for rethinking classic American literature, I faced the context of a writing classroom, in which the conventions for acceptable student writing were very much at stake. For all of my hesitations, I embraced the opportunity to discuss expectations for writers, including student writers, who often worry that they "can't say anything original." Would it be worthwhile to treat expectations around originality as matters for discussion, debate, and–most important of all–critique? I wanted to explore with students how the discourse around plagiarism has marked the limits of the human, belittling non-white subjects with the broader charge of "imitativeness," when white plagiarists have faced the lesser charge of being dependent epigones, failsons living in the shadow of their forebears' influence. Hopkins's position as a Black woman writer has meant that she is judged by higher standards for originality not applied to white writers whose well-known works are derivative in other ways.[3] After all, a racist vein of literary criticism has treated Black women writers since Phillis Wheatley Peters as mere mimics.

Lest we think this discourse is behind us, I reminded students, let's consider the case of Harvard's first Black president Claudine Gay, forced to resign in January 2024. Gay's small borrowings of choice phrases, rather than any theft of ideas, legitimated the sabotage of her credibility. To state the real objection–her insufficient militancy in punishing critics of Israel–would have placed her words within the realm of ideological contestation, so the cry of plagiarism provided a more "objective" basis for disqualification. Over and over again, Gay's small borrowings were framed as an inability to achieve originality, instead of a failure to demonstrate intellectual independence.[4] Understandable concerns over the rise of AI-generated writing have been paralleled in public discourse by the right-wing targeting of often non-white scholars, even when, as in Gay's case, they could hardly be called dissidents. The pattern remains the same with these charges of plagiarism, whether leveled against Gay, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Ward Churchill. While supposedly dispassionate and neutral, these critiques have been uncannily aligned with QAnon conspiracy-mongering about not-quite-humans, notably lizard-people, running the world.

Against such racist discourse, Hopkins's approach may seem paradoxical. Instead of acceding to the patronizing move of "humanizing" Black people, she may have decided to lean into the call-and-response method of remixing, which produces results that are not imitative at all even when the phrasing comes from elsewhere. Hopkins surely had a similar response to the representation of Africans as parahuman as the Nigerian exponent of Afrofuturism Nnedi Okorafor, who has stated, "I've always sided with the robots. That whole idea of creating these creatures that are humanlike and then have them be in servitude to us, that is not my fantasy and I find it highly problematic that it would be anyone's."[5] Okorafor calls attention to the implicit conflation of the robot and the enslaved in racist fantasy, who reemerges as the vengeful agent of the return of the repressed. Little wonder that Hopkins decided to make a robot-like prime minister a hero-figure in the novel.

As the American characters in *Of One Blood* discover a hidden advanced civilization in Telassar, they meet its most authoritative character, who exemplifies universal knowledge. Discussing this character provided the clearest entry-point for the relevance of discourse analysis to the specific challenges of college writers during the ChatGPT revolution. Here an African character named Ai supersedes a white British professor-explorer as the source of definitive information about not only Africa but the world at large. Ai is the middle-aged prime minister of Telassar who has been running the world's most advanced civilization as he waits for its rightful heirs to return. That Hopkins's Ai, whom she invented in 1902, shares a name with "artificial intelligence" is, of course, happenstance. My class played around with various decodings of the name, including the Ethiopian princess Aida from the well-known opera (Aljoe). But perhaps his name is also short for the "African intelligence" that had been denied by Europeans to justify the slave trade, but which Ai has kept carefully guarded from Western eyes since then.

Initially, the coincidental nature of the AI/Ai connection led me to dismiss the pedagogical opportunity it presented. But, on further reflection, the importance of Ai to the novel seemed too convenient a chance to pass up, as I could reframe Hopkins's practice of textual borrowing as something like the ChatGPT of fin-de-siècle culture. Hopkins's own vast library offered the author her own personal "large language model." Was there creative potential in Hopkins's plagiarisms, in which the confluence between her voice and that of her sources was precisely beside the point? Instead of introducing the novel's intertextuality as a "dialogue" with previous authors, I presented Hopkins's borrowings to students as a sort of blood transfusion, as words from one textual corpus (dozens of other books) gave new life to another (here called a "novel"), with Ai regulating the flow of words. In this sense, Ai does not so much embody universal knowledge as manage the textual corpus that contains it: like ChatGPT's corpus, he does not really "know" anything so much as he possesses the secret of access to the blood bank that, unbeknownst to the other characters, links the world's peoples in a common humanity.

This, then, seemed to be the most prophetically inventive dimension of the novel: the radical Afrofuturist possibility that Ai could be read as AI. We probed the stakes of this speculative move with the following discussion questions: What if we considered the fictive universality of ChatGPT-generated content from an African perspective? How might Hopkins's suggestion that the ancient African city of Telassar contains nearly all human knowledge help us to confront ChatGPT's vast textual corpus? Hopkins's story repeatedly affirms Ai's proclamation that "from Ethiopia came all the arts and cunning inventions that make your modern glory" (145). If the "future" in Afrofuturism comes by way of the past, summarized (perhaps too patly) as the recognition that "you had everything you needed from the start" (Womack 1), Hopkins's novel represents her characters' trip to their ancestral homeland as an opportunity to access the world's greatest corpus of stored knowledge. But the preservation of this knowledge comes with an important difference: it does not just take the characteristically Western form of a universal library of texts. Instead, Ai's archive is also corporeal: while Telassar has, like Wakanda, developed some mind-bending gadgets, the strangest objects of preservation are perishable organic life (of beautiful human bodies as well as flowers) lying in wait for the arrival of the character whose bloodline enables him to claim these technologies as his. In Hopkins's original words, Ai explains that Telassar's "preserved natural flowers" may be counted among its great aesthetic achievements: "I am told that the modern world has not solved this simple process,' he said, with a gentle smile of ridicule. 'We preserve the bodies of our most beautiful women in the same way'" (147). Telassar is ultimately a society dedicated to the preservation of bloodlines, technological expertise being passed down on the model of a blood bank organized around an unacknowledged maternal line.

Of course, Hopkins's novel is a text, not a body, but preserved organic life provides an intriguing metaphor for understanding its hybrid textual corpus, drawing attention as the metaphor does to the blood and sweat that produce knowledge and beauty before they are stored and remixed. It is too early to know what hybrid products ChatGPT may produce in the college classroom, but before contemplating any use of the technology, we teachers of writing should, as Anderson suggests, think about seeing generative AI as tied to biological life rather than a tool that can be separated from human labor. The preservation of knowledge and beauty preserved for African descendants in Ai's archive both mirrors and repairs the biological exploitation of Black women such as Henrietta Lacks. If knowledge is corporealized as blood or flowers here, then it undoes a dichotomy between mind and body, between intellect and labor. While the narrative of African slavery has focused on the suffering body, Hopkins's Afrofuturist vision of buried African intelligence calls our attention also to the theft of knowledge.

## 3. I Teach Discourse Analysis Through Hopkins

Only after we finished reading the whole novel did we look back at the book for a more granular look at Hopkins's writing practice. The excitement of talking through the *Black Panther*-like plot was behind us, and it was time for us to take a look at Hopkins's borrowings in detail with an understanding of the larger stakes. I got us a computer lab, and we spent two class sessions working through the relationship Hopkins built to her source texts. Sanborn's painstaking itemization of passages from the novel, with links to Hopkins's source materials, provides an easy portal to crowd-sourced close study of her reading.[6] But in a classroom where students' feelings about plagiarism often go no further than shame, I wanted to frame this source material as something more complex than incriminating evidence. In the absence of Hopkins's own explanation of her writing practice, I listed for students a few ways that scholars often frame the relationship between a text under discussion and source material:

- First, *allusion*, which allows us to watch a great writer engage in revision of her predecessors. However, while Hopkins does often have her characters explicitly allude to touchstones such as Milton or Hawthorne, the concept of allusion does not describe the wholesale incorporation of other writers' material that troubled and interested me.[7]
- Second, and more pertinent to the composition classroom, was a framing that would use the classroom to put Hopkins into *dialogue* with the writers whose words she reused. A familiar model comes to mind: the "They Say/I Say" dialogue used to teach argument (Graff and Birkenstein). Hopkins's positionality might then be presented to students as a Black female writer responding to her mostly white, British, upper-class authors. But Hopkins does not consistently "write back" against more socially privileged authors. If Hopkins is engaged in a dialogue with her sources, then it is more like the dialogue offered by ChatGPT, whose vaunted superiority to traditional search engines is its "conversational" quality.
- A third approach is *pragmatic and biographical*: as students look ahead to paper due dates, they can easily understand the predicament of a harried magazine writer struggling to meet deadlines for the next issue. Yet while I appreciated the students' sympathy, I also noted that, with the exception of the univocal and large-scale repurposing of single authors in the final chapters, Hopkins's borrowings are too complex and polyvocal, too painstaking not to have made writing "original" words easier.[8]

Having considered this list of explanations, we recognized their inadequacy, and critiqued existing models in literary studies for understanding the relationship between source texts and novels. Hopkins's composing practice might be understood not just as a literary "tool," a rhetorical "technique," or a writerly "skill" marshaled to get her work in on time, but also as a reflection of her decision to steal back the corpus of African intelligence from the way Atlantic history had rendered it invisible. To get this point across, we considered a single borrowing together as a class. Here is a multilayered passage from Chapter Ten, in which I marked borrowed text for students with underlining, italics, or superscript to distinguish it from Hopkins's own words:

> Reuel watched the scene–a landscape strange in form, which would have delighted him and filled him with transports of joy; now he felt something akin to indifference.
>
> *The ripples that* flit *the burnished surface of the long undulating billows tinkle*d *continually on the sides of the vessel.* He was *aware of a low-lying spectral-pale band of shore. That portion of Africa whose nudity is only covered by the fallow mantle of the desert* gave *a most sad impression to the gazer. The Moors* call it *"Bled el Ateusch," the Country of Thirst; and, as there is an intimate relation between the character of a country and that of its people,* Reuel *realized* vividly *that the race who dwelt here must be different from those of the rest of the world.*
>
> "Ah! that is our first glimpse of Africa, is it?" said Adonis's voice, full of delight, beside him.
>
> He turned to see his friend offering him a telescope. "At last we are here. In the morning we shall set our feet on the enchanted ground."
>
> In the distance one could indeed make out upon the deep blue of the sky the profile of Djema el Gomgi, the great mosque on the shores of the Mediterranean. At a few cable lengths away the city smiles at them with all the fascination of a modern Cleopatra, circled with an oasis of palms studded with hundreds of domes and minarets. Against a sky of amethyst the city stands forth *with a penetrating charm. It is the eternal enchantment of the cities of the Orient seen at a distance; but, alas! set foot within them, the illusion vanishes and disgust seizes you. Like beautiful bodies they have the appearance of life, but within the worm of decay and death eats ceaselessly.*(84-85)

Characteristically, Hopkins stitches language from several texts in her library together, but the seams become clearest when we take the time to examine the original sources. Words from a novel about Saigon (underlined) provide narrative context for a nonfictional firsthand report about Tripoli (italicized) and an African American sailor's report on North Africa (superscript) (Gaboriau 136; Jacassy 37-38; Campbell 3-4).[9] The initial payoff of unraveling the text in this way for me was not, of course, to show that Hopkins didn't write all of the words, let alone the fact that she did not have firsthand knowledge of Tripoli, but to reveal that this Western construction of Africa was the product of "pre-packaged," historically specific discourse. This approach shows how the novel's Orientalist discourse comes *through* Hopkins as much as *from* her. Just as we have seen with ChatGPT, her plagiarism incarnates ideology.

Of course, students do not need to be exposed to Hopkins's source materials to identify texts as historically and culturally conditioned discourse. Before learning that such passages were taken from other sources, I'd taught them simply as typical of their time and place, suggesting that they served Western imperial interests by representing North Africa as seductive and backward.[10] In that earlier course, a brief introduction to Edward Said's work also helped to demonstrate the ways that Western power rested to no small extent on its generation of knowledge about the "other." But allowing students to follow Hopkins to her original sources allows them to do some of the work of historical contextualization themselves. With this thought in mind, I assigned each of my students a chapter from Hopkins's novel, then asked them to follow Sanborn's links to the texts from which they were derived. Students could then mentally bookmark these passages to enable us to revisit the

theme for understanding the novel as a whole, which could point up stronger continuities between the United States and North Africa as products of a single human bloodline, whereby "decay and death" lie within rather than without post-emancipation America. A similar analysis might be done with other ideologically laden discourses in the novel, from medicine (appearing to emphasize the male medical gaze and passive female bodies) to religion (seeming to ground the self-evidence of Christian belief systems in nature), in which Hopkins's novel borrows languages from these discourses wholesale and then elsewhere appears to undermine them.

Assigning each student two chapters after we had finished the novel, I asked them to look at a plagiarized passage and consider the following questions:

- Follow in Hopkins's footsteps by formulating questions for AI.com that might produce something like the text of the passage. How similar was your result to the wording in *Of One Blood*?
- Describe your process of invention as you worked with ChatGPT. How was it similar or different to what you imagine to be Hopkins's process as she worked with her library?
- Use AI.com's side-project, DALL-E, to produce an illustration of a scene in your chapters. You might use it to produce an image that might have inspired something in the novel (such as the Nubian statuary Hopkins may have seen at the Museum of Fine Arts). Or you might use it to produce an image that could illustrate the novel or might be used to adapt the novel for the screen.

So I had finally succumbed to teaching prompt engineering! But I did so in order to draw attention to the difference between Hopkins's practice and generative AI's. Students quickly learned to modify their prompts to AI to produce language that is well over a century old—older still when her sources were Victorian novels. A chatbot, they learned, can conjure antiquated styles with a few keystrokes, just as Hopkins herself injected new blood into texts already old in her day, thereby mirroring her plotline. Students were interested in ChatGPT's ability to "write" fiction (one writing, "I learned how ChatGPT can create works of prose. I have only ever seen it used before to create non-fiction writing such as essays"), which stimulated discussion of the way that Hopkins's magazine novel also produces a knowledge-effect as it weaves the information into imaginative writing. Asked to reflect on the difference between Hopkins's method and ChatGPT's in producing a knowledge-effect, students hedged on the similarities and differences: "while plagiarism is involved in both cases, Hopkins actually read all the material that she 'borrowed' from […] ChatGPT does create 'original' sentences, but works around things that have been fed to it, so it is not really original. This is similar to how Hopkins wrote her own original work, but also used from other texts she knew."[11]

Yet students also noted that Hopkins's use of the preexisting corpus was not systematic, let alone algorithmic. And unlike the massive invisible corpus (reportedly consisting of some 300 billion words the engine has "read") processed by ChatGPT-3's black box, Hopkins's source material is now transparent thanks to the efforts of scholars. And while ChatGPT can write in particular discourses and styles, we found it incapable of the critique sometimes evident in Hopkins's use of her source material. Trained on an enormous corpus of existing text, ChatGPT inevitably mirrors the Eurocentric corpus, which it uses to generate new text. The well-documented racial biases of AI's illustration engine, DALL-E,[12] became evident as students asked it to produce visual approximations of scenes from the novel (e.g., if the prompt "Harvard students studying for a science exam" does not specify the mixed racial ancestry of the novel's characters).

## Conclusion

The discourse around AI-generated writing seems certain to change rapidly as the technology evolves. Yet while ChatGPT may leave us teachers scrambling for a new vocabulary, some old words to describe social relations (class- and race-based forms of exploitation) still prove most useful in addressing this new technology. Discussions of *Of One Blood* with my students helped me, as Anderson's unsettled writing teacher, to put ChatGPT into the kind of historical perspective that allows us to deliver class- and race-based critiques. For all of its apparent similarities, Hopkins's plagiarism did not depend on the exploitation of less powerful writers that characterizes both ChatGPT and much of the plagiarism committed with impunity. Neither separable from human beings (as tool) nor our agential equal (as a collaborator), the textual corpus scraped into ChatGPT's black box remains invisible, while Hopkins's much more modest use of her predecessors can be traced back through pathways that lend themselves to historical critique and, just as importantly, to repair.

In the end, this practice also allowed us to revisit the problem of plagiarism. If plagiarism is a kind of theft, then it is of paramount importance to address the question of *who* steals from *whom*, with attention to the social power of the parties involved. ChatGPT bypasses the transparency needed for collective intellectual accountability, but was Hopkins guilty of an analogous violation of individual property right? How might our recognition of her status as an African American woman writer influence our judgment? Inevitably turning to recent events, we debated whether Claudine Gay was held to too high or too low a standard: was it true, as some commentators claimed, that Harvard students would have been expelled if they had done the same? or did Gay's race mean that she was charged with an incapacity for "original thought" that even students are spared when they are urged simply to think independently, not necessarily originally?

In conclusion, then, our class felt it imperative not just to understand generative AI as a new tool, in which

our guiding questions might be how to use it responsibly. Instead, we needed to frame the new platform as a type of theft of intellectual labor that is not new, and which can help us revisit questions of plagiarism that arise in any writing-intensive classroom. Our novel, and the recent controversy around it, offered a particularly opportune way to understand the ways that the expropriation of labor has been racialized.

## Notes

The author expresses his gratitude to the editors and anonymous readers, as well as to his colleague Joe Ramsey, for commenting on a draft of this essay.

1. The artwork and introduction accompanying the recent MIT Press edition draws attention to this prophetic feature of the novel, though the editor, Minister Faust, prefers the term "Afritopianism." While not scholarly (it replicates minor misprints from previous editions of the novel), I used this edition for its ready availability and fine introduction. Parenthetical page references refer to this edition.

2. My calculations are derived from Sanborn, "Pleasure." The percentage has increased as ever-larger textual corpuses become available to Sanborn's diligent research, first published in 2010. Sanborn's unsparing term "plagiarism," rather than the softer language of "adaptation" used in the Broadview edition (also 2022), more accurately reflects Hopkins's unacknowledged use of these sources, even as Sanborn also treats plagiarism in this case as a generative writing practice rather than cause to dismiss the work.

3. For example, Nathanael West notoriously remixed Horatio Alger novels into the same percentage of his *A Cool Million*. More seriously, T.S. Eliot found a title and subject for his most famous work, *The Waste Land*, in the poem of writer Madison Cawein who was conveniently dead and little-known, a theft for which Eliot's welter of footnotes referencing just about everything else might be seen as an alibi.

4. Nair suggests that writing programs too often present plagiarism as a failure of "original thinking," which it is unfair to expect of students; instead the learning goal must be "independent" thinking.

5. Qtd. in Wallace and Schwartz, 10.

6. Sanborn, "Pleasure," concluding links.

7. Ricks elegantly summarizes the antinomy between plagiarism and allusion: "plagiarism [is] incompatible with allusion [...] Allusion is posited upon our calling the earlier work into play, whereas the one thing that plagiarism hopes is that the earlier work will not enter our heads" (231–32).

8. I acknowledge here that I first considered Sanborn's own reflections on using his discoveries in the classroom. While I agree with Sanborn that "Hopkins's importation of fragments of other texts" can become for students a powerful vehicle for recognizing and subverting our culture of possessive individualism ("Coming" 227), my advanced composition course at the University of Massachusetts Boston, which is a more-or-less open-admission public university, presents different challenges for teachers than an advanced course in cultural and literary theory might for an Amherst College professor. My audience here is beginning college students confronting the challenges of plagiarism and AI-generated text. I am more interested than Sanborn in having students begin by examining on their own the specific relation between Hopkins's text and her source materials.

9. The phrase "the race who dwelt here must be different from those of the rest of the world" is italicized and double-underlined because while it originates in Jacassy, it also appears in Campbell in the magazine edited by Hopkins herself (4).

10. An insightful reading of the novel's negotiation of Black cosmopolitanism and U.S. imperialism as reflected in passages like the one quoted above is Murphy 121–46.

11. Student responses quoted here were originally collected in Google Forms.

12. For a summary of this research, see Johnson.

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**Len von Morzé** is Associate Professor of English at the University of Massachusetts and Interim Dean of its Honors College, a campus unit dedicated to supporting undergraduate research and interdisciplinary coursework. He is working on a book on discourses of language justice and the rights of immigrants in the early U.S. republic.

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RADICAL TEACHER

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

# Collaborative Course Design: A Contribution Toward a Radical Food Systems Pedagogy

by Michael Classens, Nadia Gericke, Amara Digout, Aden Fisher, Madeleine Frechette, Christina Wong

FROZEN FOODS WITH STRING BEANS, NEW YORK - 1977, IRVING PENN. COPYRIGHT THE IRVING PENN FOUNDATION

*Conversation is the central location of the democratic educator.*

- bell hooks, 2003, 44

## Introduction

The relatively nascent (sub)field of critical food systems pedagogy has developed, in part, through a critique of existing approaches to teaching and learning about food and agriculture. Early on, Jordan et al., (2014) for example concluded that conventional food systems pedagogy was too narrowly conceived and rigidly disciplinarian. Perhaps most damningly, Jordan et al., (2014) and others criticized conventional food systems pedagogy as being abstracted from broader social, economic, cultural, political, and ecological contexts that shape food systems in the first place (Sumner, 2016; Valley et al., 2017). Given the importance of matrices of power in shaping food access, and the inequitably distributed socio-ecological devastation wrought by the capital-intensive, industrialized food system, these omissions are inexcusable at best, and dangerous at worst.

In response to both the inadequacy of conventional food systems education, and the urgency of attending to the global polycrisis – including the climate crisis, biodiversity collapse, geopolitical instability, and ongoing structural violence and oppression – critical food systems scholars have developed a range of approaches "not just concerned with any type of change but with change that addresses power and injustice" (Sumner, 2016, xix). Meek and Tarlau (2016) insist that food systems educators must reckon with an explicitly political choice to "use education to reproduce the current food system, raise awareness about the inequities of the food system, or *utilize education as a means to form individuals who are determined to transform the food system*" (p. 246, emphasis added). These recent scholarly interventions gesture towards a critical food systems pedagogy praxis within which theorizing socioecological justice and equity within food systems directly informs curricular innovations. We discuss this in more detail below but suffice to say for now this work is resulting in "fundamental changes…in both *what* and *how* we teach" (Galt, Clark, and Parr 2012, 43. Emphasis original). Our intervention builds on this work through experimentation with *how we design what to teach*.

We draw inspiration from the above cohort of critical food systems pedagogues and seek to build upon and add to their contributions by thinking about how critical food systems pedagogy can be advanced by challenging the hierarchies of power within universities and colleges that antagonize the pursuit of transformative education practice. We take seriously Allan Sears' (2003, 23) contention that conventional education "does not prepare students to take power. On the contrary, it prepares them to be ruled" – and ask, what might a class that prepares students to take power look like? In these days of what Kai Heron (2023, np) has recently described as "capitalist catastrophism and eco-apartheid", we also take inspiration from Raymond Williams' words, and see in them a pedagogical provocation: "To be truly radical is to make hope possible, rather than despair convincing" (1989, 118).

Our specific, modest intervention focuses on engaging students, in conversation, in the process of curriculum co-design (Bovil et al., 2011; Bovil et al., 2016; Woolmer et al., 2016). We explore this through a case study of co-designing The Edible Campus, a combined 4$^{th}$ year and graduate level course offered through the School of the Environment at The University of Toronto that situates students and campuses within the context of broader movements for more ecologically rational and socially-just food systems. Ultimately our approach to curriculum co-design was meant to interrupt and reimagine what Elizabeth Ellsworth observed over 30 years ago as the "business-as-usual – that is, prevailing social relations – in a university classroom" (1989, 299).

The University of Toronto is a very large urban university located in Toronto, Ontario, with three campuses – one downtown and two suburban campuses east (Scarborough) and west (Mississauga) of the downtown campus respectively. There are several faculty members involved in food systems research across the tri-campus, and a minor program in food studies at University of Toronto, Scarborough campus, though there is no department of food studies or agriculture at The University of Toronto. There are many campus food systems alternatives (Classens, Adam, and Srebot, 2023) – from a 10-acre campus farm at University of Toronto, Scarborough campus, and smaller food growing spaces to student-run food banks and cafes scattered across all three campuses. The University of Toronto is also home to the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), a pre-eminent institute of critical pedagogy and teacher training. Dr. Jennifer Sumner, considered one of the founders of critical food systems pedagogy, is a faculty member at OISE.

In the section immediately following this brief introduction we summarize the contours of critical food systems pedagogy. We outline current and ongoing threats to higher education, and summarize scholarship that problematizes, though ultimately remains optimistic about the university as a site of socio-ecological transformation. Next, we review literature on curriculum co-design and discuss how this practice can serve to undermine damaging prevailing trends on campus. After this, we describe our case study of The Edible Campus and provide some insight into the co-design process, and what resulted from this collaboration. We end with a brief reflection on the limits and possibilities of curricular co-production as we understand them.

## (Critical) Food Systems Education & The Antagonisms (and Opportunities) Within Higher Education

Up until relatively recently, there was a notable absence of scholarly interest at the intersection of food and pedagogy. As Jennifer Sumner observed, "those who study learning have not often turned their gaze toward food, while those who study food have generally overlooked the learning associated with it" (2016, p. xix). This lack of critical reflexivity has functioned, in part, to reproduce teaching and learning practices within the context of food and agriculture that perpetuated socio-ecologically damaging narratives and practices. This is not surprising given that, in many ways, the parameters of teaching and learning about food in North America were established within the context of the Morrill Land-Grant Act in 1862. The Act was a key driver in expanding the territorialization and political-economic project of settler colonialism in North America (Harvey, 2021). The Act enabled a land grab of nearly 11 million acres of land in the US alone. Similar initiatives throughout the settler colonial world resulted in the theft of an additional roughly 4 million acres spread across the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand world, to establish and finance a fledgling higher education sector. In exchange, 'land grab universities' were instructed by the Act to "teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts" (Morrill Land-Grant Act, as quoted in Sayre, 2022, p. 6).

For over a century and half land grab institutions in the North American context have been riven with colonial, modernist, and industrial logics designed to maintain (settler) colonial power (Palmer, 2023) – and these logics have no doubt shaped the contours of food systems pedagogies. By and large, food systems education remains beholden to commitments to a productivist paradigm focused on the maximization of agricultural profit. This creates a self-referential and self-fulfilling circularity wherein institutes of higher education train students very narrowly; those graduates bring this to bear on the industrialized and capital-intensive food system; and this, in turn, further reinforces the blinkered training regime. As Will Valley and colleagues put it, "Traditional agriculture and food-related curricula often follow linear, cause-and-effect rationalities that focus on a limited range of objectives (e.g., agricultural yield, micronutrient intake, or return on investment)" (2018, p. 468). To be clear, these foci are preferred by the industrialized model of agriculture. The political economy and financialization of agriculture demand a reductive focus on yields, which when coupled with state subsidies, results in a (relatively) cheap supply of food. Conventional agriculture pedagogy underwrites this system by stripping away the broader context within which food systems and socio-ecologies are reproduced.

More recently there have been encouraging signs of a reimagined food systems pedagogy – one that embraces interdisciplinarity and ontological and epistemological equity (WITHHELD; Valley et al., 2017). Valley and colleagues, for example, find that notions of collective action and systems thinking are key features of four sustainable food systems education programs in North America (2017; 470). Meanwhile in Canada, a recent special issue of *Canadian Food Studies* comprising 17 articles documents how teachers and program administrators are forging new directions in a distinctly *critical* food studies pedagogy. The collection documents programs and practices from across the country, sketching the contours of a food systems education informed by commitments to decolonization, racial justice, intergenerational and arts-based learning, interdisciplinarity, and ultimately, socio-ecological change of and through food systems (Classens and Sumner, 2021).

We don't mean to be too hastily celebratory – but rather we argue that the recent interventions are suggestive of a meaningful trend of food systems scholars taking seriously the transformative potential of food systems education. In the process, commitments of sustainable and just food systems as espoused by activists for decades – democratization, empowerment of under-represented voices, social and ecological change – are being woven in the fabric of critical food systems pedagogy.

There are, of course, counter-tends that threaten to undo the progress already made, and halt future innovations. The incursion of neoliberal logic within academic spaces beginning over 40 years ago, has through the passage of time, become normalized. Increasing faculty-student ratios, precaritization of labour, increasing tuition costs, customer-centricity, and education instrumentality and entrepreneurialism are all now ossified operational logics of higher education (Cornelius-Bell and Bell, 2020; Sears, 2003). Henry Giroux observes, in no uncertain terms, the toxic impact of neoliberalism within the academy:

> [I]t legitimates a culture of harsh competitiveness and wages war against public values and those public spheres that contest the rule and ideology of capital. It saps the democratic foundation of solidarity, degrades collaboration, and tears up all forms of social obligation (2023, np.)

The more recent trend of creeping fascism on campus is perhaps more alarming. So-called 'anti-woke' legislation introduced by Florida Governor Ron DeSantis seeks a total ban on state funding for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs. At a press conference to announce the proposed legislation, DeSantis was clear: "Florida's getting out of that game. You want to do things like gender ideology? Go to Berkeley. Go to some of those other places." (DeSantis, quoted in Bridges, 2023, np.) As of the spring of 2023, similar legislation has been introduced in over 20 other US states (Lu et al., 2023). More recently in Canada there have been glimpses of a discursive move to unite fascistic and neoliberal logics. In an op-ed published in the National Post, a professor at Augustine College in Ottawa opined, "To stop the poisonous radicalism within academia, privatize universities" (Robson, 2023, np).

In some ways, none of this new. Lauren Shepherd's (2023) recent work demonstrates how the right has, for decades, seen campuses as centrally important terrain in their reactionary political-economic and cultural project. And certainly, the co-opting of student movements and genuinely radical alternatives on campus remains on ongoing spectre within this context (see Brady, 2020; Dolhinow, 2020). However, considering the urgent need to transform food systems and the vitally important role of critical food systems pedagogy within this context, the stakes of the struggle to realize the campus as a site of transformation have perhaps never been higher. Encouragingly, the evolution of critical food systems pedagogy, concerned fundamentally with socio-ecological transformation, has flourished despite this antagonistic milieu.

## Co-creative Course Design and Alternative World Making

As students are continually re-cast as consumers in the contemporary academy, including them in the (co)production of curriculum and pedagogical design is an important exercise in imaging the university otherwise. Bovill and colleagues (2016) suggest that co-creation occurs "when staff and students work collaboratively with one another to create components of curricula and and/or pedagogical approaches" (196). While there has been an uptick in scholarly and practitioner interest in curriculum co-creation in the last decade or so, the idea itself is not new (Bovil and Woolmer, 2019). Over 100 years ago John Dewey compellingly made the case for democratized approaches to curriculum development, which in turn informs key aspects of critical pedagogy as defined by Freire, Giroux, and others (Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1993; Giroux, 1981).

At the heart of curriculum co-creation is a desire to disrupt conventional power dynamics that reify the teacher-student dichotomy while remedying the fact that students often lack agency over their education (Mann, 2008; Bovil et al., 2016). For Healey et al. (2014) reimagining curriculum design is fundamentally about the (re)distribution of power in higher ed. There are many noted benefits of this approach, from gaining a deeper understanding of learning and improving the classroom experience, through to improved enthusiasm for learning and developing a stronger sense of self (Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felton, 2011; Cook-Slather et al, 2014).

However, beyond this there is also an intrinsic, democratizing value to the process of co-creating curriculum (McMahon and Portelli, 2004). Given the centrally important role students have had within the context of broader movements for socio-ecological transformation for decades (Rhoades, 2019), we argue that intentionally making space for students to transform higher ed through curriculum co-development is a promising strategy. Rogers and colleagues note the role of students' "imagination or dreaming as an untapped resource for alternative worldmaking" (2023, 145). Mirra and Garcia (2020, 297), meanwhile, consider 'speculative civic literacy' that supports students to re-story "public life in ways that honor their experiences, relationships, and dreams for the future".

Bovil and colleagues (2016) make a useful distinction between co-creation *of* the curriculum and co-creation *in* the curriculum. The latter occurs when students are engaged in the process of co-design *during* the course. As an example, in an article titled "No syllabus, no problem", Connell (2022) describes the process of co-creating the syllabus with students in his first-year course, Food, Agriculture & Society. Connell facilitates a process by which students directly inform what topics, under the broad rubric of food, agriculture and society, are attended to within the course. Co-creation *of* the curriculum, on the other hand, is when the co-design process occurs before the course takes place (Bovil, 2019). We would consider our project, as described in detail below, as a case of co-creation of the curriculum. We move now to that discussion.

## Methods

The first two authors met during an agricultural walking tour of the downtown campus of The University of Toronto. The following year (during the 2022-23 academic year) Nadia enrolled in one of Michael's 4th year classes. At the same time, Michael was in the early stages of planning for the co-creation process for The Edible Campus, which was to be introduced in the fall of 2023. The general idea for a course focused broadly on campuses and food systems issues emerged from Michael's research over the past few years (Classens, Adams, and Srebot, 2023; Classens and Burton, 2023; Classens and Sumner, 2022; Classens *et al*., 2021). Having worked and learned with student activists throughout that time, Michael was motivated to cede power, as it were, and to engage in a process of co-creation with students. In late 2022 Michael hired Nadia as a research collaborator to begin working on the process of co-producing The Edible Campus. The next four authors were among the first cohort of graduate students enrolled in The Edible Campus.

Michael is a white settler, cis-gendered, straight male and Assistant Professor – Teaching Stream in the School of the Environment at The University of Toronto. Nadia is a white-passing, non-binary, assigned female at birth of German and Chicano-Mexican (Spanish and Indigenous) ancestry who recently graduated with degrees in Environmental Science and Sociocultural Anthropology from The University of Toronto. Aden is a settler Canadian of English and Indian background who recently earned a Master of Environment and Sustainability degree from The University of Toronto. Christina is a woman-identifying second-generation Chinese Canadian who recently earned a Master of Health Sciences degree from The University of Toronto. Amara is an Indigenous youth with Métis and mixed European settler ancestry, originally from the unceded territories of the Lekwungen speaking peoples. She is currently an MEd student in the Social Justice Education program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and The University of Toronto. Madeleine is a

white settler youth with Irish and French ancestry, born in Toronto, Ontario. She recently earned a Master of Environment and Sustainability degree from The University of Toronto.

The first two authors held collaborative co-creation sessions with people at The University of Toronto – one open to staff, postdocs, and faculty members whose work somehow intersects with food systems issues, broadly defined. Three additional 2hr sessions were held with student organizers, activists, and those curious about food systems issues on campus. We focus our findings here on the latter three sessions. The co-creation events took place in late March and early April 2023, each lasted about two hours, and each was catered by a small, family-run campus eatery. In total about 45 students were engaged through this process. The first and third sessions were held in a relatively nondescript room on the downtown campus, the aesthetic and feel of which would be quite familiar to many of this journal's readers. The second session, by serendipity and some last-minute adjustments, was held at Victoria College at The University of Toronto's downtown campus. At the time Climate Justice UofT, a student-run organization, was holding an occupation of a building at Victoria College to compel the College's administration to commit to fully divesting from fossil fuel investments. We saw holding one of our collaborative co-creation sessions in conjunction with the occupation as an opportunity to both show solidarity with Climate Justice UofT while perhaps engaging other allies in our Edible Campus conversations. Unsurprisingly, this was the liveliest and most uplifting of the three sessions.

Nadia led the discussions, with Michael playing a lesser facilitation role. The discussions were intentionally designed to be free-flowing and open to allow the conversation to evolve based on the composition, interests, and expertise of the participants. We had several prompting questions meant to solicit from participants their perspectives on all design elements of the course. However, we did not see this as an inventory of questions that we needed to get through. We also didn't approach these sessions as needing to specifically inform discrete aspects of curriculum development – that is to say, we didn't ask our co-creators for particular input on assignment design, readings, and the like. Rather, we wanted to create the conditions for a relatively unstructured and free-flowing conversation to invite creativity and reflection beyond conventional assumptions about what a course ought to be. We also wanted our co-creators to take the discussion in directions they felt were appropriate. We elaborate on the discussions and identify key themes in the section immediately below.

The sessions were audio recorded and transcripts of the recordings were generated and uploaded to NVivo. The transcripts were then inductively and iteratively coded by Michael for key themes. This initial thematic analysis was shared with the co-authors and refined collaboratively. The final syllabus was designed by Michael and the course was first taught in the fall of 2023. It is important to note that any overlap between the group of students who supported the design of The Edible Campus, and those who took the class, is purely incidental.

## Conversation Key Themes

The conversations were rich and vigorous, with the collaborating participants providing many insights and identifying many challenges. As discussed in the final section, not everything raised at the sessions could be integrated into the initial course design. Some of the discussions went beyond questions of course co-development, though provided the authors with content on which to reflect in the future. We identify three themes below that directly inform various aspects of the course design - food access, time/collectivity, and the campus-scape - and discuss each in turn below.

**Food Access**

Perhaps the clearest theme to emerge from the collaborative co-design sessions was a shared desire to realize enhanced food access on campus. Much of this discussion was rooted firmly in the firsthand experience many of the students have with food injustice/insecurity. For example, a deep dissatisfaction with campus food services was common across all three sessions. This is perhaps not surprising given the corporatization of campus food services across North America and the now-normalized paradigm that food services ought to be profitable (Bohunickey et al., 2019; Martin and Andrée, 2012). This has led to conditions in which low food quality and high food cost is the norm, leading to alarming levels of postsecondary student food insecurity (Maynard et al., 2018; Nazim et al., 2019). Beyond this, the declining balance model of student meal plans creates a perverse pressure on students to spend the money or risk losing it at the end of the semester. It should be added that there is very little transparency with respect to where the money students have left on their cards at the end of the semester goes. One student recounted a story about her friend:

> My friend…had like a thousand dollars left by the end of the school year. And then…she kept buying like venti cappuccinos from Starbucks or she bought all her friends bulk chocolates even though like nobody liked this chocolate and she doesn't even like it herself, but she was just trying to spend money…So it's so absurd how the system functions and it's like you have to pay for something you don't want and you're just putting money in, supporting the things you don't want to support and you don't care about but there's no alternative (Student participant).

Another noted;

> In the last period of my freshman year, I bought 200 cans of soda drinks from the vending machine and from the cafeteria just to spend all of the money. I also heard someone actually is paying for food just to give away to homeless people. I think that this is really nice, but somehow it's also problematic (Student participant).

For some students, changes to campus food services during the height of the pandemic exacerbated their food costs and pushed them closer to food insecurity. At least one of the dining halls on campus moved from an all-you-care-to-eat model to a pay-per-weight model during the pandemic. As one student recalled:

> They switched up the pricing system partway through in Covid where they were like, you're no longer able to have all you can eat. You have to pay for each thing that you buy. So you have to pay for a slice of bread, you have to pay for an orange, you have to pay for peanut butter, you have to pay for everything like this (Student participant).

Another student, a member of a housing co-operative, talked about how their community was organizing for their own food security:

> We've recently started a bulk food purchasing program, so we can actually, through community solidarity, we all pitch in and purchase food together at rates that are much cheaper than what grocery stores offer. So that's one way we're actively trying to deal with food insecurity (Student participant).

Exacerbating student challenges with accessing food is the lack of cooking amenities on campus, even for those students who live in residence. Many students noted that they knew where there was a microwave on campus, but even then there weren't enough of them available. Access to fridges and kitchens, many students felt, would reduce their food costs and enhance their food security. One student noted their struggles to find food storage space for a student-run food bank:

> The Engineers Without Borders food bank…their current problem is actually finding somewhere to store the food. Not that there isn't a need for it, not that the school hasn't recognized that food insecurity is a serious issue among the students, it's actually just getting permission to use the space and use the resources to help people (Student participant).

**Time / Collectivity**

Another closely related theme to emerge from the conversations had to do with the amount of time students have to prepare their own food, but also, to engage in advocacy and activism. As Evans & Roggio (2023, 13) acknowledge, the neoliberalization of higher education has created the paradigm of "academia as business". Within this model, students are treated as consumers, and as a result there is a deep pressure toward instrumentality. The principles of slow scholarship, having time to learn, cook, and advocate together, are all incongruent with the culture of academic capitalism. Bell and Lewis Jr (2023, 10) define academic capitalism as "the pressure for academic organizations (and faculty) to act entrepreneurially, forcing investment into 'productive' and profitable activities that gain the most return". While Bell and Lewis Jr don't explicitly include students in their analysis, it seems clear from our work that students do feel an intense pressure to spend their time doing things that are (seen to be) 'productive'. As one student put it:

> Cooking for other people and cooking with people is such a beautiful thing and it honestly sucks that time scarcity makes it so that it's difficult to just have a relaxed meal with people and cook together (Student participant).

Within this context, there is an opportunity to reimagine fundamental assumptions about course activities and how, and whether, they are valorized. As an example, one student wondered whether activism and collectivity could be integrated into course work. "We have a lack of time… I would give students time to participate in activism. I think [a course] could be a great place to take collective action" (Student participant).

Another student put a similar sentiment in slightly different terms. They understood opportunities for collective work as an antidote to the pathologies of possessive individualism within academia, and beyond.

> In general it can be very isolating for a lot of people. Um, because you know, in general our society doesn't really lean towards community. There's a lot of sense of individualism and of climbing the ladder. But cultivating a philosophy of community and that people should be looking out for each other, I think that's something that can actually be really powerful (Student participant).

**The Campus-scape**

One final theme worth briefly summarizing here is how students thought about the campus environment. While the physical campus environment is often dismissed as simply a passive backdrop to learning, it is in fact a centrally important pedagogical tool. Magolda (2001), for example, notes how the physical campus is often framed unproblematically, and curated with official institutional narratives, within the context of campus tours. These tours are part of a broader sales pitch to students – but they are also inherently pedagogical. Alternative campus tours – those that challenge the dominant narratives of the campus-scape are often organized by student groups, but have also been integrated as assignments in courses (see Classens *et al*., 2021; Magolda, 2001; Sandberg, 2015). One student articulated the rarely acknowledged structural conditions of campus land;

> The lands that students are on are lands that are colonial, stolen from Indigenous people and continuously gentrified…[the land] never really belong to [the university] in the first place, but they continue to profit from it (Student participant).

Many other students felt that university lands ought to be used in ways that depart dramatically from the paradigmatic institutional logic. For example, carefully manicured grounds, low-cropped grass, and low-maintenance shrubbery are all hallmarks of the contemporary campus. However, in light of various concerns – the use of pesticides and non-native species, urban biodiversity loss, climate change, and food insecurity to name a few – many students feel that university grounds could be put to better use. As one student put it:

> Universities are unique in that they tend to have a lot of land and a lot of land that isn't really put to use in my mind. Like in the quad. It's very manicured but there's no way to sit there. It's a beautiful quad but there's nothing to do. It's just wasted (Student participant).

Others noted specifically that the wasted land could be used for food growing.

> I guess my ideal version of things would be that every living space would have some space that people could use communally to just grow their own food, share it together, have time to cook meals together (Student participant).

**The Edible Campus**

The conversations during the co-creation sessions directly informed all design aspects of the course. These are summarized in Figure 1 and briefly elaborated below. It is important to note that various institutional rules and conventions remain regulating factors. For example, the course is bound by expectations with respect to structure such as the number of hours of class time per week (3 hours) and how many weeks the class runs (12 weeks). Beyond this, and more substantively, issues such as the requirement to assign grades as a means of assessing student learning limited the extent to which the course could be pedagogically experimental. Still, the milieu of the first author's home unit, and the general institutional milieu of The University of Toronto afforded ample opportunity for creative design choices.

While there isn't space to outline the entire syllabus here, in this section we briefly provide an overview of the content and assignment structure. Following this, we provide a reflection on one of the core assignments in the course that attempts to address the three themes noted above.

With respect to content, the course situates students and campuses within the context of broader movements for more ecologically rational and socially-just food systems. Weekly topics include colonialism, land, and the campus; the political economy of campus food systems; student food (in)security and health; labour issues in campus food provision; campus food systems alternatives; campus food growing spaces; student/campus-based food movements; campus-community partnerships; and critical food systems pedagogy. In-class sessions featured unionionized food service works on campus, a PhD student conducting research on meal plans on campus, and a panel discussion with student and recently graduated activists. We spent 5 of the 12 weeks outside of the conventional classroom. We visited the UTSC Campus Farm at The University of Toronto Scarborough and did a tour of the multiple food growing spaces at the downtown campus. We also spent three weeks – the first and last weeks, and one week about halfway through the semester – cooking and eating together.

The assignments for the course included:

*Action One-pagers*

Working in groups of 3-5 people, students developed one-page documents meant to provide practical guidance on a variety of issues relevant to those organizing for a more just and sustainable campuses. As an example, one group developed a document designed to guide student groups in identifying and obtaining funding for their work.

| Theme | Course content | Assignment |
|---|---|---|
| Food Access | • Cooking together in class<br>• Content on student food insecurity<br>• Content on meal plans and campus food services<br>• Content on food campus food growing spaces | • Critical mapping project<br>• Action one-pagers<br>• Edible Campus Symposium |
| Time / collectivity | • Cooking together in class<br>• Collective organizing<br>• Content on labour organizing on campus<br>• Content on student activism | • Collegiality and collaboration assignment<br>• Action one-pagers<br>• Edible Campus Symposium |
| The campus-scape | • Content on intersections of colonialism, food systems, and the campus<br>• Tours of growing spaces on campus<br>• Content on 'alternative' campus food scape | • Mapping project<br>• Edible Campus Symposium |

FIGURE 1. COURSE CONTENT AND ASSIGNMENTS

Another group, drawing directly from some of their group members' experience, produced a document to guide students strategizing sit-in actions on how to include access to food in their planning.

*Mapping the Campus Food Scape*

Following Fanshel and Iles' (2020/2022) mapping pedagogy, the undergraduate students working in small groups were asked to co-create maps documenting various elements of our own campus foodscape. The outputs included, for example, a map of food growing spaces on campus and a map of food services across campus and whether the workers at each establishment were unionized.

*Collegiality and Collaboration*

To challenge the individualism held in such high esteem in many academic spaces, and to create a collegial and collaborative co-learning environment, all students were asked to keep a list of brief reflections summarizing their own acts of support, mutual aid, and gratitude within the class over the course of the semester.

*Learning Reflection*

All students were asked to write a brief learning reflection on their experience in the course.

*The Edible Campus Symposium*

The graduate students in the course were asked to organize an event to bring together a diversity of campus food systems actors, stakeholders, activists, and allied community partners. This provided students an opportunity to engage explicitly in praxis – to work toward organizing a more just and sustainable campus foodscape while building solidarity with allied groups on campus. We reflect on this assignment immediately below.

*The Edible Campus Symposium*

The inaugural Tri-Campus Food Symposium was held December 1 and 2, 2023. This event was planned by a group of four graduate students (last four authors) in The Edible Campus in collaboration with the Hart House Farm Committee, a student group focused on food justice on campus, and beyond. The summer before the course began, the first author applied for a small grant ($4,600) and had preliminary discussions with members of the Hart House Farm Committee about collaborating on organizing the symposium. Additional funding was provided by The Hart House Farm Committee and the University of Toronto Environmental Resource Network (UTERN), a student-run environmental justice organization on campus. The assignment was framed as an action-learning opportunity that would provide students with real-world organizing experience. The assignment was also an exercise in praxis - theories and concepts from the course informed the material planning of the event, which the students refined through reflection and further action.

The symposium included two keynote presentations, four discussion panels (one on growing food on campus; one featuring unionized food service workers in the lead-up to bargaining; one, an interdisciplinary discussion focused on defining the 'edible campus'; and one on decolonizing food systems on camps) a seed saving workshop, a tea making workshop, a Black & Indigenous Food Sovereignties workshop, a lunch drop-in discussion, a series of student socials, and plenty of free food, including two communal lunches. Roughly 100 people – students, staff, community members, and faculty – attended the two-day event.

The symposium began with opening remarks from Bonnie Jane Maracle, Wolf Clan, Mohawk Nation at Tyendinaga Territory, who is the Traditional Teacher in Residence at First Nations House at The University of Toronto. In her remarks, Bonnie Jane asked attendees to consider, what is the duty of the human being? How are we obligated to our relations? The authors understood this as an invitation to consider how we might contribute to the improvement of our own campus food systems. The symposium provided the opportunity for many students and allied groups across all three campuses, as well as community members from neighboring institutions, to think deeply about this question, and to build and strengthen networks.

## Closing reflection

We live in dire times dominated by intersecting and compounding socio-ecological and geo-political crises - times that desperately require us to imagine the world - and the campus - otherwise. One could argue that we need what (some) universities aspire to be now more than ever. We don't want to romanticize a halcyon period within the academy - we recognize the various and intersectional regressive structural forces that are inherent to the historical and contemporary fabric of the campus. However, we remain optimistic about the potential for the campus to be a crucible of socio-ecological change.

Collaborative course design is one intervention, however modest, that may support the realization of a more radical food studies pedagogy. We return to our motivating question, inspired by Sears (2003) - what might a class that prepares students to take power look like? The answer, at least in part, is by empowering them with increased control over their education. This isn't to suggest that the creativity and expertise of course instructors be banished all together from the process of curriculum design. Instead, we argue for a Freirian re-calibration of sorts, that moves closer to the teacher-student, student-teacher paradigm. This approach would equally bring the creativity and expertise of students to bear on course design while providing a pedagogically enriching experience for students.

Implicit in the conception of this project is the notion that critical food studies can benefit from the rich history of critical pedagogical scholarship. Galt, Clark and Parr (2021, 43) have made clear that the increasing cross-pollination between food studies and critical pedagogy has resulted in important changes in the content and approach to teaching food studies. Our work builds on this intersection to insist that critical food scholars ought to consider other ways that critical pedagogical scholarship

can inform and develop critical food studies. If we take seriously the provocation from Meek and Tarlau (2016) to consider how we might use food studies education to inspire and equip students to transform the food system, experimenting with how we develop curriculum seems necessary. Empowering students as co-creators is a move toward democratizing food studies education while furthering embedding some of the principles of critical pedagogy within food studies. We do not mean to suggest that all critical food studies courses must necessarily adopt the practices and principles of critical pedagogy. However, we do note that the intermingling between critical pedagogy and critical food studies enabled the development of an essential, trenchant critique of existing approaches to teaching about food and agriculture. This work has exposed the ways in which conventional approaches to food studies pedagogy simply reproduce the social and ecological harm wrought by the capital-intensive industrial food system. At the same time, the emergent hybrid of critical food pedagogy informs ways of teaching (and ways of designing what and how we teach) that aspire to imagine, enact, and realize more just and sustainable food systems.

We'd be remiss to omit the limitations of our particular approach. First, while students informed the design of the course, it wasn't the cohort of students who took the course. In other words, co-creation *of* the curriculum, as we undertook it, presents a number of practical challenges with respect to (mis)alignment of timelines. The process to co-design this course - which took about 6 months all told - occurred before the course was even approved through university governance. By the time the course is officially on the books, it's too late to engage in co-creation of the curriculum with the students enrolled in the course. One possible solution would be to use a sufficiently flexible special topics course shell, common at most institutions, to avoid the process of having a new course approved through institutional governance.

The co-creation processes as we undertook it afforded the time and space to engage in generative, exploratory discussions unincumbered by the conventional trappings of a course. For example, the teacher-student power dynamics inherent to the classroom were subverted both by orienting the co-creation process outside of a course, and by having Nadia as the lead facilitator. Within our approach, grade dynamics were completely eliminated. The participants were co-creators of the course, not students taking the course for credit. We suspect this allowed for discussions that were candid, free-flowing and authentic.

Interestingly, many of the participants noted that they'd like the course to not be graded in the traditional sense. This highlights a limitation of our approach – the inability to implement specific suggestions due to structural limitations. There is a rich body of literature demonstrating the benefits of 'ungrading', which include deeper learning experiences, stronger sense of collectivity in the classroom, and encouraging students to take risks, among others (Gorichanaz, 2022; Hasinoff et al., 2024; Spurlock, 2023). However, ungrading remains a relatively uncommon, and somewhat controversial pedagogical approach, for which there is little precedent in the first author's academic unit. Regrettably the first author didn't have the time to navigate the complex institutional milieu to propose that the course be ungraded. However, this remains a possibility for future iterations of the course.

Relatedly, the co-creation sessions generated far more ideas than could be incorporated into a single course, even where structural limitations are not an issue. The rich dialogue and diverse perspectives shared during the sessions demonstrated that students do indeed have much to say about both food systems and pedagogy. While much from the co-creation sessions were not incorporated into the inaugural syllabus, the first author has returned to the transcripts and analysis as he revises the syllabus for future years.

Ultimately the collaborative co-creation process afforded an opportunity for pedagogical experimentation towards the ends of engaging and empowering students in curriculum development. Neither our process nor the results were perfect - but this was never the point. As we struggle with the existential crisis of higher ed within the compounding context of global polycrisis, collaborative experimentation that centres social and environmental justice seems nevertheless a promising tactical intervention.

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**Michael Classens** is Assistant Professor - Teaching Stream and Associate Undergraduate Director in the School of the Environment at The University of Toronto.

**Nadia Gericke** (they/them) is a recent graduate of the University of Toronto working various jobs in urban agriculture and helping out with a local Food Not Bombs distro group. When they're not working, the love to cook and do hobbies with their friends, like play sports and board games.

**Aden Fisher** has a Master's degree in Environment & Sustainability and a Bachelor of Science from the University of Toronto. He is currently a research and teaching assistant at the university studying food system sustainability, social justice activism, and food-climate policy at the School of the Environment.

**Christina Wong** is a graduate of the Master of Health Science in Translational Research program in the Department of Laboratory Medicine and Pathobiology at the University of Toronto.

**Amara Digout** is a Métis graduate student in the department of Social Justice Education at OISE and is interested in topics of Indigenous food sovereignty, urban agriculture, land-based pedagogies, and decolonization. She is originally from Victoria B.C. and currently pursuing a thesis on Indigenous community experiences with campus growing spaces.

**Madeleine Frechette** is white settler youth from Toronto, Ontario. She recently completed her Master of Environment & Sustainability (MES) at the University of Toronto and is currently working full-time as an Outdoor Educator for the Pine Project, Ontario's leading nature connection organization.

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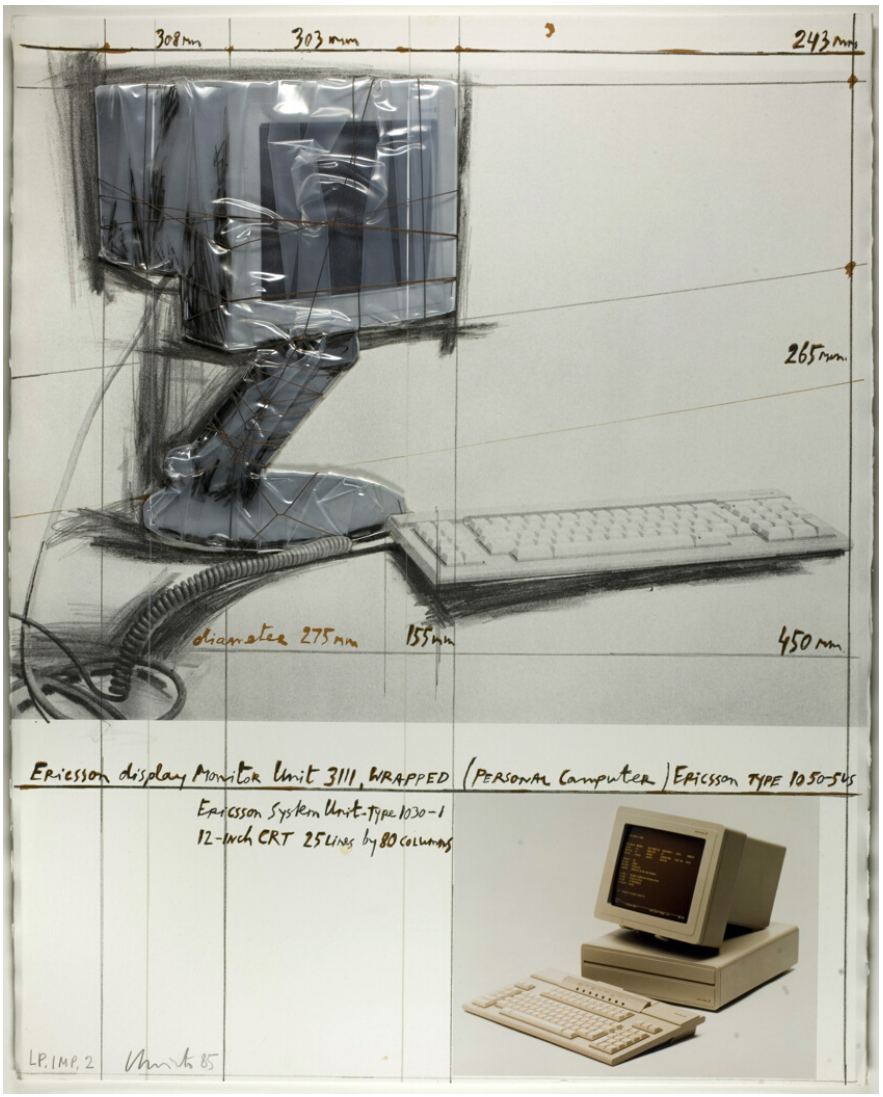
# Can There be a Feminist Pedagogy within the e-Learning Industrial Complex?

by Michael J. Illuzzi and Nafisa Nipun Tanjeem




ERICSSON DISPLAY MONITOR UNIT 3111, WRAPPED, PROJECT FOR PERSONAL COMPUTER. 1985 BY CHRISTO. GIFT OF NORMAN AND STANLEY FREEHLING

## Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic created an unprecedented, chaotic situation for almost everyone. The root of this chaos extends far beyond the pandemic's timeline or extent. On the one hand, the preexisting lack of protective socioeconomic structures, which Elora Chowdhury aptly describes as "the precarity of preexisting conditions," worsened the impact of the chaos for feminized, racialized, and minoritized communities (Chowdhury 2020). On the other hand, as Naomi Klein points out, cataclysmic changes like the COVID-19 pandemic can act as a catalyst for showering aids (such as no-strings-attached corporate bailouts) on the most privileged groups while ignoring the interests of working-class and minoritized communities. Nevertheless, the same moment of what Klein describes as "coronavirus capitalism" can inspire a wider recognition of the necessity of a functioning safety net and grassroots organizing for suspending evictions, defending workers' rights, and claiming otherwise seemingly impossible transformative changes (Klein 2020).

Utilizing Klein's framing of coronavirus capitalism, we argue that the chaos created by the pandemic is a carefully crafted one that capitalizes on a moment of catastrophic change. Powerful institutions in our societies use the pandemic to distract workers and advance questionable policies that would have been hard to implement at another time. The pandemic can also serve as a portal that opens unexpected scopes for developing praxes and pathways of resistance to achieve an egalitarian society. As Arundhati Roy evocatively says:

> Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. This is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.
>
> We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it (Roy 2020).

In response to the chaos of the pandemic, neoliberal universities took a series of drastic measures, including, but not limited to, the emergency shifting to e-Learning, furloughing and laying off workers, downsizing, restructuring, and cutting budgets. Neoliberal universities have been actively trying to advance some of these initiatives for a long time (Maisuria and Helmes 2019; Chatterjee and Maira 2014; Taylor and Lahad 2018; Bulaitis 2020; Kezar et al. 2019). The pandemic-induced chaos gave these institutions a timely justification for implementing all the changes and cuts they had long tried to accomplish. These adjustments have substantially affected how feminist scholars and practitioners engage with feminist pedagogies in neoliberal universities.

According to Shrewsbury, "Feminist pedagogy is a theory about the teaching/learning process that guides our choice of classroom practices by providing criteria to evaluate specific educational strategies and techniques in terms of the desired course goals or outcomes" (Shrewsbury 1987, 166). Feminist pedagogy has been widely recognized as a tool to challenge power relations and dominant ways of knowing, recognize the agential subject position of students, and subvert the growing corporatization of universities in an age of neoliberal globalization (Light et al. 2015; Crabtree et al. 2009; Feigenbaum 2007). Nevertheless, feminist pedagogy can lose its radical potential when it is treated as an "individualized practice that instructors can enact" and not supported by the institutional mechanisms of the university (Potvin and Dority 2022). The institutional mechanisms of neoliberal universities are antithetical to any critical pedagogy, including feminist pedagogy. A creative subversion would require a continuing commitment to grassroots political organizing, which goes beyond the extensive focus on individualized education (Busse et al. 2021).

One sector where the pandemic significantly affected feminist pedagogies and practices is e-Learning. Sangrà et al. describe e-Learning as "an approach to teaching and learning.…that is based on the use of electronic media and devices as tools for improving access to training, communication and interaction" (Sangrà et al. 2012). Since the pandemic began in 2020, e-Learning became increasingly a norm rather than an exception. Feminist instructors recognize that switching to e-Learning is not a power-neutral act and that the digital learning space is not necessarily a neutral equalizer (Denial 2021). There has been an intense focus on how to nurture feminist pedagogy within the virtual classroom space (Daniel 2021). For example, FemTechNet, an activated network of feminist scholars, students, and artists working in the broad areas of Gender, Science, Art, and Technology Studies, published a list of things they have learned about digital learning through their international network as well as things feminist instructors should consider as they move to teach online (FemTechNet 2020). Some feminist instructors demonstrated how they could manifest bell hook's engaged pedagogy without physical bodies and classrooms. Pedagogical practices, such as using an opening/centering practice to settle into formal Zoom classes, checking in at the beginning and checking out at the end of Zoom classes to recognize that students and faculty are human beings with everyday struggles, establishing group norms, or incorporating co-teaching, guest speakers, and shared instructional leadership with students, can create a sense of community and foster solidarity online (Dhala and Johnson 2021).

Other feminist instructors went beyond the classroom interaction-focused feminist "best practices." They argued that the lines between the university and society got blurred, specifically during what LaToya Eaves evocatively calls "the twin pandemic" of COVID-19 and anti-Black racism. They called for a revolutionary feminist approach that goes beyond the boundaries of classroom interactions (Eaves 2021). Some recognized the need for organizing around structural factors shaping the experiences of students, staff, faculty, third-party contracted workers, and other workers of neoliberal universities. They called for an ethics of care, kindness, and compassion in e-

Learning environments to recognize that students were struggling with illness, food and housing insecurity, job loss, caregiving responsibilities, and various other difficulties. They worked with multiple university offices and local communities to ensure access to technology, food, and housing for students during the pandemic. Some appreciated the value of asynchronous learning, ungrading practices, audio- and video-based assignments instead of assignments solely based on written words, and organizing with workers who keep the university running (Denial 2021). Others acknowledged that feminist instructors themselves were overburdened workers in neoliberal universities, suffering from personal, professional, financial, and social losses and negotiating inequitable gendered and caregiving responsibilities in their everyday lives (Daniel 2021).

Against this backdrop, this article is inspired by the contributions of feminist practitioners who use insights from feminist pedagogies and negotiate the pandemic-induced chaos in neoliberal universities in myriad ways. It specifically focuses on the practice of feminist community engagement, which incorporates feminist praxis in the curriculum, and elaborates on how feminist praxis was affected by the pandemic. Drawing on our experience of incorporating feminist community engagement in the Honors curriculum of Lesley University – a small liberal arts college in Cambridge, Massachusetts – during the pandemic, we offer a conceptualization of the e-Learning industrial complex and how that engulfs feminist pedagogies and practices in neoliberal universities. We ask: can there be a feminist pedagogy in online classrooms when the online transition itself is part of a questionable collaboration between neoliberal universities and a billion-dollar e-Learning industry prioritizing profit over learning? What do transformative feminist pedagogies and praxes look like that can contest the e-Learning-industrial complex and create new pathways for navigating our ongoing state of precarity?

## University-Community Engagement and its Decolonial Feminist Critiques

Universities have broadly packaged university-community engagement as "service learning" or "civic engagement" in North America. Many community-engaged programs have a problematic neoliberal hyperfocus on offering "professional skills" and "real-world exposure" to students while enhancing the university brand value and encouraging students to "do good" and "give back" without being critically reflective and reflexive about their power, privileges, and vulnerabilities. Institutionalized service-learning promotes an illusion of "reciprocity" and "mutual benefits" as the university and the community engage with each other. While doing so, it constructs the university as a site of privilege and the community as "unprivileged Others." The question of who the "we" is in the university and the community and whether that "we" includes not-so-privileged Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and working-class students remain unresolved (Dean 2019; Luhmann et al. 2019; Stoecker 2016; Kwon and Nguyen 2016; Tanjeem and Illuzzi 2022).

Feminist, Indigenous, and decolonial critiques of university-community engagement question the quantifiable and outcome-oriented institutionalized service learning that trains students as model neoliberal citizens to sustain intersecting systems of oppression instead of challenging the oppressive regimes. They demonstrate the limitations of the requirement of completing a certain number of community engagement "hours" or "credits" as students use those hours or credits to boost their resumes and engage in "poverty tourism." Feminist, Indigenous, and decolonial critiques of university-community engagement also challenge the mainstream way to conduct service-learning projects in collaboration with apolitical nonprofit organizations that provide services and can't engage in political lobbying and advocacy due to requirements imposed by the International Revenue Service (IRS) (Dean 2019; Kwon and Nguyen 2016; Tanjeem and Illuzzi 2022).

## The Turn to e-Service Learning during the Pandemic

Due to the pandemic, many universities and other educational institutions issued COVID-19 guidelines for service-learning, restricted direct exposure to the community, encouraged distant engagements that relied on research, advocacy, or virtual communications, and provided resources on best practices for teaching courses involving digital service-learning components (University of Central Arkansas, n.d.; The Edward Ginsberg Center for Community Service and Learning; Albanesi et al., n.d.). An emerging trend of scholarships examines the possibilities, limitations, impacts, and best practices of what many have described as "e-Service learning" during the COVID-19 pandemic (Schmidt 2021; Warren-Gordon and Jackson-Brown 2022; Hassett 2021; Adkins-Jablonsky et al. 2021; Shek et al. 2022; Wong and Lau 2022; Huang 2022; Kehl et al. 2022). For example, scholars have argued that e-Service learning can offer communities access to cutting-edge research that takes place in universities. It can foster collaboration between students and community organizations in geographically distant places domestically and internationally (Krasny 2020). It can also create scopes for human-centric and innovative digital activism-oriented projects led by students, even when they live in physical isolation resulting from the pandemic or other reasons (Brooks 2020). Therefore, e-Service learning presents possibilities for re-imagining community-engaged learning and the connection between not only faculty and students but also between distant institutions and communities (Veyvoda Michelle A. and Van Cleave Thomas J. 2020).

Decolonial feminist critiques of e-Service learning, which go beyond examining impacts or outlining best practices and offer a systemic critical overview of e-Service learning during the pandemic, are yet to emerge. While the digital turn undeniably provides many possibilities, it is essential to situate it against what we conceptualize as the "e-Learning industrial complex" elsewhere. On the one hand, the emergency turn to e-Learning ensured the safety and security of students,

faculty, staff, and other university workers during the global pandemic. On the other hand, university administrators used this crisis to justify the neoliberal venture of turning to more and more online and hybrid classes, which many universities have been trying to implement for a long time. While we recognize the value of e-Service learning, we question e-Service learning's uncritical compliance with the e-Learning industrial complex and offer a critique from decolonial feminist perspectives (Tanjeem and Illuzzi 2020).

## Conceptualizing the e-Learning Industrial Complex

We argue that an increasingly robust e-Learning industrial complex is taking hold in the U.S. higher education system. The idea of an industrial complex came from Dwight Eisenhower, who warned that the intertwined interests of the military and the war production industries were driving military procurement decisions and insulating themselves to the detriment of all other interests, sectors, and ideas (Gilmore 2016). We define the e-Learning industrial complex in higher education as the symbiotic relationship among university administrators, Board of Trustees, consultants, e-Learning technology and service providers, think tanks, foundations, government regulatory offices, and banks who pursue their interests in tailoring higher education to neo-liberal goals and objectives to the detriment of students, staff, faculty, and other workers - including third party contracted workers, parents, and other university community members.[1]

The e-Learning industrial complex stakeholders have a shared interest that is at odds with the interests of university community members. One reason for this is how the U.S. government helps fund higher education. Unlike many wealthy industrialized countries, the U.S. federal government does not directly fund higher education but instead supports education through government-backed loans. The National Defense Act first initiated a government-supported loan program for education in response to the U.S.S.R.'s launching of Sputnik in 1957. The Lyndon Johnson administration expanded the program in 1965 with guaranteed government-backed loans. Afterward, in the 1970s, the Nixon administration introduced a government-backed private company called Sallie Mae, providing loans to students. While trustees appointed partly by the Congress and the White House made up Sallie Mae's board, its shareholders (i.e., those who owned and profited from its operation) were banks and universities. The more loans banks and universities handed out to students, the more money they made (Abdelfatah and Arablouei 2022). The banks and universities are also interconnected with a host of other entities in the promotion of e-Learning, which involves shifting to a heavy focus on virtual learning and virtual student engagement, recruitment of highly paid administrators with the experience of transitioning to online learning, outsourcing of instructional services to low-cost third-party online course providers, and creating revenue-generating partnerships with other aligned nonprofit and for-profit entities.

The e-Learning industrial complex helps explain a paradox in the contemporary higher education sector. On the one hand, the costs of college tuition and fees from 2000-2021 have increased rapidly, much faster than inflation, primarily driven by a decline in state funding of public universities, but also - to a smaller extent - by a rise in the number of top-level higher-ed administrators (Hiltonsmith 2015). The increased costs put a tremendous extra burden on students and anyone who assumes the responsibility of paying tuition and fees. On the other hand, despite criticisms from tuition payers, as well as scholars of critical university studies, about the rising costs that have diverted resources away from the university's core academic and civic mission, the root causes of the decline of state funding have not been addressed. At the same time, the adoption of neoliberal practices, such as top-down leadership, destruction of faculty governance, emphasis on short-term balancing of budget over ensuring long-term retention of faculty, staff, and students and supporting intellectual growth and knowledge production, defunding of liberal arts and humanities-focused departments and programs, gradual abolishment of tenure-track and tenured faculty lines, increasing reliance on poorly compensated contingent faculty, and outsourcing jobs to sub-contractors with few protections for workers, continues unabated (Marcus 2021; Desierto and Maio 2020).

We argue that while the existing literature does a good job of diving deeper into the mechanics of the neoliberal transformation of higher education, there is a dearth of literature looking beyond the process and inquiring about what makes it extremely challenging for students, faculty, staff, workers, parents, and community members to build meaningful resistance against the neoliberal takeover, especially when this takeover hurts the quality of educational experience and working conditions in the long run. We also argue that one of the major challenges for community mobilization against neoliberal universities involves the insulation that the e-Learning industrial complex extends to the top-level administrators – and specifically to the Board of Trustees (BoT) decision-makers - from the consequences of their decisions. BoT members and top-level administrators, who are supposed to look out for the interests of students, faculty, staff, and other workers of neoliberal universities, often operate in alliance with various financial sector representatives whose interests are aligned with and part of the e-Learning industrial complex. In this way, various actors of the e-Learning industrial complex exist and operate within a symbiotic relationship with one another.

BoT members also spend relatively little time - 16 to 37 hours per quarter - on their tasks as Board members. Furthermore, the majority of that time is spent in administrative meetings rather than other tasks that would prepare them to bring accountability, such as "learning about industry disruptors, higher education governance and board leadership, and the drivers of student success" (Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges 2020). Recent research on why trustees do not reign in college costs cites that BOT members function on a part-time basis and are primarily from outside academia.

As a result, this powerful body with a tremendous level of authority over decision-making mostly remains disconnected from on-campus operations and the needs and priorities of students, faculty, staff, and other workers. Their activities often prioritize the interests of financial stakeholders rather than promoting growth and staying accountable to students, faculty, staff, and other workers of neoliberal universities (Schalin 2021). BoT, in conjunction with upper-level university administrators, have a long history of shifting resources away from instruction and toward administration. As Paul Weinstein eloquently points out, this shift happened because of:

> ….greater student demand for services, the growing number of accreditors, government regulations, and the natural tendency for administrators to solve most problems with—you guessed it—more administrators….With no market or regulatory forces to contain the reckless spending behavior of colleges and universities, school presidents have focused on fundraising, not good management (Weinstein Jr. 2023).

## The Normalization of the e-Learning Industrial Complex during the Pandemic[2]

As we argued elsewhere, e-Learning offers a viable option to a student population who cannot afford to be full-time and the "traditional" students who need flexible and self-paced learning opportunities (Tanjeem and Illuzzi 2020). During the academic year 2019-20, 51.8 percent of college students took at least one online course (Smalley 2021). With the advent of virtual collaboration and work-from-home culture, e-Learning has become more and more relevant to students' personal and professional needs. The global e-Learning market, worth USD 107 billion in 2015 and USD 299.67 billion in 2024, is forecasted to reach USD 842.64 billion by 2030 (McCue 2018; Grand View Research 2024). During the height of the pandemic, Christina Paxson, the President of Brown University, argued that the tuition-dependent "business model" of most colleges and universities in the United States would be severely disrupted if they had remained closed in the Fall of 2020. In Paxson's words, "It's not a question of whether institutions will be forced to permanently close, it's how many" (Paxson 2020). In a country where the idea of "tuition-free college" often faces severe backlashes, where the $1.6 trillion student-loan industry (Federal Reserve Bank of New York 2023) has clear incentives to keep higher education unaffordable, and where universities tend to make up for the lost federal and state funding through tuition hikes, it was inevitable that colleges - especially the ones with lesser resources – would face an unprecedented financial crisis during a global pandemic.

The pandemic-induced chaos normalized the e-Learning market and collaboration with corporate profit-making ventures as a survival mechanism for struggling universities. DeVaney et al. frame this strategy as "risk mitigation" that, according to them, was projected to be helpful not just during the COVID-19 pandemic but also during a future calamity (DeVaney et al. 2020). This risk mitigation strategy offered a lucrative, easy fix for universities undergoing a financial crisis that only worsened in the later phases of the pandemic. Many struggling universities have increasingly moved toward the model of Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU), which Professor Gabriel Kahn aptly describes as "The Amazon of Higher Education" (Kahn 2014).

SNHU reverted from its near demise by rapidly expanding its online division, offering 200+ career-focused online degree programs. It unapologetically refers to its students as "customers" and claims to provide high-quality "customer service." SNHU pays as little as $2200 per 8-week undergraduate course and $2500 per 10-week graduate course to adjuncts who mostly deliver the content and have little control over designing the materials and learning experience (Southern New Hampshire University, n.d.; Kahn 2014). The growing popularity of the SNHU model during the pandemic offers strong incentives for abolishing full-time and tenure-track lines which is likely to worsen the existing situation. Forty years ago, 70 percent of all faculty members and academic employees were either tenured or on the tenure-track. In contrast, now 68 percent of faculty and academic employees hold positions that are not eligible for tenure, and 48 percent hold positions that are not even "contingent" (e.g., on enrollment, funding or some similar arrangements). Therefore, more than two-thirds of faculty members and academic employees are currently low-paid with little to no job security and benefits (American Federation of Teachers 2023).

## The e-Learning Industrial Complex and Its Appropriation of the Social Justice Language of "Accessibility" and "Affordability"[3]

Neoliberal universities often justify the e-Learning industrial complex by exploiting the social justice language of making higher education "accessible" and "affordable" for all students (Zalaznick 2020; Sohail 2022; India Today 2019). These institutions appear to utilize scholarly studies that, perhaps inadvertently, create an opportunity for them to rationalize their neoliberal ventures using social justice vocabularies. For example, in a widely cited study, Kalantzis and Cope argue that universities should embrace e-Learning because post-secondary education needs to become cheaper and more efficient, not only by "reducing the need for expensive infrastructure" but also by being more flexible, making it "possible for all workers and all those with domestic caring responsibilities to access higher education without having to leave their communities, jobs and homes." (Kalantzis and Cope 2020, 52). Such an uncritical celebration of e-Learning has twofold ramifications. First, an exclusive hyper-focus on pedagogical factors detaches students from their social-economic-cultural-political context and assumes that pedagogical interventions alone are universally sufficient to create an inclusive and accessible learning experience

for all. Sandy Baum eloquently points out that underprepared and disadvantaged students often underperform and experience poor outcomes in e-Learning environments, as gaps in educational attainment across socioeconomic groups are even larger in online programs than in traditional coursework. They further argue that "online education has failed to improve affordability, frequently costs more, and does not produce a positive return on investment" (*Does Online Education Live Up to Its Promise? A Look at the Evidence* 2020). Second, the uncritical celebration of e-Learning inadvertently caters to the needs of neoliberal academic institutions, which collaborate with profit-driven e-Learning platforms, and offers these institutions the much-needed social justice vocabularies that eventually help perpetuate the e-Learning industrial complex. Therefore, the disconnect between the needs and priorities of students, staff, and faculty who experience the learning and the administrators, BoT, and consultants who make decisions regarding learning at neoliberal universities eventually results in continuous institutional compliance with the e-Learning industrial complex.

For example, students can take popular online courses on the "StraighterLine" web platform for as low as $79/course with a membership fee of $99/month.. More than 180 partner schools accept credits from StraighterLine (StraighterLine, n.d.-b). As we elaborated elsewhere, a quick search of the course catalog did not return any courses including keywords such as "women," "gender," or "sexuality." We reviewed the POLS101: American Government syllabus from StraighterLine (StraighterLine, n.d.-a). The syllabus borrows all course contents and lesson plans from the textbook "We the People: An Introduction to American Politics" published by McGraw Hill (2024). The course assessment methods rely heavily on the vast bank of multiple-choice and other test questions from the textbook. The lesson plans offer no opportunity to engage in direct or live intellectual exchanges with instructors. There is little scope for students to reflect critically on the digested information and participate in dialogues and debates with their peers (Tanjeem and Illuzzi 2020).

StraighterLine claims on its website that it offers "affordable, self-paced college courses – meaning you can take classes required for your degree without worrying about timelines or deadlines, and without breaking the bank" (StraighterLine, n.d.-c). As we argued elsewhere, online platforms like StraighterLine provide questionable quality of e-Learning to students in need in the name of ensuring "accessibility" and "affordability." In contrast, students with privileged backgrounds continue to pay exorbitant tuition fees and attend top-notch higher education offering more face-to-face interactions. The turn to e-Learning creates a tiered higher education system and exacerbates the growing inequities in the United States. Creating accessible and affordable higher education requires challenging coronavirus capitalism that has severely infected the U.S. higher education system. Band-aid solutions offered by the e-Learning industrial complex only aggravate the current crisis. Radical transformative measures and structural reforms, such as introducing a wealth tax that can pay for tuition-free public college education or abolishing student debts, are desperately needed to ensure access to higher education for everyone (Tanjeem and Illuzzi 2020).

## Reflections from the Field: Feminist Community Engagement within the e-Learning Industrial Complex at a Small Liberal Arts College

Michael Illuzzi and Nafisa Nipun Tanjeem co-designed and co-taught a feminist community-engagement-focused Honors First Year Seminar titled "Doing Good or Looking Good: Decolonizing Community Engagement" at Lesley University from Fall 2019 to Fall 2021. As we described elsewhere, we did not just work as co-instructors but also collaborated as the Director and the Assistant Director of the critical community engagement-focused Honors program that we developed from scratch, as union organizers, and as mobilizers of a series of collective actions resisting the pandemic-induced austerity and budget cuts on campus. Despite our differences in gender, race, ethnicity, religion, academic training, and socio-cultural background, we continuously learned from each other's stories, acknowledged different power positions that we occupied or did not occupy, and unlearned our biases (Tanjeem and Illuzzi 2022, 105–6).

As we approached the Fall of 2020, during the height of the pandemic, we started planning our community engagement projects for our feminist community engagement-focused Honors First Year Seminar. We engaged in conversations with the grassroots community organizations with whom we had partnered for the semester: Sunrise Movement Boston, Matahari, Real Food Challenge, New England United for Justice, and an on-campus student-led group called Lesley Votes. When the pandemic hit, we were pleasantly surprised by how smoothly the community partners and students adjusted to online projects on the fly. For example, the group working with Sunrise Movement Boston focused on advocating for climate justice training, which was mindful of racialized, classed, and gendered experiences of communities, to be included in the first-year orientation. Their efforts included attending Zoom meetings with Lesley administrators, crafting an online petition that gathered more than 100 signatures, weekly Instagram posts, and other forms of digital outreach to students and the broader Lesley community. Students working with Real Food Challenge (RFC) gathered information on the university's purchasing practices to update RFC's database of big seafood distributors in an effort to make unethical fishing practices public. A student who took our First Year Seminar in the previous year and created the student group "Lesley Votes" worked as a Course Assistant and organized students to engage in a series of outreach actions that implemented what they described as "relational organizing" using digital means, having students do voter outreach to their contacts within the Lesley community. The students in the Matahari group

assisted the organization by taking notes at meetings and doing phone banking.

The inability to be in physical proximity to others amplified the difficulty of addressing core and structural causes of harm in short, semester-long, credit-bearing projects (Tanjeem and Illuzzi 2022; Dean 2019; Stoecker 2016; Kwon and Nguyen 2016). Yet, students also thought, as noted in their evaluations, that the interactions with group members on their projects were among the few experiences that allowed them to form meaningful relationships. Furthermore, we realized that an unexpected benefit of the transition to online community engagement projects was that this relieved the extra burden on those students who were commuters and/or struggled to afford the cost or time to travel back and forth to the university – a problem that disproportionately affected students from marginalized and minoritized communities.

Despite the privilege we had as full-time faculty to navigate feminist pedagogies within our classroom and build relationships with partner community organizations, coronavirus capitalism affected our ability to pursue meaningful feminist community engagement and e-Learning. The university requested that the faculty union accept cuts to core faculty benefits as a cost-saving measure, which the union rejected. The President then announced a series of cost-saving measures, including the creation of a Voluntary Separation Incentive Program, the elimination of departmental budgetary discretion, the requirement of approval for every expenditure from upper-level administrators, and the elimination of course releases for program directors across the university. Fifty-five faculty and staff (9 faculty and 46 staff) left the university as part of the Voluntary Separation Incentive Plan, and a disproportionate number of those who had left were people of color. Most of the newly vacant positions remained unfilled for an extended period, increasing the workload for existing faculty and staff. Staff members reported feeling especially vulnerable because they were not unionized, unlike faculty. During the pandemic, all the sub-contracted staff for dining services, who were low-paid and had fewer benefits, had their employment terminated, as did most of the cleaning staff. The budgetary expenditures at Lesley University during the pandemic shed light on the consequences of insulating decision-makers from accountability and the prioritization of e-Learning. As cuts in staff, faculty, and other workers mentioned above took hold, the university simultaneously spent resources on building an e-Learning technological infrastructure. It upgraded its Learning Management System from standard Blackboard to Blackboard Ultra. It also purchased sophisticated Logitech Rally Bar conference cameras with built-in mics and speakers, as well as 65" monitors, for most classrooms to ensure that nearly every classroom across campus was hyflex-capable of integrating face-to-face and online learning. Furthermore, during the Summer of 2020, after the voluntary separation, adjunct and core faculty were invited to attend a "Summer Institute," where participants would be trained on implementing hyflex teaching in the classroom with a stipend of $1000/person for participation. While relatively few faculty ended up taking up the opportunity for the training, the existence of the new technology in every classroom and the lack of maintenance of older technologies meant that many faculty began using the new technology, whether or not they adopted a hyflex modality. The presence of the hyflex equipment in almost every classroom threatened the legal standard for a "past practice" as defined in the Collective Bargaining Agreement for both core and adjunct faculty. Past practice refers to any long-standing, frequent practice accepted and known by the union and management. With so many students requesting instructors to add them over Zoom via the monitors and conference cameras used for Hyflex and many faculty accepting these requests, it raised the prospect that hyflex was becoming a past practice that faculty might then have more difficulty in being legally able to refuse in the future.

Universities have used the crisis to reshape their structures and conform more to the neo-liberal principles of the e-Learning industrial complex. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Lesley University closed the Office of Community Service after the office coordinator left. The Office of Community Service used to be one of the few radical spaces for transformative dialogues and campus organizing. It ran monthly teach-ins on grassroots community organizing on Zoom, a student-led event series called "Art for Change" that invited the community to "reflect upon, learn about, and create art" that could develop "our vision of liberation," and a Community Leadership Education and Action Program that created "a community of social justice-focused, action-oriented Lesley undergraduate and graduate students" among other programs ("Community Service, Lesley University," n.d.).

As Lesley University eliminated the Office of Community Service, we lost our much-needed logistical and political support for developing our feminist community engagement-focused course. The university appropriated the language of "community partnership," where partnerships mostly involved eliminating in-house offices and staff members and outsourcing the services to local nonprofits and corporations. The opening of the Riverside Outpatient Center on Lesley University's campus in 2023 illustrated the model of these new partnerships. During the pandemic, the university got rid of its in-house health center, leaving students without access to accessible and affordable healthcare for months. The university started generating revenue by renting its real estate to an independently operated, licensed behavioral health center that, in turn, offered Lesley students healthcare services that were paid for by their insurance.

Lesley University did not stop capitalizing on the pandemic-induced crisis to continue the neoliberal transition of the institution even when the pandemic subsided. In October 2023, it abruptly announced mid-semester that it would cut 20 percent of the core faculty. It disproportionately targeted faculty who taught liberal arts courses, who were senior and – as a result - more expensive, and who were union organizers. The average age of fired faculty was 60. Over half of the core faculty union stewards were fired. In addition, the Honors program we directed and co-directed, with its emphasis on

critical community engagement, was slated for "transformation." Michael Illuzzi, the Director of the Honors program, was fired. Nafisa Nipun Tanjeem – the Assistant Director – left Lesley University a year before, anticipating the upcoming massive budget cuts. As a result, the critical and feminist community engagement-based focus of the Honors program disappeared. In November 2023, massive staff cuts were enacted that further decimated student support services.

Lesley University's exhibition of the e-Learning industrial complex may be more extreme than other universities, but it reflects a much broader trend. The public higher education system in Wisconsin is a good example of the process across a whole range of higher education institutions in a state. Wisconsin administrators and legislators used the crisis exacerbated by the pandemic to make massive austerity cuts. Neil Krauss notes how this took place:

> In 2021, the Republican-controlled Wisconsin State Senate's Committee on Universities and Technical Colleges followed up with an excruciatingly detailed version of the Blueprint in the form of the Roth Report, which again assumed permanent austerity, and advocated significantly increasing online education while shrinking campuses by forcing them to specialize (Kraus 2024).

Many branch campuses were closed, and faculty and staff were cut while funding for online education was increased. The result was the growth of a two-tiered education system:

> …online education within a narrowed curriculum will become understood as 'just how higher education is now' for working-class and lower-income students. Meanwhile, face-to-face education in a broad array of fields will always be available to the more privileged students who attend flagship universities and private schools (Kraus 2024).



PHOTO 1 AND 2: IN FALL 2023 AND SPRING 2024, LESLEY STUDENTS, ALUMNI, FACULTY, AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS ORGANIZED A SERIES OF PROTESTS IN RESPONSE TO MASSIVE FACULTY AND PROGRAM CUTS. THESE PHOTOS ARE FROM ONE OF THOSE PROTESTS THAT STUDENT AND ALUMNI ORGANIZERS HELD DURING AN OPEN HOUSE FOR PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS ON OCTOBER 15, 2023. PHOTO CREDIT: IAN DICKERMAN.

## Turning the Chaos of the Pandemic into a Portal: Organizing Resistance to the e-Learning Industrial Complex

At Lesley University, we had a history of grassroots organizing of faculty, staff, students, and community members against the e-Learning industrial complex. In December 2020, a top administrator verbally abused two faculty members in a faculty assembly meeting as they raised their concerns about the university's policy of transferring an unlimited number of credits from StraighterLine, Study.com, and other similar online platforms. The two faculty members filed a complaint to Human Resources (HR). To express solidarity with the two faculty fighting against a problematic manifestation of the e-Learning industrial complex, more than ten faculty members, who witnessed the interaction at the faculty assembly, reported the maltreatment of faculty by a top administrator to the Bias Education and Response Team (BERT). The faculty union and informal networks of faculty extended their support and created a community of care as the two faculty were navigating the HR investigation process. Their actions involved providing emotional support, issuing a statement that questioned the problematic construction of

the call for "civility" by the top administration and analyzed the racial, gender, and power dynamics in the exchange between the two faculty members and the top administrator during faculty assembly, and collective strategizing for the next steps. However, this kind of solidarity building among faculty and the larger community became more and more difficult as campus leaders started to hold most of the academic and service-related meetings online, and fewer faculty had face-to-face interactions with each other.

When the university community returned to campus after being online for over a year, the prioritization of e-Learning created significant disruptions. As we mentioned before, the university made it a priority to invest in developing and upgrading the e-Learning structures. However, the material infrastructure that nurtures students and the larger community fell apart. After students returned to campus in the Fall of 2021, they found out that some dorms lacked clean drinking water, laundry facilities, and adequate heat, and had leaks in ceilings. Some campuses had insufficient hours for dining services, and the campus food service served spoiled or expired food. More than 100 Lesley University students and a handful of faculty members gathered to protest the lack of progress on fixing the infrastructure. Their protest was a glowing example of how a sophisticated e-Learning infrastructure is inadequate for sustaining a care ethic and economy for the university community. The protests of students and faculty resisting the failing physical infrastructure and the lack of shared governance went on through Fall 2022 and Spring 2023. In Spring 2023, the faculty voted overwhelmingly for the second time that they had no confidence in the President of Lesley University and the Board of Trustees (Fox et al. 2023). In Spring 2024, the Lesley President received a third vote of no confidence from the University's faculty assembly after mass-firing of faculty and massive program cuts (Giordano 2024). The President was still in charge until the publication of this article.

Some student organizers who participated in a series of protests at Lesley University were students in our feminist community engagement-focused Honors First Year Seminar, where they learned about intersecting systems of oppression and the significance of grassroots community organizing. As their past instructors, we had the invaluable privilege of observing how some of our students turned out to be dedicated student activists and community organizers whose work went beyond the hour- and semester-restricted and credit-bearing feminist community engagement projects. They took the spirit, ethics, and politics of decolonial feminist grassroots organizing from the classroom to everyday grounded struggles impacting the lives of their community members.

## Conclusion

We would like to emphasize that resisting the e-Learning industrial complex is different from resisting e-Learning. E-Learning can offer access to higher education to people with restricted personal or work schedules, people with disability, single parents, and many others who need flexible and self-paced learning opportunities. The e-Learning industrial complex appropriates the social justice language of "accessibility" and "affordability," capitalizes on the particular need for e-Learning specifically for vulnerable communities, and turns e-Learning into a profit-making venture for neoliberal universities and the e-Learning industry, sidestepping the need for transformative learning for students and ensuring sustainable working conditions for faculty, staff, and other workers.

In response to the initial questions we raised at the beginning of this article, we argue that instructors should not confine feminist pedagogy to face-to-face or virtual classrooms. Feminist pedagogy is about resisting the principles of neoliberal capitalism, challenging hierarchies, and nurturing care ethics and care economies. As such, we need to zoom out from the classroom, as the focus on it is too narrow and individualistic. Efforts to incorporate feminist pedagogies in an e-Learning environment remain incomplete without examining the larger institutional structures against which feminist pedagogies and everyone involved are situated.

We propose a conceptualization of the e-Learning industrial complex and show how the chaos created by the pandemic incentivizes struggling universities to succumb to the e-Learning industrial complex as an easy "fix" for the ongoing budgetary crisis. Drawing on our example of incorporating feminist community engagement in the Honors curriculum of Lesley University, we demonstrate that the turn to e-Learning, on the one hand, was a "success" given that our community partners could engage our students in some meaningful community organizing campaigns. The digital turn also removed the burden of commuting to campus for marginalized and minoritized students. On the other hand, we reveal that the apparent "success" of our e-community engagement projects does not reflect the profound damage the e-Learning industrial complex inflicted on our community members' living and working conditions.

Nevertheless, we suggest that the pandemic did not just create a carefully crafted "chaos." It also holds the possibility of turning into a "portal," as described by Roy (Roy 2020), to come out of the chaos through collective struggles and move towards a vision for a more egalitarian world. The small-scale, albeit meaningful, resistance against the e-Learning industrial complex, which the students, faculty, staff, and members of the Lesley community engaged in, highlights the fact that feminist pedagogy can start making transformative changes as we take the spirit, ethics, and politics of feminist community engagement outside of the classroom and engage with the broader community.

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## Notes

1. This definition is an adaptation of Picciano and Spring's definition of the broader educational-industrial complex (Picciano and Spring 2013).
2. An earlier version of the part of the section titled "The Normalization of the e-Learning Industrial Complex during the Pandemic" was published in an opinion piece co-written by the authors (Tanjeem and Illuzzi 2020).
3. An earlier version of part of the section titled "The e-Learning Industrial Complex and Its Appropriation of the Social Justice Language of 'Accessibility' and 'Affordability'" was published in an opinion piece co-written by the authors (Tanjeem and Illuzzi 2020).

Both authors contributed equally to this work and are listed as co-first authors of this article.

**Michael J. Illuzzi** is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Providence College. He specializes in American politics, political theory, and critical community engagement. He is also author of *Mending the Nation: Reclaiming "We the People" in a Populist Age,* which uses lessons from the past to chart a new way forward. While many blame populist rhetoric, *Mending the Nation* points to an alternative version of populism—one that heals rather than divides, uniting people across political and social lines. Email: milluzzi@providence.edu

**Nafisa Nipun Tanjeem** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies at Worcester State University. Her research and teaching interests include transnational, postcolonial, and decolonial feminisms; globalization and feminist politics; critical university studies; and transnational social justice movements with a specific focus on the United States and South Asia. Nafisa is an organizer of the *Meye Network* and the *Feminist Alliance of Bangladesh,* and the winner of the 2025 IARSLCE public scholarship award. Email: ntanjeem@worcester.edu

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# Expansive Gender Pedagogy in the Undergraduate Classroom: The Gender and Sexuality Galaxy

by Anne Marie E. Butler and Mazey Perry


ROLL ME A RAINBOW. 1974 BY PAT STEIR. GIFT OF STANELY M. FREEHLING. ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO.

## Introduction and Context

In 2023, Professor Anne Marie Butler (she/they) and three students at Kalamazoo College in Kalamazoo, Michigan, Annitta (she/they), Mazey (she/her), and Nico (they/he) developed The Gender and Sexuality Galaxy worksheet (Appendix) to create an inclusive and productive tool for students learning about gender, sexuality, and attraction. Many Gen Z students come to the college classroom with some prior knowledge about gender, sex, and sexuality. However, most need guidance in learning about the intricacies and possibilities of these identifications. The worksheet helps students explore attraction, gender expression, gender identity, sex, and sexual identity by allowing them to learn about how each of these categories is different and where they might intersect. This article details the research, development, trial study, and revisions to the worksheet, contextualizes it as a pedagogical tool, and discusses how others might use this resource in their classrooms. We argue that the development of this worksheet, a collaborative, student-centered project, and the resulting article, co-written by Butler and Mazey, both enact transformative pedagogy in their processes, and parallel the self-actualization the worksheet encourages through intersectional learning about expansive ideas of gender, sexuality, and attraction.

Kalamazoo College is an undergraduate only, predominantly white, liberal arts college with approximately 1400 students, situated in southwest Michigan, on the stolen lands of the Council of the Three Fires: the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi. The College operates on the trimester schedule and one section of WGS 101: Introduction to Women's, Gender, and Sexuality is offered every term. As the only faculty member with a (half) line in the WGS program, Butler teaches this class two out of three terms. In the spirit of feminist pedagogy, commitments to self-reflection and collaboration are critical to the class.

In this article, we follow Diane Fujino et al. and bell hooks in conceptualizing transformative pedagogy as learning that takes place in a collaborative, socially invested, and socially engaged learning community. Fujino et al.'s discussion of the Transformative Pedagogy Project (TTP, 2015-present) at University of California, Santa Barbara guides how we understand our project as breaking down student/professor hierarchies and valuing lived experience. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks describes how in her early, segregated schooling, she learned from her Black teachers that her experiences were "central and significant" (37). In the creation of this worksheet, student lived realities of cultural identity, gender, sexuality, and attraction are valued in the overall design, the conceptualization of the identity groupings, and the included terms and their definitions. In addition to scholarly articles, the research group was guided by online resources and by the group members' own ideas about how they would want to interact with such a worksheet, based on their various identities. Student experience is also valued in the worksheet itself, where students think about how they experience their own identities to understand more about how gender identity, gender expression, sex, sexual identity, and attraction relate to one another.

"The Genderbread Person" and "The Gender Unicorn" worksheets have helped many people, including students at Kalamazoo College in WGS 101, use self-reflection to identify with and understand the concepts of gender and sex identity, gender expression, and attraction ("Genderbread," Pan and Moore). In WGS 101, The Gender Unicorn worksheet activity involves a follow-up discussion which, while acknowledging the usefulness of the worksheet, also critiques its insistence on the use of spectrums within apparent binaries, lack of diversity in sex options, and its inability to fully capture a range of diverse genders, attractions, and identifications.

After about five years of wishing that there were a more updated and inclusive model for this activity, Butler put out a call for students to join an independent study group that would design a gender and sexuality worksheet: Annitta, Mazey, and Nico, all of whom previously took courses with Butler, responded. Butler's prior efforts at teaching WGS 101, including using existing worksheets, gave her time to reflect on classroom needs, and the cognizance that seeing patterns in student needs year after year is the most important experience those wishing to develop pedagogical tools could have. Certainly, Butler's teaching experiences were not always successful, but learning from many different classes and students has enabled her to develop better awareness of student learning needs, a process that is always in progress. Introspective students with good critical thinking skills are well positioned to discuss how various learning materials impact them, and Annitta, Mazey, and Nico were crucial to the development of the project. Their perspectives enabled the group to collaborate while working with difference to ensure that the model would be as inclusive as possible. Butler identifies as a white, queer, cisgender woman. Annitta identifies as both Chicana and Indian, and as an intersex and genderqueer person. Mazey identifies as a white, heterosexual, cisgender woman. Nico identifies as white, queer, and transmasculine. In this group we not only developed a resource that we feel will benefit many people, but we also challenged ourselves to understand our own learning related to our gender, sexual, and attraction identities, and to recognize our investments in this learning tool as transformative pedagogy.

Our goal in redesigning The Genderbread Person and The Gender Unicorn worksheets was to create a model that works for many different types of people who are at different places in their understanding of gender and sexuality. Our target demographic for this model is young adults and older, with a particular focus on how the model might be used in an advanced high school or college classroom. We developed The Gender and Sexuality Galaxy by the end of the fall term, and the activity was trialed with varied students, faculty, and staff in an IRB approved study at the beginning of the winter term. Mazey stayed on in a second term of independent study to work with Butler on the trial, model adjustments, and write up of this project. This worksheet's development was a collaborative learning, reflection, and creation experience involving students and professor in equal measure. For

Butler, this research, development, and writing became a way to engage more fully with her own and her students' capacities for transformative living.

## Research and Trial Model Development

Throughout our development process, we read many sources that talked about gender, sexuality, and related topics to ensure that our model was rooted in research that aligned with how we wanted to think expansively about these issues. We had many discussions about what we wanted people to learn from this activity, and how the model helps enable that learning in two ways: it helps students learn about sex, gender, sexuality, and attraction for better understanding of these concepts and their relationships, but it also helps them learn about themselves beyond the classroom, aligning with hooks' discussion of self-actualization: this "knowledge offered [to] students [will] empower them to be better scholars, to live more fully in the world beyond academe" (6). Self-actualization can be seen as a part of transformative pedagogy, where social experiences are valued as learning, and historicized through lived reality (Fujino et al.).

We began our research by looking at the two most popular existing models of this activity. The Genderbread Person was popularized by Sam Killermann beginning in 2011 but previously existed in multiple unattributable forms ("Breaking"). The Gender Unicorn, another popular model, was designed by Landyn Pan and Anna Moore for Trans Student Educational Resources and is dated 2015. We found additional existing models that had similarities to these two, but that replicated some of the unhelpful structures therein. We began our discussions around existing models by articulating what we felt was helpful or problematic about the designs.

All the students working on the project – Annitta, Mazey, and Nico – had some previous experiences with either The Genderbread Person or The Gender Unicorn. Both Mazey and Nico used The Gender Unicorn in WGS 101 with Butler, and Annitta had seen The Genderbread Person used in various student organizations on campus. While our group had varying levels of familiarity with the terms and concepts we wanted to include in our new model, we worked together to read scholarly articles and had open discussions that allowed everyone to learn and grow together. Like Fujino et al.'s approach, we "blend[ed] scholarly reading and theories with personal experience, intuitive knowledge, and social critique" (73). Our collaborative and dynamic development valued student identity processes, feelings about terms and labels, and personal evaluation of how scholarly sources approached the topics of these lived experiences.

What we liked about existing models was that many attempted to let the participant indicate the degree to which they identified with a particular term. We wanted to keep the idea that participants could shade in each section, not fill in boxes or bubbles. However, we found that in visualizing degrees, many models employed a spectrum where gender or sex options are based on the idea of points along a single continuum. Although the idea of gender as a spectrum has become popular within the past decades, and is a tool for unthinking static gender, a spectrum that is a line, as seen in many existing models, reinforces binaries when the points at each end are opposed, and is problematic when in between points are considered "in the middle" or some mix of the two binary points, thus reinforcing the idea that the two "opposites" are the norm.

Based on our personal experiences, we knew that our model could be more complex in the options and categories we included. As a WGS professor and WGS students, we have spent many classes discussing binaries and the harm they cause to all, particularly those that fall further outside of their prescribed norms. We remarked that many existing models included only man, woman, or other; feminine, masculine, or other; or some variation of these. Judith Lorber describes how "multiple categories disturb the neat polarity of familiar opposites that assume…one normal and one deviant identity, one hegemonic status and one 'other'" (145). Although existing worksheets were well-intentioned in their efforts to move beyond socially constructed, heteronormative categories by including a third and sometimes fourth option, they ultimately fell flat. We additionally felt the use of the term "other," as seen on some worksheets, perpetuated harmful ideas that anything outside of listed categories was not the "norm."

The problems extended to the figural design featured by many extant models: some kind of cartoonish character. Nico remarked that a figure instructs students that gender, sex, and attraction are located somehow in the body: sex is in the genitals, gender in the brain, and so forth. Although the figures are tools for understanding that sex and gender are different, in part so that students can understand transgender as a concept, the use of a cartoon model invalidates the seriousness of trans people. A figural model where sex and gender are indicated as "located" in different places risks equating trans people with cartoons, silliness, and magic (i.e. a unicorn). We decided that a figural representation was inappropriate for our target audience and that a non-figural model would bypass problems with expressions and identities located on/in the body.

Such a character also makes these models feel as if they are for young children. It became clear that the youthfulness of these models made them feel less inclusive for older students with more lived experience. Nico felt that, while The Gender Unicorn was developed by Trans Student Educational Resources, its infantilizing nature and linear spectrum options ultimately make it an inaccurate and unhelpful worksheet for trans people who are young adults and older. The infantilization and dismissal of trans people is rampant in many state and cultural structures. Pfeil and Pfeil argue that infantilization, as a process that denies self-determination, is violently enacted upon trans people by the state in part through the regulation of healthcare including medications, surgeries, and mental health (Pfeil and Pfeil). These harms could not be more aptly illustrated than in the current year, 2025. It is more important now than ever that worksheets such as ours are

careful about the information or representations presented and their possible implications.

Early in the process, we each designed a mock-up and brought it back to show the others. Developing the ideas individually allowed us to be creative without influencing each other, and to then decide what parts of each mock-up we wanted to modify and use. Butler called her mock-up The Gender Galaxy because it featured stars with sections radiating from their centers. Wondering if someone else already had this idea, we searched for "gender galaxy" and discovered The Gender Galaxy by Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights ("Gender and Sexuality Galaxies"). This model aligned with many of the goals for our own model. It deprioritized hierarchies, binaries, and linear spectrums while visualizing varied relationships of gender and sexual identities. However, it also separated sexuality and gender into two different galaxies and is interactive through instructor-led prompts rather than self-led learning. We wanted our model to integrate gender and sexuality as related parts of identities. Further, the Action Canada model presents only two attraction models: sexual and romantic. We differentiated our model significantly from that of Action Canada by incorporating gender, sexuality, attraction, and sex into one galaxy, by prompting students to interact with the worksheet by shading each identity to any degree, and by allowing students to self-identify in provided blank spaces.

The final version of the initial design was made with Canva. Drawing on the idea of the page as a galaxy, we developed spherical "planets." We spent significant time discussing what these planets would be called; the categories that students would explore and how they were named. The Gender Unicorn (Pan and Moore) and The Genderbread person ("Genderbread") both use the sections gender expression, gender identity, and some category indicating sex. In our discussion it became clear that while there are drawbacks to some of these categories, they contain language with which the general public and many students will have some familiarity. We therefore named the initial planets gender expression, gender identity, sex, attraction, and sexual identity.

The sexual identity planet occupied a large portion of our attention. Some models call this category "sexuality," "sexual attraction," or "sexual orientation." The Genderbread Person and The Gender Unicorn do not present a sexual identity category, instead opting for two attraction categories. We discussed that "orientation," as well as the association of certain attractions and acts with prescriptive terms, can be limiting (Zeigler 250). "Sexuality" is larger than either sexual attraction or the interaction of gender identity and sexual preference, making the term too broad to describe the focus of this planet. Lorber raises a series of helpful questions about categorizing sexuality: "conventional sexual categories are hard to document empirically. At what point does sexual desire become sexual preference? What sexual behavior identifies a 'pure' heterosexual or homosexual?" (148). On our model, separating sexual identity and sexual attraction allows students different ways of understanding how sexuality is experienced and identified with and demonstrates that identification with a term does not necessarily precipitate attractions, nor vice versa. This conceptualization is in line with contemporary understandings of how non-binary people may identify as lesbian, for example. We reject transphobic and gender essentialist ideas that only women who have sexual attraction to only other women have exclusive rights to a lesbian identity. As Lorber contends, "we have to think not only about how these characteristics [of bodies, sexualities, genders, and racial-ethnic and class positions] intermingle in individuals and therefore in groups but what the extent of variation is *within these categories*" (146, emphasis in original). In this project, we are intent not only on diversity within groupings, but without as well: categorizations have uses, and they also have limitations. We decided on "sexual identity" instead of "orientation" or "sexuality," allowing participants to find affinity with labeled groups and identities while offering an unfixed way of understanding sexual identity categories and attractions.

Further, we wanted to separate attraction from its hegemonic alignment with sexuality. Lisa Diamond examines the relationship between sexual attraction and romantic attraction and how these two feelings do not always coincide within one partner (173). We recognized that our model needed to have space for people who experience dissimilarities between sexual attraction and sexual identity and thus placed sexual attraction on the attraction planet. This layout also encourages students to understand that attractions do not have to define identities: here, they do not need to identify as a particular sexual orientation to experience attraction. This inclusivity follows Antonsen et al.'s description of how asexual people may have non-overlapping romantic and sexual attractions (1627). Acknowledging that attraction and sexual identity are not necessarily aligned better recognizes asexual and aromantic people as well as illustrating the potential flexibility of both attraction and sexuality.

To tackle the issue of identification as a spectrum, a point, or a box, we developed the idea that people would indicate a degree of identification or affinity: on each planet we created slices like a pie chart. These slices allowed us to create more spaces and include a wider variety of identifications. Importantly, in the instructions we encourage people to shade in none, some, or all of the space in each section. Informed by Galupo et al.'s study on non-binary transgender people and gender identity, we thought about how gender can be a blend of identities, or at least flexible. We decided that our worksheet should encapsulate a fluid experience of gender and sexuality, so that identities might overlap and be multiple. We wanted to emphasize unlearning prior assumptions and ideas, especially ingrained binaries, by moving away from the "in between" of a linear spectrum model to a notion of "beyond" (Galupo et al. 172). Annitta had previously encountered The Autism Spectrum Wheel and brought this model to the group's attention. She explained that it was a way to move away from binary spectrums and instead visualize how certain traits of autism can be coinciding or not felt at all (Apricott Team). We decided to modify this base model, recognizing that pie slices were a more useful

way to display identities: the umbrella term for the category of identity could be placed in the middle of the planet with options radiating out from it, avoiding the binaries of a linear scale. Students could therefore indicate how much or how little they might identify with a term, addressing one of our foremost goals: inclusivity through dehierarchization and decentralization of normative terms.

When we conceptualized our terms and definitions, we were unconcerned with creating terms that would be useful in data analysis. Our goal with this activity was to explore, not to measure. Yet the problem of definition persisted on our terms list and in how we labeled the planets. Reworking the idea of the category of "other," an exclusionary grouping, we decided to leave blank spaces on each planet. Ho and Mussap discuss how people may want to indicate more than one gender expression or gender identity, such as transgender and woman (217). Leaving blank spaces allows students freedom to choose any identification they want to include. If they feel unrepresented by the extant terms on the planet but are not sure what else to put, they can refer to the terms list to see if there are any terms with which they find affinity. When students are allowed to develop their own ideas about how they identify, and can reject prescribed identifications, they can recognize that identities may be part of larger social constructs. Identities both oppress and enable. Self-identifying may help students to negotiate this dissonance.

We also wanted to include cultural genders such as two-spirit to recognize Indigenous peoples of North America who use that term, but we knew we needed to define the term carefully so that non-Indigenous people would understand its cultural importance and be wary of appropriating it. Nico reported hearing non-Indigenous people describe themselves as two-spirit, lacking the cultural awareness that they perpetuate settler-colonialism. We defined two-spirit as "a gender specific to some North American Indigenous communities that embodies aspects of masculinity and femininity" in recognition that two-spirit is not a universal term.

Our discussion on two-spirit led us to include "cultural gender" on the terms list both so that those with a cultural gender identity could be represented and could fill in any cultural gender in the blank space, and so that other students could learn the importance of cultural gender identities. For the definition of cultural gender, we stated "gender associated with one's cultural background, which may not be recognized by the state." The inclusion of two-spirit and cultural gender and their definitions that indicate their importance for marginalized communities demonstrates that normative ideas about gender, sexuality, and attraction, for example, are cultural products that correspond with hegemonic modes of understanding, and that, as Margaret Robinson summarizes, alternative ways of understanding these ideas can mitigate settler-colonial constructs (1675).

Blank spaces also give room for new terms or phrases to be added to the worksheet. Our word bank encompasses current inclusive language, but as Marilyn Roxie points out, language surrounding identities is constantly changing. Lorber, writing in 1994, understands androgyny as a mixture of unchanged masculinity and femininity, and therefore inadequate to fully express ambiguities of gender and gender expression. More recently, Roxie discusses the historical lineage of the word androgynous, which, while in current usage, has taken the place of other terms that are now thought to be derogatory or disrespectful. We included androgynous on our terms list and as an option on the gender expression planet because we understand it as offering a gender expression identification that includes masculinit*ies* and femininit*ies* that may be appropriated in any combination and to any end. The discussion about androgyny reminds us that as inclusive as this worksheet currently is, we do not know what new terms and concepts will be defined in the future, and we wanted to leave space for ever changing language. The instructions state "the terms list is non-exhaustive and does not represent every possible identification" in part to indicate this temporal fluidity.

Fluidity was crucial for the attraction planet, around which we made several important decisions based on our research and lived experience. Shape.com had a useful article that explained in simple terms sexual, physical, emotional, romantic, and aesthetic attractions (Chatel). We asked ourselves if an alternate attraction model could list types of attraction and ask the user to select a few ways that they want to think about their attraction(s). In this way, we strove to dehierarchize attraction. After debriefing the five categories we ultimately decided that these were what we wanted to include on the wheel. Our initial design had two concentric wheels that allowed students to choose expressions or identities that they were attracted to under these categories: the outer having the overarching types of attractions and the inner with two blank slices for students to fill in.

Allowing students to self-identity within different categories aligns with the questioning of dominant knowledges (Fujino et al.) in which students can reject labels being imposed upon them or feel that they experience X attraction so they must identify in Y way, and instead guides students to question what they know about themselves. We endeavored to balance this self-identification with guidance on terms and groupings that may help students articulate that for which they may not have language. Antonsen et al. discuss differences in romantic attraction for asexual and allosexual (non-asexual) people, making clear that the attraction wheel needed to have room for personalization in each category. For example, asexual people may or may not experience romantic attraction (1616).

We considered how the privileging of some types of attraction as related to gender and sexuality is a heteronormative construct. The emphasis on sexual attraction can be seen as related to the measuring of variant sexualities against normative heterosexualism (Galupo et al.). The more we understand asexuality and asexual theory the more we must recognize that romantic and sexual attraction may not be the two most important, or indeed even relevant, ways that people might want to think about themselves. Antonsen et al. found that "many similarities were observed between romantic and

aromantic asexual individuals. This suggests a high degree of complexity in asexual diversity, where binary classification as romantic or aromantic does not capture the full extent of the very heterogeneous group" (1628). The shortcomings of binaries are not surprising to us, but discussing this study in our working sessions solidified the choice to include five categories of attraction and to let students self-identify in all categories.

The last aspect of creating the worksheet was defining the terms in our word bank. As a group, we drew on literature that had good definitions, and on our own experiences with these terms, to collectively write out the definitions. The Trevor Project's "Resource Center" was one of the most helpful resources for conceptualizing definitions ("Resource Center"). We also drew on a web source developed from Roxie's work on definitions (Roxie), among a large amount of the literature cited in this article.

Our trial design represents a term's worth of research, discussion, design development, and personal reflection. In addition to reading and discussion, each student working on this project completed a weekly reflection writing in which they attended to personal learning, their peers' ideas, and their commitment to and participation in the work. They also engaged in weekly self-grading. These reflections on our collaborative work contributed to the self-actualization of the students working on this project. hooks states, "making the classroom a democratic setting where everyone feels a responsibility to contribute is a central goal of transformative pedagogy" (39). In the independent study that generated this worksheet, students contributed to each other's learning processes, working from personal experience, research, and reflection.

## Methods, Results, and Revisions

At the end of the fall term, we gained IRB approval to trial our worksheet. At the beginning of the winter term, we set up four two hour walk-in sessions over a two-week period during which students, faculty, and staff could drop by and participate. The purpose of the trial was to gauge how our initial version succeeded in its content, design, and user experience. We advertised the study by email, by asking professors to publicize it in their classrooms, and by flier. Our trial total was 30 participants ages 18 and over, the majority of whom were students.

The anonymized study consisted of four documents: an instructions sheet, an informed consent form, the worksheet, and a response questionnaire. Participants first received the instructions, the informed consent, and the worksheet. They received verbal and written instructions that they were to read and sign the consent form, if they agreed to participate, then they should complete the worksheet. They received the feedback questionnaire after completing the worksheet. We separated these activities because we wanted to avoid participants' worksheets being swayed by the response questions. Upon completing the worksheet and response questionnaire, participants returned all papers to the researcher. Participants were instructed verbally and in written instructions that they could stop at any time, and that upon completing the worksheet and/or feedback questionnaire, they could revoke consent from its inclusion in the study and/or publication. All participants consented to have their responses referenced anonymously in this article.

Conducting this study was crucial in our design revision. We found that most participants were very positive about the worksheet. They loved the idea of a galaxy and felt its design was a creative way to include many identities on one worksheet. Their positive discussion included responses such as, "I like being able to fill in as much space or as little space in each section of a planet;" "It felt very open and like there's no wrong answer;" and "It allowed for a spectrum of identities to be expressed." Participants also gave positive feedback on the terms list from the back side of the worksheet. This terms list gave a definition for every term on the worksheet as well as terms that participants could choose to write in any of the blank spaces if they felt that the provided words did not encompass their identity. One participant stated, "It provides me with common identities, but gives me room to define my own, less common ones." The positive feedback signaled that we had made a good start on an important idea.

Suggestions from the trial also allowed us to make significant improvements. Several participants suggested changes to the instructions, such as "in the directions…include the idea that identity and expression could change over time," which we adopted. Further, in the study model, the sex planet had four areas: Intersex, Female, Male, and blank. Several participants remarked that this planet was not as inclusive as the others, particularly for trans people. One participant stated, "the 'sex' threw me off and still feels weird to answer being trans and queer." Based on such comments we included language in the instructions that not all the planets need to be filled out; people are invited to skip ones they do not want to do. We also added an additional space on the sex planet: None. We discussed eliminating the sex planet entirely. However, the goal of this worksheet is to be useful to a wide variety of people, which includes those that need visual learning about how sex and gender are different, and those that have personal experience with transness. These changes now allow students to opt out of the sex planet, while providing more possibilities for trans students, and guidance for students who are new to these concepts.

The feedback for the sex planet also helped us conceptualize one important change we implemented throughout. Early in our thinking, we discussed if the sex planet would be called "assigned sex" in recognition that sex is a social construct. Although this is an option that some models present, and it does some work towards a trans-inclusive worksheet, Nico expressed their feelings that it is not an entirely accurate description, as many intersex children are assigned either male or female. Annitta also discussed how she identifies as intersex, which led to the idea of sex as an identity. Considering that "identity" indicates self-actualization and choice, we thought about using "sex identity," but from this idea jumped to using the plural "sex identities" so that people

would feel welcome to identify with as many sex categories as they like. We then decided to change the language on all the planets to plural. The pluralizing of the planet categories is a major part of the model's broader inclusivity, as it indicates to students that they are free to find affinity with multiple labels and ideas at once (Galupo et al.).

In the initial design we struggled most with the attraction planet. We did our best to think through how it would be inclusive in allowing multiple attraction styles and objects, and accessible in how it would be interacted with, but we expected constructive feedback in this area. One student remarked, "the attraction planet leaves two spaces under each category. As a bisexual person, I have attractions to more than just men or women." Due to this feedback, we adjusted the layout of the model and were able to add three areas under each attraction to better indicate that there are an infinite number of possible attractions. We also changed the labels on these areas from a simple description, i.e. physical, to a phrase, i.e. "physically attracted to." This language change embodies inclusion as the language itself now guides the students to better understand different types of attraction and the flexibility they have to self-identify how they feel attraction and to what degree they feel it. We again later changed "physically attracted to" to "physically (touch) attracted to" to clarify that our definition of physical attraction is about desire to be in physical contact with or to touch someone, hugging, for example.

Many study participants also reported learning that aligns with self-actualization in which students discover more about themselves and have thoughts and feelings about identities they may not have had before. Responses included, "I had to really look deep inside myself;" "It helped me clarify some of my feelings;" and "I didn't realize there were so many elements of attraction and I realized more about what I am attracted to in a partner." The self-actualization indicated by students is part of transformative pedagogy that enhances students' understanding of the importance of lived experience and self-determination.

## Discussion

This worksheet engages two overlapping learning goals: learning about sex, gender, sexuality, and attraction in general, and students learning about themselves beyond the classroom. Objectives for students who complete the workshop include feeling seen and included, a sense of belonging, and learning terms they identify with but for which they did not have a name. However, due to arriving at the worksheet from different backgrounds, specific outcomes depend on the knowledge and exposure to ideas with which the student entered the classroom, with both learning goals dependent upon prior exposure to language, similar activities, and self-knowledge.

Criteria considered for assessment are understanding the differences between sex, gender, attraction, and sexuality, and gaining an increased awareness of the myriad ways in which people may choose to identify. These goals are assessed with qualitative information in the form of responses during in-class debrief and any related comments given on anonymous feedback forms such as those used throughout the term and course evaluations. Feedback may also be collected at the instructor's discretion through other qualitative means such as reflection writing.

Assessment for this activity is not straightforward. Because one of this activity's primary goals is that the students learn about themselves within the process of understanding the potential expansiveness of gender, sexuality, and attraction, direct, quantifiable measurement is unproductive. Further, typical assessment measurements do not align with engaged, feminist pedagogy in this case, where individuals come to this activity with various backgrounds, and all have individualized outcomes resulting from this activity. hooks is instrumental in understanding these functions, stating, "I can circumvent [unequal power dynamics with] pedagogical strategies that affirm [the students'] presence, their right to speak…rooted in the assumption that we all bring to the classroom experiential knowledge." She continues, "if experience is already invoked in the classroom as a way of knowing… it lessens the possibility that it can be used to silence" (84). Applying a uniform assessment beyond learning about sex, gender, sexuality, and the self is moot for this activity; such a measurement is defeated by the learning goals of the activity itself, the related outcomes of which are individualized since the learning depends on the individual. Thus, our learning goals and outcomes focus on the individual as part of a community of learners on topics about sex, gender, sexuality, and attraction and about connecting lived experience to knowledge production.

It is crucial that the instructor introduces the activity with the acknowledgement that because every student's lived experience is different, every student's worksheet will be different, and that their work is confidential. Students may complete the worksheet in class and then discuss it on the same day; they can begin the worksheet in class and then take it home to finish it; or they can complete it entirely at home. The instructor should explain that each planet can be filled out to whatever degree the student wants, and that planets and categories may also be left blank. Attention should be drawn to the terms list that should be either attached or printed on the back of the worksheet.

Students may not be familiar with some of these terms nor aware that these terms may describe a part of their identity. Our goal is to encourage self-exploration and reflection, and for students to be validated regarding some things about themselves that they may not have shared with others, or that they simply have not yet recognized within themselves. The success of this goal is illustrated in part by the feedback from one participant, who stated, "it made me make some notes in my head so that I can better understand myself." Reflecting on and understanding of the self is a major part of transformative pedagogy and self-actualization. As Fujino et al. propose, "the objects of knowledge [in transformative pedagogy] emerge from a

place of lived vulnerability" (72). The worksheet as a safe space for vulnerability allows students to engage with it in an unfearful way.

Additional self-actualizing learning reflected in feedback includes, "I learned new terms," and "[the worksheet] allowed me to think about the many intersections and fluidity of gender and sexuality." More specifically, many study participants indicated that they learned a lot from the attraction planet, and that the idea of different attractions was a new concept for them and this area of the worksheet allowed for deeper personal understanding. One participant commented, "I was fairly confident I was on the ace spectrum for sexuality, but hadn't heard 'Aesthetic' used in that context before and found it was super accurate to me." Another responded, "I hadn't heard of emotional attraction before… I learned about more levels of attraction and how I feel about them." This worksheet recognizes that many people are not raised in a space that is accepting of deviations from heteronormative expectations and ensures that participants may engage in some self-discovery by having definitions for a wide variety of terms.

It is important for students to feel that their mental and emotional well-being is prioritized and included. In making this model we wanted everyone to feel like their identity was important and valid. This validation is also why we left blanks in the wheels because if we missed any identity or term, we wanted students to be able to write it in. Having this worksheet as a class assignment allows students to feel a sense of belonging where prior experiences of expressing gender or sexual desires outside of heteronormativity may have been met with ridicule, dismissal, or violence. When they see terms on the planets, they can know that there is someone else who also filled out that sheet, perhaps choosing those or other terms. The feeling of not being the only one, and that choosing something "different" is supported and encouraged by this worksheet, enables students to feel safe in reflecting on their identities in this format. Following hooks, it is a practice of theorizing as healing for those with direct experiences of violence as well as for those who, although feeling generally safe and loved in their identities, may still wonder about being different.

There are several ways to approach the debriefing of this activity that depend on when and where students complete the worksheet. When deciding when to debrief, instructors should consider that if the discussion of the worksheet happens in class period after the worksheet is distributed, students have time to reflect before discussing it, which may be desirable. Importantly, the students should know that they will not turn the worksheets in, nor will they be asked to show them to the class or to anyone else. In line with this confidentiality, when Butler asks her students to share about such a worksheet, she does not ask them to share *what* they filled out. Instead, the students talk about the *experience* of doing the worksheet, such as what it was like to fill it out, and if they learned about themselves or in general.

Butler has used The Gender and Sexuality Galaxy in three WGS 101 classes since the trial and design revisions concluded. She noticed that her students often share that they were able to understand how sex, gender, sexuality, and attraction are different. They also frequently remark that there were parts of the worksheet that made them rethink their possible identifications and attractions. To ensure that this debrief is a safe space, the instructor could ask pointed questions about a broadly applicable learning experience, such as, "what did you learn about different ways that people can experience attraction?" or "what was a term that stood out to you as new or that you now understand in a different way?" Students may also engage in an individual writing reflection activity, using a prompt such as those above, or such as "make some notes about if you felt any resistance or apprehension about any part of this worksheet, and try to be curious about why that may have been your reaction." These debrief approaches prioritize students' safety by never requiring them to disclose how they filled out the worksheet. Instead, creative ways to reflect on the learning experience can be employed. However, it is always possible that someone will see someone else's worksheet, or that someone will share something they later realize they were not ready to share. It is therefore vital that, no matter the class demographics, instructor assumptions about the students' political investments, or the political moment in which the class occurs, the instructor has cultivated an atmosphere of trust and community in the classroom before engaging in this activity. An alternative approach for instructors who question if their classroom is the right environment to have students actually complete the worksheet could be to teach some of the terms, and then to have students think together about how the worksheet illustrates flexibility and diversity in gender, sex, sexuality, and attraction, affirming that anyone could feel any of the ways this worksheet describes.

## Conclusion

The student and professor team that created this worksheet represents a collaborative, dynamic, and feminist approach to resource development for the WGS classroom and beyond. Our process of transformative pedagogy and self-actualization during worksheet creation is one that we encourage other groups to use, particularly for the development of teaching resources. Teaching resource in all fields should be developed with guidance from those who will use them: students. Too often teaching resources are developed without student input. hooks states, "as a student in a predominantly white institution [it is] easy to feel shut out or closed down" (86). If teaching activities are designed within the matrices of predominantly white institutions, such as those that occupy the hegemonic space of academia, and without attention to student needs prioritized by asking real students how they experience this activity (either through collecting reflection responses/feedback or by student input in development) their inclusivity and ability to call-in students of many different backgrounds is forfeit.

We admit that the amount of research and development that went into this activity is unrealistic for the development of many teaching activities and

approaches. The length of this article is intentional in acknowledging the labor that went into this project: it was impossible to give it its due credit in a short teaching activity write-up format, which would have sacrificed the important research discussion herein. Butler is privileged to work at an institution where the merger of undergraduate teaching and faculty research is highly valued, and where inclusive teaching practices are a part of ongoing equity, access, and inclusion discussions on campus. We hope that by publicizing this activity through a detailed write-up of its development process and background, we can illustrate one way to center student lived experience in collaborative student/faculty research. We further intend instructors that feel safe doing so to use this worksheet in their classrooms with the inclusivity we describe in mind, as part of their own self-actualization as teachers, and in service to their students. Most importantly, anyone can use this worksheet once or many times to explore their own feelings and experiences.

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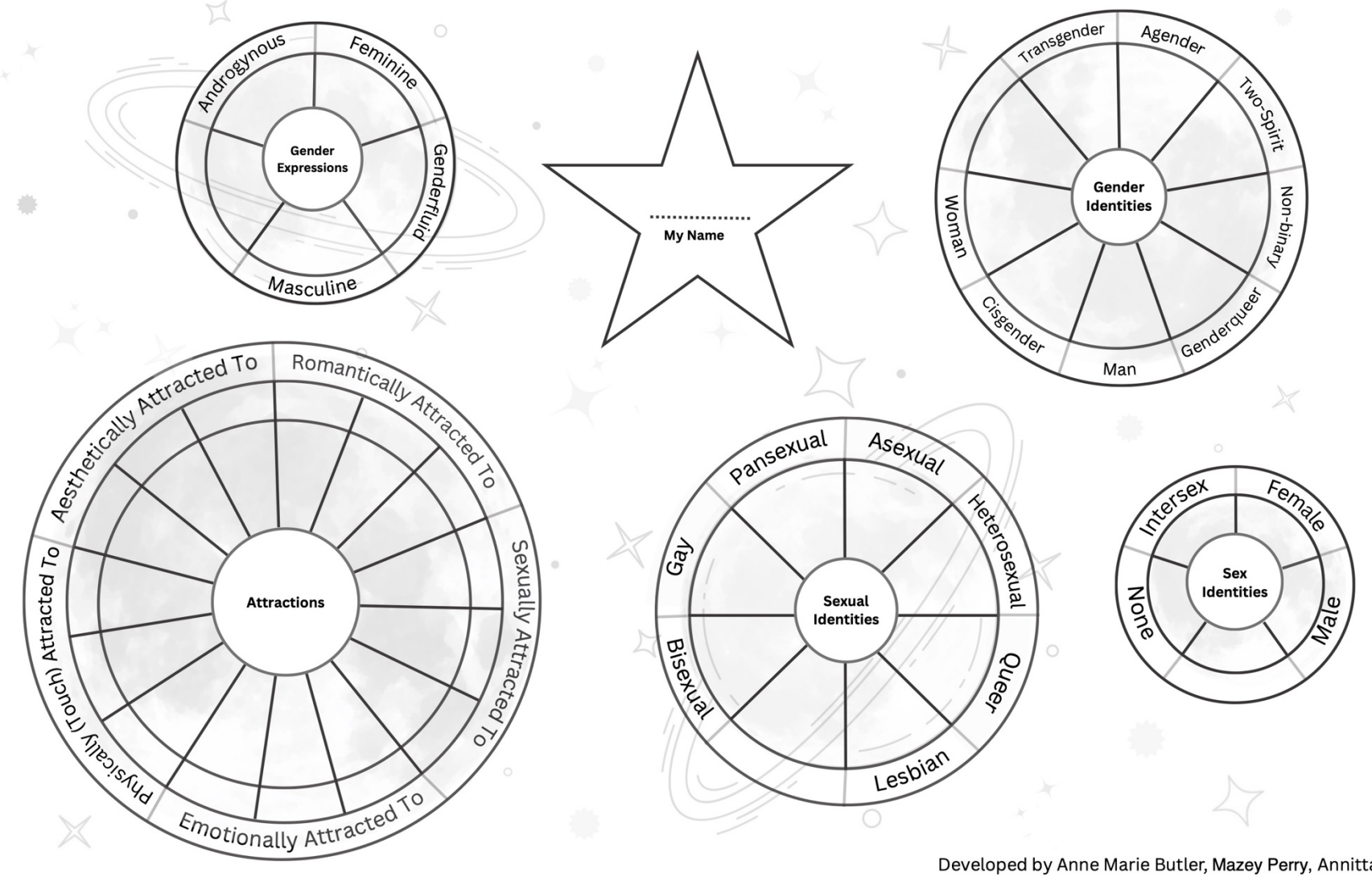
**Anne Marie E. Butler** is Associate Professor of Art History and Women, Gender, and Sexuality at Kalamazoo College, Kalamazoo, MI, Land of the Council of the Three Fires, USA.

**Mazey Perry** is a 2024 graduate of Kalamazoo College, she majored in English and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. She currently works in merchandising and marketing for a female-founded gifting and software company, where she enjoys collaborating and bringing creativity into her daily work.

# The Gender and Sexuality Galaxy

Shade or color the sections of each planet according to the degree you identify with each option. You can shade none, some, or all of any section based on how you are feeling today. Identities, attractions, and expressions may be in flux, feel stable, or change. Each planet has a blank space for you to write in any other term you would like to include. You can skip anything you don't want to fill out. There is a terms list on the back to help you understand the terms on the planets. It also includes other terms that you might like to write in. The terms list is non-exhaustive and does not represent every possible identification.




Developed by Anne Marie Butler, Mazey Perry, Annitta, and Nico, at Kalamazoo College, 2023-24.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## Terms List

This list of terms is only a small fraction of the ways that people may identify.

**Aesthetic/visual attraction**: appreciating the physical appearance of another person, regardless of other attractions
**Agender**: the absence of gender
**Alloromantic**: someone who experiences romantic attraction
**Allosexual**: someone who experiences sexual attraction
**Androgyne**: someone whose gender identity includes identification with some parts of masculinity and femininity
**Androgynous**: Someone whose gender presentation includes some parts of masculinity and femininity
**Aromantic**: an umbrella term for someone who experiences little or no romantic attraction
**Asexual**: an umbrella term for someone who experiences little or no sexual attraction
**Attraction**: desiring an emotional, physical, sexual, romantic, or otherwise close relationship with another person. Someone can experience multiple types of attraction at the same time, and towards the same person or multiple people.
**Bisexual**: someone romantically and/or sexually attracted to genders both like and unlike their own
**Cisgender**: when someone's gender identity is the same as their sex assigned at birth.
**Cultural gender**: gender associated with one's cultural background, which may not be recognized by the state
**Emotional attraction**: the desire to connect with another person emotionally, regardless of other attractions
**Female**: Someone who has a bodily make up consistent with normative understandings of female sex, including an alignment of XX chromosomes, ovaries, hormone levels, and secondary sex characteristics
**Feminine**: presenting or performing characteristics associated with women, within the context of social and personal understandings of gender
**Gay**: Someone who identifies with manhood and who is romantically and/or sexually attracted to others who identify with manhood. Also used an umbrella term to describe same-gender attraction.
**Gender**: social categories, normatively based on bodily sex and expressed in terms of masculinity and femininity, that develop both internally and externally; a historical and ideological process of psychological, social, and cultural understandings of bodily sex; processes of identification with or against these understandings
**Genderfluid**: Someone whose gender identity is fluid and changing
**Genderqueer**: rejecting normative feminine or masculine appearance to transgresses binary gender
**Gender identity**: internal identification with or against psychological, cultural, and social expectations of gender categories.
**Gender Expression**: physical expression of gender through appearance, behavior, and/or mannerisms. Expression does not need to align with gender identity.
**Heterosexual**: someone who experiences romantic and/or sexual attraction to people of sexes and genders unlike their own, typically within the normative social patterns of sex and gender binaries
**Intersex**: someone who is born with chromosomes, gonads, hormones, genitalia, or primary or secondary sex characteristics that do not align with 'male' or 'female'
**Lesbian**: Someone who identifies as a non-man who is romantically and/or sexually attracted to others who identify as a non-man.
**Male**: someone who has a bodily make up consistent with normative understandings of male sex, including an alignment of XY chromosomes, testes, hormone levels, and secondary sex characteristics
**Masculine**: presenting or performing characteristics associated with men, within the context of social and personal understandings of gender
**Man**: Someone who identifies internally or personally with the social role and/or idea of men and/or masculinity
**Monogamy**: the practice of having a romantic and/or sexual relationship with only one person at a time
**Non-Binary**: an umbrella term for people who do not identify as either a man or a woman
**Pansexual**: someone attracted to others regardless of gender identity or expression
**Physical/touch attraction**: desire for non-sexual physical contact with another person, regardless of other attractions. Hugging, for example.
**Polyamory**: the practice of having a romantic and/or sexual relationship with multiple consenting people at one time
**Queer**: a politicized identity for people whose gender and/or sexuality is marginalized by normative binary, heterosexual, and state arrangements; an anti-assimilationist position that challenges heteronormative expectations.
**Romantic attraction**: desiring a relationship or connection with others, beyond friendship, regardless of other attractions
**Sex**: made up of chromosomes, hormones, gonads, internal and external genitalia, and secondary sex characteristics
**Sexual attraction**: desiring sexual contact with others; being sexually interested in another person, regardless of other attractions
**Sexual identity**: internal identification with or against psychological, cultural, and social expectations of sexual attraction
**Transgender**: Someone whose gender identity does not align with their sex assigned at birth
**Two-spirit**: a gender specific to some North American Indigenous communities that embodies aspects of masculinity and femininity
**Woman**: someone who identifies internally or personally with the social role and/or idea of women and/or femininity.

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RADICAL TEACHER

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

# Friday Night Comics in Dark Times

by Jake Mattox


ANIMAL HABITAT IN NEW YORK. 1986. BY WILL ELDER. GIFT OF DR. AND MRS. LEWIS H. KAMINESTER. ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO.

I began writing this essay in the fall of 2023 as a review of *Friday Night Comics* (FNC), a free workshop series in which a different comics artist each week describes their work and leads Zoom attendees through real-time prompts to create their own. I had some modest goals of explaining the value of having university or K-12 students attend FNC, how it might help them with the freedom to experiment and create, and, hopefully, reflect on themselves as students in a learning environment outside of our formal educational institutions.

However, during the period of researching and writing, plus working with the journal editors, a dark context has gotten darker. The disastrous 2023 elections promised and brought newly emboldened attacks on education: more-extreme rhetoric and policies pertaining to academic freedom, student access, and the very role of public education. Locally, the regional campus of the major public university system where I teach, like so many, has embraced a dangerous narrative: *There's a crisis in higher education, caused by a looming enrollment cliff. Parents and students no longer want to pay for a broad-based liberal arts education. They seek narrow job training. Students want to be online. Our institution can no longer afford "the public good."* Administrators on many campuses, including mine, have used versions of these narratives to justify radical restructuring—cutting programs, altering the campus mission, and downsizing faculty while continuing with new levels of administrative bloat. Our state legislature, under the guise of ensuring "intellectual diversity" on public campuses, passed a law attacking DEIJ, threatening tenure, and creating a new system of ideological surveillance, arguing that *We want to make sure all students feel welcome and safe on campus. We're only giving universities the tools to strengthen open discussion and debate.*

More: one night in April 2024, top leaders within our state system quietly formed an ad-hoc committee to change longstanding university policy regarding demonstrations on the flagship campus. The committee had no faculty or student representation. The very next day, state police in riot gear (including a rooftop sniper) arrived to suppress the free speech of peaceful student and faculty demonstrators, who, when arrested, faced immediate one-to-five-year bans from even stepping foot on campus. They told us: *We had knowledge of potential threats to campus safety*. *We firmly believe in the right of free speech but need to balance those interests*. *There are outside agitators.*

The attacks have accelerated. Most recently, several last-minute additions were snuck into the state's budget bill with no time for public discussion. These included giving the governor control over the seats on the IU Board of Trustees that had long been reserved for (and chosen by) alumni, setting new minimums threatening the existence of hundreds of smaller majors and programs, and functionally ending tenure protections via mandatory post-tenure reviews.

Developments such as these demand that we organize politically and strengthen alliances between faculty, students, staff, and community members. We need, that is, to fight for our institutional spaces of learning, to define who has the right to be there and under what conditions. Further, if we believe in the potential of radical pedagogy, we need to prioritize, protect, and re-invent those and other spaces, ones where students feel safe to try out ideas without risk of failure, where community is central to what is meant by "learning," where the relation between student and teacher moves away from the authoritative model too often instilled beginning in kindergarten, and where students can explicitly reflect on key questions, such as how "learning" and being a student is situated in wider social contexts; how our institutions can foster certain kinds of "achievement" even as they reproduce existing unjust relations; and how students' own experiences, goals, and motivations—as students and as people—shape and are shaped by established spaces of learning.

In this essay, which is a review, a call to action, a self-reflection, and an offer of suggested approaches and activities, I will first briefly introduce *Friday Night Comics*—its history and current form. I will then focus on the kind of *making* its participants do—comics—as a genre that can combine spontaneity, creativity, and openness to create new knowledges with the possibility for individual and collective awareness and change. I will consider its location (a non-university space) and its online delivery as important to its possibility in establishing learning communities whose strengths lie at least in part in the fact that they need to be rebuilt each week. Finally, I will discuss a few ways for teachers to incorporate comics and/or these workshops and the advantages of doing so.

Even if you teach in disciplines that traditionally have not intersected with the arts, have little interest in comics, and/or think primarily of superheroes when you hear the word, these workshops matter. They might suggest either a reminder, or a reimagining, of what learning can look like. In place of competition, one finds a supportive community. Instead of high-stakes testing, standards, mastery, and reified learning outcomes, one finds joy, creativity, and spontaneity. Instead of for-profit, private, and reputation-focused schools, one finds free workshops with the only barriers being the need for a computer or smart phone and internet access. Instead of an instructor imparting supposedly value-free and universal knowledge, what gets created is, ultimately, generated by the participants as they take the prompts and techniques and use their own lives, experiences, and situated knowledges to create. And if the sharing at the end could be seen as implying some emphasis on *product*, the 60+ minutes of each workshop feel more valuable as a collective *process*.

It would be a mistake to reduce the specifics of what's happening in my state and elsewhere to one cause, and it's surely too much to suggest that a weekly online creativity workshop can decisively counteract beliefs and practices rooted in authoritarian and neoliberal assumptions about higher education and the public good. And yet that's precisely what this essay explores. I will argue that alternatives like *Friday Night Comics* can, at the very least, offer alternative spaces of learning free of coercion, ones that contribute to a sense of community often lacking in institutional spaces, insist on the centrality

of the arts in creating knowledges, and focus on a medium itself that has strong potential for recognizing and countering dangerous narratives—that is, for reflection and resistance. The workshops, like comics as a form, are not immediately or inherently transformational or radical. But when used deliberately and combined with other resistant practices and approaches, they can play literal and symbolic roles, reminding us—indeed, even insisting upon—what other forms "education" might look like.

## An idea born of the pandemic

At the start of the COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020, the then-Art Director of the arts/culture quarterly journal *The Believer*, Kristen Radtke, launched *Friday Night Comics* (*FNC)* and hundreds joined on Zoom each week from 7 to 8 pm Eastern to make and share comics. The early workshops explicitly sought to counteract the isolation of the pandemic. Beginning with making a "quaranzine" (Malaka Gharib, April 10, 2020), other early *FNC* topics included "Draw Your Lockdown Life" (Teresa Wong, May 22, 2020) and "Self-Care Comics" (Nicole Georges, May 29, 2020). The final *Believer*-hosted workshop was led in June 2021 by Radtke, author of the graphic non-fiction work, *Seek You: A Journey Through American Loneliness*. Looking back that night, she said that more than 10,000 people had joined live over the 15+ months of the workshops, with twice that number having watched recordings on YouTube. In October 2021, the nonprofit Sequential Artists Workshop (SAW) took over hosting the workshops. SAW offers in-person classes in Gainesville, Florida, plus online instruction, resources, and community. Over more than three years, SAW has offered more than 150 *FNC* workshops hosted by more than 100 different artists, with its founder Tom Hart usually there to greet Zoom attendees, introduce the guest, and moderate the sharing of comics. The *FNC* series fits with SAW's mission of fostering an inclusive comics community that "celebrates creative investigation, exploration and excellence in cartooning and comic art."[1]

The list of past *FNC* workshop leaders includes cartoonists, activists, illustrators, writers, poets, graphic novelists, zine creators, educators, multidisciplinary artists, editors, and more. Many identify with groups traditionally marginalized due to race, ethnicity, first language, nationality, gender, sexuality, and/or disability. Topics and content range impressively. Some are more directly focused on issues of power and social relations, such as "Comics as Resistance" (Bianca Xunise, June 29, 2020), the ironically named "Making Comics for the Politically Indifferent" (Ben Passmore, Aug. 14, 2020), and "Making Comics for a New World" (Leila Abdelrazaq, Oct. 23, 2020). Others, just as selected examples, have included "Movies as Memoir" (Jett Allen, July 1, 2022), "Experimental Comics" (Lawrence Lindell, Nov. 4, 2022), "Experiments in Climate Drawing" (Aidan Koch, Jan. 6, 2023), "Filipino Form Poetry" (Trinidad Escobar, June 9, 2023), "No Panels Allowed" (Laura Gao, Aug. 4, 2023), "Comics Battle the AI" (Tom Hart, Aug. 25, 2023), "Drawing Sound" (Mara Ramirez, March 22, 2024), and "Family Migration Stories" (Carly Shooster, Aug. 30, 2024). A quick search of the web presence of roughly 10 workshop leaders suggests that they come from across the country (and one from Australia).

Each of the *FNC* workshops starts with a short lesson or presentation from a comics artist followed by participants making their own comics, spending 20-30 minutes following prompts that pertain to content, style, materials, and/or structure. During the final 15-20 minutes, volunteers share what they created. Many people appear to join the Friday workshops regularly, from different parts of the U.S. and often other countries, and it's not difficult to begin to recognize faces, styles, and Zoom backgrounds as people share the work they do that night. Many attendees make use of Zoom's chat function to support one another; as of this writing, average attendance seems to range around 80-120 participants.

## Comics and "signifying monolithically"

Critical discussions of comics have included a question that could not have higher stakes, having everything to do with ideology and power: how do the formal/genre elements of a specific medium enable and limit claims about the way the world is and the way it should be? For instance, in his seminal study, *Understanding Comics* (1993), Scott McCloud suggested that "cartooning isn't just a way of *drawing*, it's a way of *seeing*" (31) and more recently, Nick Sousanis (2015) argued that through the variety of possibilities of arranging text and image, through different ideas of visual thinking, we enable new ways of understanding the world. For Sousanis, these "are offered not as steps to follow, but as an attitude—a means of orientation—a multidimensional compass, to help us find our way beyond the confines of 'how it is" (46). Such a compass would surely be invaluable for recognizing specific narratives that reinforce unjust social relations and imagining alternatives.

McCloud and others also focused directly on specific formal attributes of comics as related to the interaction between comic and reader. He explored "closure," the human "phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole." For McCloud, comics are unique in that the audience (reader) is a "willing and conscious collaborator," and the "gutter," the space between the panels of a sequential comic, is central to that. He wrote, "Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality" (62-69). McCloud did not understate the importance of what comics artists have placed on the page and how that can guide and manipulate the reader, but even so, he argued that in comics the reader has a unique participatory role.[2]

That assertion about the unique openness of comics and relationship between reader and text might be overstated, but I think there is a central point about what is possible with comics, assuming we frame the questions productively. That is, we might emphasize the openness of a particular comic, or panel, even as we recognize that it very well can be used to instill/enforce a specific

meaning—but even as it does so, with the tools to read it, we can see y its self-referentiality, its awareness, its insistence on a given meaning's transience, improvisation, artificiality.

In a 2018 special issue of the journal *American Literature*, titled "Queer About Comics," Darieck Scott and Ramzi Fawaz add to the discussion by asserting the semiotic openness of comics. They quote Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's explorations of the meanings of "queer," and especially the "open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (202). Scott and Fawaz build upon this to suggest that the proliferation of images, their ordered and re-ordered sequences, and the "presentation of mutant, monstrous, or altogether fantastical characters that have no 'original' form in everyday life" (203) leave comics a medium resisting the imposition of a single, "original" source of meaning or interpretation. They continue:

> Perhaps more than any other literary or cultural mode, then, comics self-consciously multiply and underscore differences at every site of their production so that no single comics panel can ever be made 'to signify monolithically.' Each iteration of an image, an issue, a storyline, or a world has the potential to disrupt, comment on, or altogether alter the flow and direction of what has come before… (203).

Each reader, each reading, uses the specific text and image combination to co-create a specific meaning. But that very openness and opportunity can be a lesson in the provisionality, situatedness, and improvised nature of asserted knowledge—which is essential everywhere but especially in our university spaces.[3]

To be sure, regardless of the specific content of a given comic or the background or intentions of the artist, comics as a medium does not *necessarily* force us to question existing social relations and forms of power and domination. Indeed, some have argued that many branches and traditions in comics, broadly speaking, have served reactionary ends. For instance, one review of *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (2016) praises its argument that while many "comics of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s engaged in radical worldmaking," more recently, "diversity is championed but has no worldmaking potential" and can serve instead as a "neoliberal marketing scheme" (Cuffman 228). Similarly, on a roundtable blog in 2023 discussing Sam Cowling and Wesley Cray's *Philosophy of Comics: An Introduction* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022) Sam Langsdale noted its suggestion that "superhero stories … [perpetuate] social injustice insofar as superheroes essentially function to keep society at, or restore it to, its present status quo" (*Nine Scholars*).

Essential to a full discussion of the potential of any genre or medium are the contexts of production and reception. Cultural forms and genres never exist in isolation; the meanings that are created through process and product depend just as much on the communities of practice that arise. Here, comics and *FNC* offer key possibilities. In this context of free online comics workshops, how should we think about the relation between art, activism, and community?

## Comics, communities, and maker cultures

In their introductory essay to the 2010 *Radical Teacher* issue "Jamming the Works: Art, Politics and Activism," Linda Dittmar and Joseph Entin consider some crucial questions about art and its relation to activism, most notably how one knows for sure whether a given work of art or performance, etc. is indeed *activist*? They argue that while "most ideologically driven art" has served the interests of those in power, "it is heartening to remember that the arts of the powerful have always been countered by the arts of the powerless and their allies. The lavish church pageant met its counterpart in the village square; the overpriced canvas is challenged by the cheaply produced poster and graffiti; the canonic book is de-sanctified by the zine" (5). A collection of 100+ people from around the country and beyond, learning from practitioners passionate about comics (some of whom—such as Mira Jacob, Matt Madden, Malaka Gharib, Tom Hart, Kristen Radtke, and Teresa Wong—have reached degrees of mainstream success with major publishers and/or prominent reviews), supporting and learning from the work each other do, coming together at the same time each week in this imagined community, I suggest, cannot help but offer alternative spaces of relating and creating. Dittmar and Entin also suggest that such either/or formulations are not productive, writing that "the dividing line between direct action, which is incontrovertibly activist (e.g taking over a building) and activities that educate and agitate for such action (e.g. making a poster that critiques what that building represents) is not so clear. That is, the lines separating awareness, advocacy, and action are fuzzy" (7). They note that at the heart of the essays on teaching and art-making is a "sense of community—of dialogue in a common 'language'" (8); perhaps we can understand online, non-profit, weekly comics workshops as developing their own common language.

Scott and Fawaz addressed this as well, writing about the strengths found in the very fact that comics are often dismissed:

> The status of comics as marginal literature and art, as well as the assumed immaturity of its audiences (associated with childhood or arrested adolescent fantasy), situates comics as an outsider medium that elicits attachments from perceived social delinquents, outcasts, and minorities. … Comics is a medium that thus hails counterpublics. …[which are] shaped in large part by the development of a variety of alternative and often egalitarian and grassroots forms of sociality among readers, creators, and textual content including fan clubs, letter-writing campaigns, zines, and comic art conventions. (200)

Scott and Fawaz are careful to emphasize the *potential* of comics in its communities and its form—not any predetermined ideological vantage point or meaning. The *FNC* series embodies this potential as well. Its open-ended prompts, open access, and sustained community of enthusiastic and supportive participants—all contribute to a democratic ethos lacking many spaces of teaching and learning. Furthermore, the sense of "learning" and "knowledge" valued by these workshops is one deeply central to critical pedagogy: the knowledges produced, the meanings created, the stories told, the methods of telling, and the images and words offered come, ultimately, from the artist/creator/participant. There is no standards-based lesson or outcome driving the workshops. One might say that if there were, it would be an *anti*-standard, one entirely seeking and valuing the lived and varied experiences of participants.

Furthermore, as a Zoom workshop repeating every week, *FNC* can be understood as a form of grassroots sociality that draws from and sustains a community of people who become, at once, fans and makers, outsiders and artists.[4] Many of the weekly instructors have themselves taken classes or participated in other SAW programs. As distinct from, say, a university class or degree program, these workshops are free from the forms of coercion endemic to higher education today, including high tuition and resulting student debt; classroom power dynamics expressed through grading, testing, sorting; and the pressures to quickly narrow one's course of study and skip "useless" non-required courses that a student might hope to take.

In a basic sense, the *FNC* workshops might be seen as responding to what Neil Meyer and Jocelyn Wills, writing in *Radical Teacher*'s "Teaching in a Time of Covid" issue, suggest that students are calling for, even as the public sense of pandemic urgency has abated: "more meaningful learning opportunities, active listening on the part of the institutions they engage, more work-life balance and self-care time, a greater emphasis on passion over dead-end make-work, more resources for mental and physical health, and programs that allow them safely to express their emotions and identities" (2). The *FNC* workshops generate meaningful experiences, appeal to the passions of participants, and are safe spaces for different kinds of expression. The word compassion also comes to mind.[5]

No spaces can be entirely outside of current systems resting on logics of competition, individualism, and privatization. But the *FNC* series suggests at least one compelling alternative whose community rests on shared interests but does not assume shared (universal) experiences or resources. Because the workshops almost always feature a different comics artist and never draw the exact same participants/audience, structurally the series lacks some advantages and disadvantages of ongoing, regular meetings with a semester-long syllabus and goals. Workshop leaders bring widely varying backgrounds and experiences as people and as artists. As teachers, they have in common the modeling of possible (not prescribed) techniques and approaches. There is a sense of "Try this one. Or this one. And come back next week for another." And they seem to share the assumption that the entire point of teaching and learning is to support individuals and the improvised community in creating based on their own visions, styles, aesthetics, and experiences—that the art the student will make that day is necessarily the right art, the best art. This calls to mind Lynda Barry's wonderful graphic compendia, *Making Comics* and *Syllabus*. In the former, she asks (and illustrates) "How old do you have to be to make a bad drawing?" (3) In the latter, accompanying a drawing/thinking exercise, she writes "The only way to understand this is by *making* things. Thinking about it, theorizing about it, chatting about it will not get you there." (72)

The potential within and debates around Do-It-Yourself (DIY) communities, cultures, and media also help contextualize the *FNC* workshops—which, while not entirely self-directed or rooted in peer-to-peer pedagogy, contribute to a vibrant "maker culture." As Red Chidgey notes in her chapter on feminism and zines in the recent collection *DIY Citizenship*, on one level, "Maker cultures are seen as strategic processes through which people reclaim power in their everyday lives" (104). Chidgey goes on to outline, though, how some scholars challenge the very concept of "DIY democracy" and argue that "zines are mere flirtations with resistance, leaving mainstream codes, values, and systems intact" (106). Along those lines, for Chidgey, "self-described DIY projects, wherever they take root, cannot necessarily guarantee liberating possibilities or outcomes by intention or declaration alone" (102). These seem like fair observations to apply to the *FNC* series. I would like to suggest, though, given its status outside of the formal institutions of learning, of the for-profit complex, of the necessities imposed through state funding, accreditation, and neoliberal accountability, and despite the fact that the workshops and participants do not form and gather under any particularly overt political/ideological purpose or banner, the collectivity, the process, and the making together form this important site of potential. And Chidgey's review of the debate about DIY cultures, zines, and feminism, especially with her when engaging with feminist-scholar Alison Piepmeier, seems apt: "In the end, it does not matter if bigger systems remain untouched because other transformations in individuals and communities are taking place" (qtd. in Chidgey 106-107).

## Conclusion: Incorporating FNC and Comics

There are no wrong ways to try incorporating *FNC* into our teaching. Different levels, different institutional settings, different disciplines: all could find some kind of value in this more informal teaching experiment. Requiring one's students to attend *FNC* workshops in real-time or accessing a recording can, as with the above example, not only push students in new directions that blur the line between different kinds of thinking and meaning making but push the instructors as well. In other words, what will you experiment with? Are you willing to give up some of the certainty or control of the more traditional lesson plan, outside the boundaries of your own classroom? Moreover, if you're an instructor who thinks it's crucial—as I do—to

cover not just content and skills but make our methods, lessons, and assumptions transparent to students, then incorporating an *FNC* workshop could also allow you to ask students: What do you notice about the instruction and learning here? How is this setting and structure different from what you usually experience? What are some takeaways for you as a learner?

One possibility is to consider how "creativity" itself can support learning across the disciplines. At a September 2023 workshop focused on "Non-human Characters" (Robert James Russell), for instance, one participant with a University of Florida (UF) background screen-shared how they had taken the prompt and drawn themselves as "hijabi cat." I found out later that they and other students were part of Professor Elif Akçali's "Divergent Thinking" course for later undergraduates and graduate students in the UF Herbert Wertheim College of Engineering. Akçali told me that she required all 29 of her students either to attend that *FNC* workshop in real time or to watch it on YouTube later. She explained that she insists on the need for engineering students to experiment—and struggle—with the methods, approaches, thinking, and skills of what is too often separated as the "arts." She requires students to try to adopt these processes and utilize alternative ways of knowing in their engineering design projects: "For instance, I may have them attend a dance performance and watch it through the eyes of an engineer, and then try to solve a particular engineering problem by drawing on that dance performance." According to Akçali, "All engineering students have qualities as artists, but they think they cannot afford to bring that part of themselves to their engineering practice and make it part of their engineering identity. Hopefully, through experiences like *Friday Night Comics*, they learn to see art as not outside themselves."[6]

At my university, I am afraid that we have reached the point where even the question about where "art" resides and matters would simply be smiled at, acknowledged—and then dismissed. The arts, artistic thinking, and creativity are too often assumed to be extras, enjoyable diversions from the "real work" at hand. Incorporating different modes of thinking and creating, of course, does not automatically challenge existing relations, does not necessarily even raise consciousness—but as curricula shift away from arts and liberal arts, programs are combined, majors disappear, and faculty are cut, alternative ways of accessing creativity, spontaneity, and joy matter in whatever form they take. In this final section, I will offer not developed lesson plans but descriptions of two additional possibilities for incorporating *FNC* and/or comics into a class—and the principles or objectives attained. Though I teach in an English department, I believe that, as with the example above, there are possibilities for just about any subject, set of goals, or discipline.

**Possibility 1: Comics and *FNC* to encourage self-awareness: How could students benefit from reflecting upon institutional learning contexts and their reified and naturalized approaches?**

*Background and my context*: My campus now requires all first-year students to take a "First-Year Seminar," as many universities do. Faculty have latitude to create these courses with widely varying topics if they cover the primary goals of helping first-year students feel more connection to campus and each other, learn about successful habits and support resources available, and reflect upon their own experiences, goals, and motives for university studies. To that end, I have designed a course called "Why School? The Problems and Potential of Public Education in the U.S."

*Relation to current approach*: One way I hope to use *FNC* in this course: connect it to our examination of how traditional grading affects learning—and how the "ungrading" approach we discuss and use relates as well. In my class, following teacher/scholars such as Asao Inoue and Susan Blum, we use a "contract-based" grading approach in which students decide from the start what semester grade they are working toward, a grade that will be based on *labor*. For instance, an "A" student attends more than a "B" student, completes more of the regular assignments, takes advantage of revision opportunities, even meets with me outside of class, etc. Key to this system, though, is that along the way, I offer no letter or number grades on any assignment. I only indicate whether the assignment is "complete" or not, and I offer specific feedback. I also ask students to reflect on nearly every assignment: How long it took them, what the conditions of their labor were, what they feel good about, what they struggled with, and/or how something from a previous assignment helped them think about this one. Drawing upon Alfie Kohn and others, this approach assumes that traditional grading is poisonous to the learning environment for many reasons, including the following:

- When an *extrinsic* motivator—carrot and/or stick—is attached to anything, the *intrinsic* motivation lessens or even disappears;
- Students are less likely to read comments if you also attach a grade;
- Students avoid taking risks out of fear of failure, instead following incentives to take the easiest path to the "A," and this also destroys the joys of learning and risk-taking;
- Students have been hurt—and in some cases traumatized—by the stressors of only working toward a grade and the related constant surveillance and real-time anxiety as points are gained or lost; and
- Students can become alienated from each other (as competitors) and from teachers (who are the gatekeepers to be impressed, convinced, or fooled).

*New assignment and goals:*

Step One: First require students to attend one of the *FNC* workshops (or watch an archived one on YouTube) and then, either writing individually or discussing/sharing as small groups, reflect upon and contrast their traditional classroom experiences. One goal is to help them think

critically not just about the elements of the Zoom workshop context but how it departs from so much of what has become naturalized as a space of learning, from the blackboard and rows of desks to the separated spaces of the campus to the tools of assessment and coercion, and more.

Step Two: Then require students to use the internet informally to research a variety of non-institutional learning environments, events, and settings and then share what they have found. What other alternatives beside *FNC* exist, and given their own individual expectations, experiences, motivations, and goals, what benefits—or drawbacks—would they entail?[7]

Step Three, if time: Have students attend/explore at least one such alternative and share a critical analysis with the class.

Note: While the class I teach, a First-year Seminar, is ideal for this sort of assignment, I would argue that time taken in many classes to help students critically reflect on themselves as students in relation to the contexts of institutional learning—and possible alternatives—could be valuable, especially if it's in a class taken in the first or second year of university studies. For many students, seeing college as not just several more years of compulsory K-12 education could offer an opportunity for a different perspective and, in the case of many of my students, a chance to reset.

**Possibility 2: Comics, *FNC*, and constructing the world: How can students learn about, and participate in, the tools of representation and meaning-making?**

*Background*: This past spring, I taught the gateway course to our English major/minor (also required for future teachers). It surveys college-level approaches to literary interpretation and we read poetry, short fiction, drama, and either a novel or, as I chose this time around, a graphic narrative. The primary course goal is to help students develop the skills of close reading: Identifying and analyzing the importance of the textual elements, formal devices, and strategies particular to a text and to a genre—and consider how these enable a text to make meaning, to represent the world a certain way. Along the way, we survey the history of some approaches, from the New Critics to Political Criticism and New Historicism.

*Relation to current approach*: For the first time, I chose a graphic narrative for the longest text of the course (replacing novels I have chosen in the past such as *Ragtime* and *The Jungle*). This time around, I chose Joe Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009), though I could have instead assigned *Palestine* (originally a nine-issue series from 1993-1995, collected in 2015, and re-released in 2024): both are full-length and self-contained collections of his "comics journalism." *Footnotes* is based upon a reporting trip to Khan Younis and Rafah that Sacco took in 2001 with Chris Hedges. Sacco's purpose was to find and interview eyewitnesses to large-scale killings of civilians by the Israeli military nearly 50 years before, in 1956, events he characterizes early on as "footnotes to a sideshow of a forgotten war." After helping students with the key terms for graphic narratives via excellent videos created by faculty at Oregon State University, we regularly practiced those terms in analyzing specific panels, pages, and chapters in Sacco's text, discussing how the specific arrangement of image and text suggested—with varying degrees of insistence—ways of understanding conditions and debates about Palestine in relation to historical events.

*New assignment and goals*: In the future, I will ask students to attend an *FNC* workshop as we study such a text, with the following goals/considerations:

- What do they notice as they become creators of comics? What are the representational challenges and stakes in the interrelation among image and text?
- What do they notice, as we studied with Sacco's text, about the importance of such genre elements as gutters, panels, thought and speech bubbles, and more?
- Is meaning-making, as Scott and Fawaz and others have argued, more semiotically open in comics? Does creating and/or reading comics help us think critically about the way narratives are shaped and improvised?

There are surely many other possibilities for fostering critical awareness and enhancing course skills and knowledge through comics and sending students to alternative contexts like *FNC*. I hope that, as with the first example above, students themselves will discover and share other alternatives and contexts that I have no idea exist, ones similarly rooted in or enabling reflection, trust, and the freedom to experiment.

As we face these new realities justified by troubling narratives, we need to increase our own awareness of how institutional spaces have become diseased, how conditions of and motivations for learning have been hijacked. We need to keep control of curriculum even while trying out new forms, activities, and tools to best educate our students and ourselves. We need to rethink what's possible and what's needed in our spaces of teaching and learning.

I want students to reflect on themselves as part of institutional spaces of learning that have, too often, naturalized practices and purposes that work against meaningful learning and community. I want them to consider their past and current relations to each other and to the instructor. I want them to scrutinize the usual practices of assessment and surveillance, the prevalence of carrots and sticks, as they also comb through their own motivations and experiences. And I want them to explore the stakes of interpretation and meaning-making—so central to a broad liberal arts-based education, and so anathema to the goals and priorities of those who seek to alter the fundamental mission and spaces of public education.

## Notes

I am grateful to Kelcey Ervick, Tom Hart, and Elif Akçali for their conversations with me about comics and *Friday Night Comics* workshops. And I thank Jesse Schwartz and Jocelyn Wills for their enthusiasm and extremely helpful ideas about this piece.

[1] SAW was founded in 2011 by Tom Hart, author of the breakthrough graphic memoir *Rosalie Lightning* (2016) and *The Art of the Graphic Memoir* (2018) and co-editor (with Kelcey Ervick) of Rose Metal Press's *Field Guide to Graphic Literature* (2023). One of SAW's priorities is accessibility, with sliding-scale and scholarship possibilities for paid classes, plus free online resources including books, videos, tutorials, and member-run regular events such as the Thursday Virtual Draw Jam and weekly "skills swaps" via, for instance, the "Underdrawing Club" and "Procreate Wednesdays" (for the digital illustration app of that name). All or nearly all the *Friday Night Comics* workshops, whether hosted by *The Believer* or SAW, are available on YouTube.

[2] The question of audience in comics is too rich to delve deeply into here. As one example: Joshua Kopin tells of a Marvel Comics vice president's lamentation in 2017 about the poor sales for the brand's recently developed "diverse" characters—and the troubling assumption that readers of comics are straight, white males who simply want versions of their childhood comics heroes (439-440).

[3] Precisely for that openness, some writing teachers have been drawn to using comics. For instance, Gabriel Sealey-Morris uses them in teaching first-year composition, arguing that that comics, as a multi-modal text (one with any combination of text, image, audio, visual), "complicate notions of authorship, make sophisticated demands on readers, and create a grammar and rhetoric as sophisticated as written prose, while also opening new methods of communication often disregarded by conventional composition instruction" (31). Comics bring tools to encourage different ways of making meaning, thus encouraging critical reading and thinking, plus a potential for collaborative authorship. And, echoing the importance of the semiotic openness of comics, Sealey-Morris writes that with comics, "[E]ven in sequence, there can be no prescribed order, as a comics reader may start with words, with images, or with various combinations" (37).

[4] I identify these benefits but am aware that notions of "community" can be overstated and potentially serve anti-democratic ends. In their essay exploring alternative, non-individualist, and anti-hierarchical modes of study and learning, Dyke et al draw from Miranda Joseph's *Debt Society* to warn that "A romanticized imaginary of 'community' as a fetishized container can serve to reify the borders surrounding 'education' or mask relations of power, oppression, and difference" (176). In addition, there is nothing intrinsically progressive or radical about a creative workshop. Recent work by scholars such as Chavez and Salesses, for instance, show how traditional writing workshop models (most notably the longstanding Iowa model) and static ideas of "craft" assume false and destructive ideas of neutrality and universality that don't just foreclose creativity and community but also suppress and deny marginalized communities. Salesses notes, for instance, that "Since craft is always about expectations, two questions to ask are: Whose expectations? and Who is free to break them?" (22). Chavez writes of her experiences as a student in a workshop in which her "professor and peers … schooled me in how to write like them. 'Use our words,' they seemed to say, and 'with time and hard work, you, too, can have voice'" (7).

[5] See Inoue, who briefly explores "compassion" in different religious traditions and applies the concept to his composition classrooms, especially in terms of its importance in antiracist writing pedagogies and assessment.

[6] Akçali also told me that her emphasis on arts as part of engineering education was recognized by an endowment from a UF alum for a new Professor in Creativity position in the Herbert Wertheim College of Engineering, which Akçali now occupies. She has also written and received NSF grants to train future engineering educators on including this kind of interdisciplinary approach in their teaching.

[7] Another community connecting through and with comics, although students could find resources and workshops focused on other media, is "Graphic Medicine," which describes itself as "academics, health carers, authors, artists, and fans of comics" who "explore[] and support[]the interaction between the medium of comics and the discourse of healthcare." The group features an International Collective, supports an online journal, and has held annual conferences (according to its website) since 2010.

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**Jake Mattox** is Associate Professor of English and Director of General Education at Indiana University, South Bend. He holds a PhD in Literature from the University of California, San Diego. His research and teaching interests include critical pedagogy, critical university studies, and late nineteenth century U.S. literature and culture.

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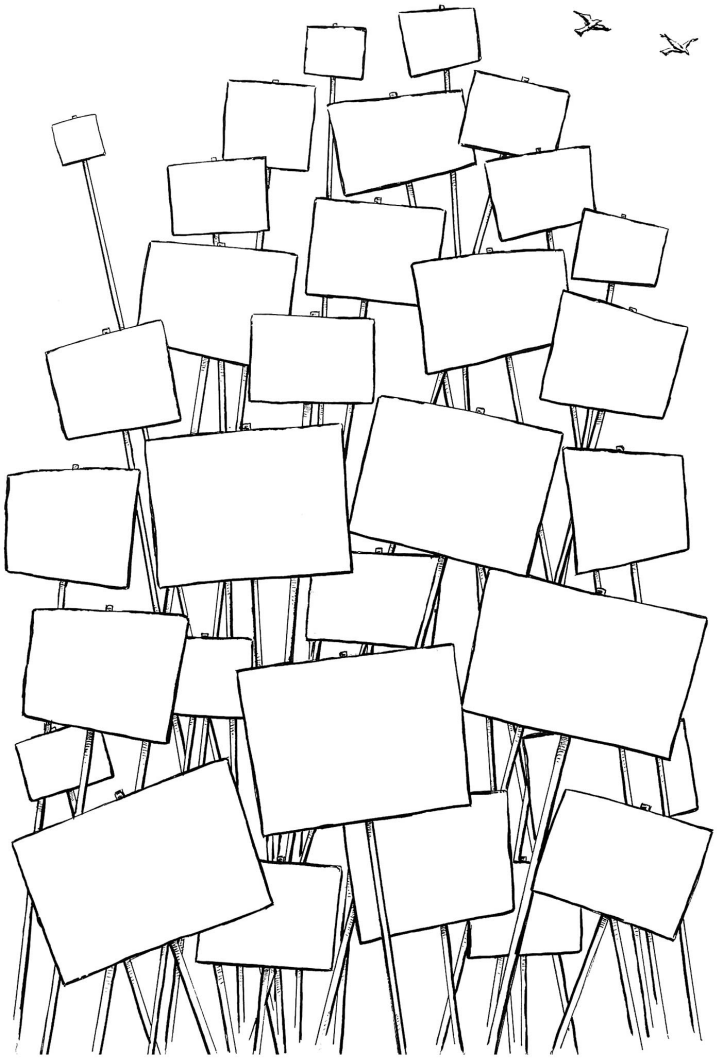
# Protest Pedagogy

by Beatrice Dias



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## Framing Pedagogy Through a Lens of Protest

When we take to the streets in protest, we use our bodies to take up space, both physically and ideologically. Within these subversive locations, we create a new community with our collective wisdom, voices, and passion. In doing so, our gathering transforms into building blocks for the world we want to inhabit, while working to disrupt oppressive structures that make this world unlivable.

This article explores what protest means in a university course context. What is the pedagogy of protest? In my very first semester as a new assistant professor, I found myself asking this question in an institutional context where I was very much an outsider. My entrance into this space took place within a global context of protest, as the COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the inequities encoded into our way of life. This included the wave of street protests, in the U.S. and world-wide, instigated by the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the police (Roth & Jarrar, 2021; Taylor, 2021); the mass movement of farmers in India who were protesting the economic burdens of new government policies (BBC News, 2021a); and U.S. teachers rallying against regulations aimed at eliminating critical discourse on race in schools (Schwartz, 2021). Moreover, the course I was assigned to teach proved to be much more challenging than I anticipated in terms of students' conservative ideological entrenchment and aggressive response to critical course content. This form of student backlash is a familiar experience documented by several faculty of color in predominantly white institutions (Evans-Winters & Hines, 2019; Rodriguez, 2009; Ruparelia, 2014). Reflecting on and analyzing the struggles I faced through this course, led to my conceptualization of protest within a pedagogical context. Heeding Gloria Anzaldúa's (1990) call for people on the margins of power to occupy theorizing space, in this article I introduce *protest pedagogy* as a framework for liberatory teaching and learning.

So, what does it mean to engage a pedagogy characterized by protest and aligned with the aims of liberation struggles? Grounded in my lived experiences as a co-instructor for an online and asynchronous graduate education course, I built out dimensions of *protest pedagogy* in dialogic praxis with genealogies of scholarship and genealogies of protest. The collective work encapsulated in *This Bridge Called My Back* (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015) served as a model for me in synthesizing protest, scholarship, and pedagogy. I open this paper with an overview of the course that formed the basis for my pedagogical exploration. Following this contextualization, subsequent sections of the article highlight the mirrored dimensions of protest in the streets and protest as pedagogy. The key elements of this pedagogy include protests of individualism, status quo, binary, and productivity. I conclude with how this theoretical frame of protest as a pedagogical approach also relates to transforming the self, as part of our study and struggle (Kelley, 2018).

## Course Context

My formulation of *protest pedagogy* emerges within the context of a co-taught course that intentionally complicated, questioned and expanded ways of perceiving the world and building knowledge. Scholar and wisdom holder Ruha Benjamin (2019) encourages us "to imagine and craft the worlds you cannot live without, just as you dismantle the ones we cannot live within" (p. 14). Benjamin's vision is embodied in protests that emerge from the margins of power and are centered on collective action, and it was this vision that guided our pedagogical intentions. This was a fully online and asynchronous course entitled 'Social Context of Education.' (Note: I've used pseudonyms for names and titles throughout the paper). My co-teacher, also a woman of color, supported my entry into online teaching by sharing her expertise in instructional design. Together, we aimed to design and facilitate a humanizing online learning space (Dias & Brooks, 2023). Our 25 students were predominantly white and came from a few different disciplinary practices within education. Female students made up almost 70% of the class, and all eight male students were white. We were situated within a university whose faculty and student body are also majority white, and within a majority white city and county with a long history of racial segregation (Dickinson, 2021). As two women and faculty of color situated within this predominantly white space borne from settler colonialist ideology, protest offered a deeply meaningful mechanism through which we could operate as fully human.

Within an online course, the line between curriculum and pedagogy is blurred. How you present yourself through the course outline and material you select becomes an integral component of your pedagogy because there are few opportunities, if any, to make real-time adjustments. Therefore, characterizing protest within an online and asynchronous course context, encompasses all aspects of the course design as pedagogical praxis.

Given the subject of our course, the larger social context was always present in our work. We drew from education movements in particular, as we conceptualized our approach to teaching this course. For example, in 2012 tens of thousands of Chicago teachers and community members took to the streets to fight for equitable labor practices, and against reform efforts that sidelined and maligned educator voices: "The objective was ostensibly to negotiate a new labor agreement, but the bargaining was as much a platform for educational justice as it was a process for reaching a contract" (Ashby & Bruno, 2016, p. 4). So, these teachers were dismantling extractive labor practices while building equitable education spaces. A wave of "red state" teacher strikes followed with similar demands for funding and policy support to create a more equitable schooling landscape (Blanc, 2020). This expansive form of protest that operates within and across the dual framings of agitation against injustice and building toward justice was a salient social context for our course. Educator protest is a powerful vehicle for transformation through solidarity and imagination. But it also, necessarily, creates a destabilized context for

students who join the field for its more colonial, conservative purposes (Ruparelia, 2014). This destabilization influenced how we organized our course.

We structured our course through modules as depicted in prior work (Dias & Brooks, 2023). Each module engaged with a different exploration of education and society, and they all fit within a broader story arc. We opened our course with a module that established our learning community through exchanging introductions and instilling relational values. Module two continued this relational dialogue as we explored each of our own lived experiences with schooling and asked critical questions about the history and function of state sanctioned schooling. As part of this exploration, we charted our school experiences by grade level to note when we felt at the table of our own learning (Teacher-Powered Pittsburgh, n.d.); we asked questions about how knowledge is constructed in conversation with Michelle King (TEDx Talks, 2015a) and Munir Fasheh (TEDx Talks, 2011); we interrogated historical narratives through Malcolm Gladwell's podcast episode on Brown v. Board (Gladwell, 2017); we examined education policy in conversation with David Gillborn (2005); and we engaged with critical pedagogies through the work of Brayboy and Maughan (2009).

Our third module moved us from the personal to the systemic view to investigate connections between schooling and other institutions, namely prisons, economics, and technology. In this section we were in conversation with scholars and thinkers such as Erica Meiners (2007), Chana Joffe-Walt (2020), and Ruha Benjamin (TEDx Talks, 2015b). Module four was focused on understanding social movements connected to education-movements insurgent within the academy and outside it. For this exploration we engaged with material on the Black Panther Party (Peralta Colleges, 2014) and Russell Rickford's (2016) work on Black power and radical imagination. Our fifth and final module looked to the future and encouraged students to dream into being the equitable and just futures they wished for. James Baldwin's (1963) articulation of the purpose of education served as inspiration for considering the education futures we want to build toward. We coupled these core modules with our humanizing practices that included relational responsibilities (Vaught, 2021), a positive response protocol (Koch, 2020), and our grading with care policy (Dias & Brooks, 2023). Collectively, this course design sought to disrupt dominant punitive structures and transactional practices, to make space for a pedagogy of protest to emerge.

Our throughline of disruptive design was largely organized around self-reflection. Grounding our exploration in the self was critical in making sense of the broader social context of education. As co-teachers, we too embraced the vulnerability of reflective sharing in our teaching practice, often analyzing course material in relation to our own lived experiences. Thus, who we are became a part of our pedagogy. In turn, this exposure of us as individuals was available as a subject of student retaliation and often reasserted the imposter within us. Gloria Anzaldúa once asked "*Who am I, a poor Chicanita from the sticks, to think I could write?*" (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 249). As a Brown, cis, bi, woman from Sri Lanka, I too often question whether I belong in the grand halls of academia. The right to exist in spaces that were not designed for us is a constant conundrum in my mind. This is the tension that propels me, and those who came before me, to resist that voice in our heads that says, and at times screams, that we are not enough, that we are imposters. To push against this sentiment that is not only a feeling but an encoded reality, is to protest the imposter inside us. At the same time, we have to continuously imagine into being the spaces that can hold us - us, the interlopers in this world. Alexis De Veaux noted that her ancestors had to "*Wake up every day and figure out freedom*" (John Hope Franklin Center at Duke University, 2016). This daily work of resistance and imagination is the act of protest that has shaped my entry into and path within the academy.

From this struggle to resist white supremacist standards of academia while carving out a space where I can thrive as a scholar, I identified protest as a vehicle through which I could develop my praxis. In what follows, I explore the mirrored dimensions of protest as experienced in the streets and in the classroom; as a whole, these components form a pedagogy of protest.

## Collective Mindset as a Protest of Individualism

I recall my first experience joining a mass protest as a young activist. As soon as I stepped into the flock of people, I felt a sense of purpose, belonging, courage and hope, anchored by our shared goals of justice and liberation. During moments of isolation as a young immigrant student of color in a predominantly white college, I often channeled the communal power of protest to stay grounded and strong. Even now, many years later, as an assistant professor, I continue to draw on protest as a collective framework for pursuing justice-centered work in institutionally isolating environments.

The lineage of protests in the streets that have shaped my framing of *protest pedagogy* are all necessarily collective and actively work to absorb the individual into the whole. Within a U.S. context, perhaps the most widely recognized community-based protests took place during the civil rights movement, which included several forms of collective action from sit-ins to marches and boycotts, as well as legal actions and art (Wilson, 2013). Although participants entered these spaces as individuals, motivated by their own commitment to justice and freedom, they were trained to become a part of the whole when they joined the protest (Hartford, 2004). These strategies live on in today's marches and acts of subversion against domination. Once immersed in the group, no one voice stands alone. We chant together, we sing together, we move together. Individual speakers may take up a podium to share wisdom and raise spirits, but as we march, their voices blend into the whole. In this context, no one person is isolated–we become a flock much like a murmuration of starlings. A beautiful example

of how Individuals combine forces to transform into a more powerful whole is the 2021 Indian Farmer protest, which included thousands of women who donned yellow clothing to symbolize mustard fields and demonstrate their collective struggle for visibility and livelihood (Al Jazeera, 2021). This solidarity protest was one of the largest (if not the largest) in world history and illustrated the power of mass movements motivated by shared goals rather than individual benefit (BBC News, 2021b; Dhillon, 2021). So, although individuals are recognized, protests are fundamentally driven by a collective vision and purpose; thus, moving against the isolation of capitalist logics that pit us against one another to compete for seemingly scarce resources.

Even when the protest is catalyzed by the experience of an individual, that person is absorbed into the whole. For example, when George Floyd was murdered on the streets of Minneapolis, his name was carried by a community of people through racial justice uprisings that spread across the world (Roth & Jarrar, 2021). Moreover, his story did not stand alone; it was woven into a collective narrative fabric that linked all those killed at the hands of police. During marches, we "say their names" to remember and honor each individual, while contextualizing their collective experiences within a broader system of racialized police violence (Wu et al., 2023). Likewise, slain Gaza professor and writer Refaat Alareer, along with the tens of thousands of Palestinian people killed in Israel's collective punishment of Gaza, have been taken up in the solidarity protests across university and college campuses in the U.S. and across the globe (Al Jazeera, 2024). White kites are frequently displayed during Free Palestine protests as an ode to Alareer's final poem (Syed, 2024), and most recently the New School faculty encampment was named after the late poet scholar (Fadulu & Roberts-Grmela, 2024). These symbolic references intentionally incorporate an individual's wisdom and scholarship into a collective consciousness that pushes forward a shared vision for freedom. As such, even though one person's name is lifted up specifically, it is not done through a hierarchical mechanism that prioritizes an individual's interest over others.' Thus, there is no space for any one person's actions to encroach on another's right to exist, as is the normative experience under racial capitalism, which is focused on individual interests, often at the expense of collective well-being (Kasser et al., 2007; Nelson, 2019). Through these different animations of protests, we see a throughline of collective action for community prosperity and against isolated competition. My conceptualization of *protest pedagogy* mirrors these themes from protests in the streets.

Accordingly, relationships and relationality are central to a pedagogy shaped by protests. My pedagogical story begins in relational dialogue with my co-teacher, Dr. Brooks. Individually, especially as women of color in a predominantly white institution, we experienced the pressures to measure up to institutional standards of academic success. Academia is deeply entrenched in the neoliberal project that is sustained through efficiency, competition and market gain (Moosa, 2024). This ethos creates a hostile environment for most faculty, and especially those of us who enter from the margins and thrive on connection and collaboration (Spinrad et al., 2022). Dr. Brooks and I found each other at this incongruous intersection between our values and institutional norms. The mere fact that we were co-teaching a course was a subversion of university dictates that discourage this practice because it defies the logics of efficiency and individualism. Against this backdrop, we embraced moving as a unison and at the speed of trust. We drew inspiration from the work of scholars such as Freire (2017), who conceptualized pedagogy within a dialogic framework: "Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist, and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers" (p. 80). As such, we anchored our course in an adaptation of Dr. Sabina Vaught's (2021) "Relational Responsibilities," which advocates for fostering a learning community of conscience, through collective study, generous engagement, and respectful scholarly discourse. These shared responsibilities reminded us to act as a collective, attending to each other's learning and wisdom. In practice, this manifested as checking in with each other regularly, sharing the workload of course design, implementation and management, struggling through disagreements through a dialogic process, letting go of control to make space for growth, and being honest with ourselves and each other about our capacity and needs.

Academia can too often be a lonely pursuit. We are evaluated individually and pushed to outshine the flock in many ways (Cannella & Koro-Ljungberg, 2017). To be in authentic partnership in this space is to refuse the institutional ego, open our hearts and minds to another's perspectives, and commit to the dialogic practice of shared creation. Our regular planning meetings were dedicated to strengthening our relationship through learning about each other on a personal and professional level, discussing course material to better understand our scholarly dispositions, and grappling with how to tackle any issues that arose along the way. Over time, much like the radical authors of *This Bridge Called My Back*, our two pedagogical voices became a chorus. In doing so, we strove for what Moraga described as a revolutionary solidarity, where "women of color, who had been historically denied a shared political voice, endeavored to create bridges of consciousness through the exploration, in print, of their diverse classes, cultures and sexualities" (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015, p. xvi). Dr. Brooks and I shared some of our dialogue with students to convey how we, as course facilitators, were also grappling with questions related to course content and concepts. For example, during the exploration of our lived experiences in school Dr. Brooks and I shared a video recording of our conversation about this topic. In the video we each shared personal stories from our school experiences and contextualized those narratives against the broader backdrop of state sanctioned schooling. This was an effort to create an atmosphere of collective learning and model dialogic teaching and learning.

By explicitly attending to how we chose to be in relationship with one another, we created an opportunity

to be in honest dialogue and make space for each other's and colleague scholars' contributions to our collective study. Throughout the course we offered students similar opportunities to put our relational responsibilities into practice through course discussions, peer reviews, and collaborative annotations of texts we studied. Our hope was that these efforts would support building a learning community that could surrender to vulnerability, so that we might challenge ourselves to complicate and expand our own viewpoints through relational discourse. However, we found that the asynchronous virtual environment was not always conducive to this form of dialogic connection. Students mostly worked individually, and although they shared their comments with the larger group, there were few moments of authentic exchange. A key exception took place when discussing our school experiences. We used a Padlet dashboard to share our stories, and students had an opportunity to engage in dialogue with each other based on shared and disparate experiences. Additionally, students found dialogic spaces through our collective annotation work via Perusall and occasionally through course discussions on Canvas. Still, there remained a tension between what we envisioned for course engagement and the ways students engaged with the course. Moreover, one or two students engaged in practices that frequently breached our relational responsibilities. For example, our guidelines invited students to "practice complexity over critique" (Vaught, 2021); however, one of our students, Bob, often defaulted to critique, primarily criticizing course material, and occasionally also debating fellow students and course instructors. Bob's refusal to engage in relational learning demonstrated his rigid adherence to neoliberal ideals of individualism and was a stark reminder of what we were operating against through a collective pedagogy. In response, we remained committed to a collaborative dialogic process. Through our feedback and communication, we continually pushed students to step outside the competitive framework that promotes showcasing individual cleverness at the expense of opportunities to learn from and with others. Although this message did not resonate with Bob and a few others, most students did make an effort, at least at the superficial level, to honor our relational responsibilities. Most often this manifested as polite exchanges, or praises and echoes of each other's work. However, we did see students engaging in dialogic learning with course material we explored. For example, when studying the Brown vs. Board of Education case through the stories of Black teachers from that time, several students reflected on why they only learned a sanitized version of that history in school and began to question how their social context has limited their perception of the world. This form of vulnerable reflection is a critical aspect of collective learning because it requires a surrender of individual ego and an openness to growing our thinking through discourse with others.

*Protest pedagogy* must be collective at the outset, building on and transforming who we are through the process of collaboration to take risks and create new relational possibilities for dialogic teaching and learning.

## Centering the Margins as a Protest of the Status Quo

We intentionally prioritized non-dominant perspectives and voices in the readings and media that guided our collective exploration. Much of our course content was authored by critical scholars, such as Erica Meiners, bell hooks, Ruha Benjamin and James Baldwin. Additionally, our praxis was shaped by pedagogical conceptualizations emergent from outside political and institutional power, including critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2021), feminist pedagogy (Light et al., 2015), engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1994), and disability justice pedagogy (Shelton, 2020). Our goal was to protest the dominant framework through which we often construct and view the world. As Toni Morrison articulated, we asserted that perspectives emerging from the edges of power are central to our study and inquiry (dadadad321, 2017). In order to disrupt dominant narratives and understand concepts beyond a status quo framing, we established core material that intentionally engaged with knowledge traditions and ways of knowing that are frequently relegated in conventional academic discourse. We wanted to raise critical questions about how we understand education as intersected with race, class, ability and other markers of difference, so as to disrupt the status quo systems we operate within. As Moraga articulates,

> It is not always a matter of the actual bodies in the room, but of a life dedicated to a growing awareness of who and what is *missing* in that room; and responding to that absence. *What ideas never surface because we imagine we already have the answers?* (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015, p. xix).

We sought to explore these relatively less known spaces of creating knowledge and scholarly discourse.

Our course began by first interrogating knowledge itself and asking questions about who gets to claim they are authorities on knowledge and whose ways of knowing are dismissed as uneducated. In disrupting our foundational comprehension of what it means to know, we learned with Munir Fasheh (TEDx Talks, 2011), who pushed us to acknowledge and value the many sources of wisdom we draw on throughout our educational journey (in Fasheh's case, this included a chicken). Similarly, exploring science curriculum through the work of Brayboy and Maughan (2009) compelled us to consider Indigenous ways of relational learning that contrast the more transactional western traditions. Throughout the course, our explorations were guided by critical scholars who questioned normative practices and examined the ways historical inequities have systemically shaped our current institutions. Students engaged with material that often unsettled their preconceived beliefs about U.S. education and society and compelled them to confront messier truths. For example, they learned how the Brown v. Board decision did not end de facto racial segregation in schools, how school disciplinary practices mirror prison logics of surveillance and punishment, and how higher education institutions are complicit in gentrification. This discourse truly disrupted most students' worldviews as they began

to ask questions about their educational experiences, including the types of knowledge we prize in K-12 schools (TEDx Talks, 2011), the ways policy and regulations reinforce racial injustice in education through testing and surveillance (Gillborn, 2005), and the narratives we hear about education technology that are often profit-driven rather than pedagogically sound (Watters, 2019). Protests in the streets are fundamentally engaged in this form of agitation to unsettle dominant ideologies. A great example of this emerges through Occupy Wall Street, which rebelled against the oppressive capitalist logics that maintain wealth inequity, enabling 1% of the population to hoard riches while the other 99% are left with the scraps (Levitin, 2021). This movement brought attention to the fallacies that uphold our corrupt economic system and centered their protests on the experiences of the majority of people who live on the margins of economic power. At the same time, Occupy also ignited the nation's imagination of a more just economic landscape that is collectively shaped by the 99 percent. The Freedom Schools movement in the Civil Rights era, also exemplified this dual role of protests by agitating against the fundamentally racist project of state sanctioned schooling while, at the same time, reshaping schooling in a liberatory context (Hale, 2016). Congruously, our students studied historical and persistent injustices in education and society, while also exploring possibilities for more liberated education futures. For example, they considered alternatives to high-stakes grading structures in conversation with thinkers such as Alfie Kohn (Fiddlestick Productions, 2016) and engaged with Baldwin's message to teachers from 1963 to articulate their own hopes for the future of education. Thus, our course curriculum mirrored the two-fold arc of protests that seek to dismantle oppressive status quo structures while also creating more liberated spaces oriented through the lens of those on the margins.

Examining the ways power operates in society through a non-dominant lens compels us to grapple with our identity and positionality. As such, our course content pushed students to reckon with their own identity and complicity in systems of injustice, and wrestle with how they might be actors in building education equity. Unsurprisingly perhaps, we experienced reactionary resistance from students, much of which emerged from the center of socio-political power through Bob, a white male student. He asserted that we were deceiving students into accepting our subjective, critical perspectives as the objective truth–assuming a singular objective truth exists. Additionally, Bob posited that we lacked intellectual humility to entertain other aspects of education and society, outside of examining the marginalizing influence of systemic white supremacy, which he deemed to be the only offering of our course. Many of these comments were included in Bob's summative assessment of our course (only visible to instructors), which he saw to completion. On several occasions he also contradicted course material by debating concepts through clever rhetoric. This tension became particularly prominent during a discussion of Erica Meiners' Right to Be Hostile (2007). Bob debated the merits of Meiners' (2007) argument with Dr. Brooks by pointing out that anger and hostility are distinct, and while anger is a natural feeling, people should expect consequences from showing hostility. Furthermore, he posited that Meiners' analysis was too simplistic in attributing social inequities to white supremacy and structural racism, which were concepts he deemed irrelevant or illegitimate to the discussion. In contrast, Bob maintained that the social issues Meiners described can be attributed to the complexity of human nature and individuality. One white female student challenged Bob's views in a couple of heated exchanges, but Bob never yielded his point. Other students did not engage with Bob; their silence left us uncertain of whether the anonymity of online spaces shielded their agreement with his comments. Ultimately, Bob was invested in defending the status quo through his refusal to accept any complicity in the project of white supremacy and his denial of the existence of systemic oppression. As such, he altogether rejected our approach of study that centered the margins, and deemed us biased against his dominant, status quo ideology.

In many ways Bob's rhetoric often paralleled our own, except he co-opted and distorted our language to delegitimize our practice. As such, *protest pedagogy* was itself protested, to reassert a sense of self that is entitled to take up space based on a dominant perception of moral and intellectual high ground. Moreover, this student's reaction demonstrated to us how readily our scholarship can be invalidated as mere opinion. As two people emerging from the margins of power and pushing against the status quo canon, we embodied the pedagogical approach of our course. This positionality led us to wonder whether Bob would have responded so brazenly if we were white men delivering similar content. To be minoritized, is to often question whether people are responding to you as a person or reacting to your otherness, because your existence is disruptive to their expectations–that is, their expectations for who is granted personhood and permitted to take up space, especially in academic settings. During these exchanges with Bob, our entry from the margins was met with the aggression of his position within the status quo, and he never shifted his gaze to see beyond this purview. We understood that engaging Bob on his terms would only reinforce his dominant framework, so we did not seek to justify our approach with him. Instead, we refused to entertain debates about the existence of white supremacy and systemic oppression, and refocused discussions on grappling with key lessons offered by our course material. Most importantly, we remained committed to our pedagogical values and continued to encourage Bob to surrender his supremacy to make space for scholarly growth.

*Protest pedagogy* must be rooted in struggle and study framed by perspectives on the margins of power, so that we might better understand the function of status quo narratives and unsettle them as we continue the freedom struggle.

## Complexity as a Protest of the Binary

Key to our course was the push to complicate our understanding of education and society by moving beyond

the boundaries of binary thinking. In this context, we invited students to wrestle with their conceptions of the world as shaped by popular narratives entrenched in binaries such as us/them, self/other, winners/losers, right/wrong, and heroes/villains. Specifically, our course offered students perspectives on Brown vs. Board of Education and the Black Panther Party that troubled the dominant binary framings of these topics. For example, listening to Gladwell's (2017) Revisionist History podcast episode on Brown v. Board, compelled students to view this story from a perspective that goes beyond naming winners and losers of the court case. Learning about this piece of litigation from the viewpoint of Black educators of that time, in particular, revealed a more complicated story. Students grappled with the fact that although the ruling succeeded in striking down blatantly racist segregation laws, it also served to reinforce racial tropes of Black inferiority, and in practice, resulted in the mass expulsion of Black teachers and the institution of de facto segregation. In addition, revisiting this case led students to question why most of them previously only learned about the case as a win for civil rights through heroic legal efforts that defeated the villainous racist southern laws. These sanitized stories serve to maintain national myths of righteousness while concealing messier truths. Our protest of the binary embraced the multiplicity of complex truths, which at times are contradictory and yet coexist. Complicating one's worldview in this way can also lead you to question your own identity, as it has been shaped through stories that idealize the U.S. in terms of heroes, freedom, and patriotism. Therefore, confronting multiple truths requires courage and an open-mindedness, because it is more convenient and safer to accept the partial story that fits into the U.S. 'progress' narrative.

As students wrestled with their intersecting identities and complicated their views through our efforts to protest the binary, perhaps the most prominent dichotomy we disrupted was the notion of being right vs. wrong. In education, we are often pushed to find the "correct" answer and are rewarded for acing the test with "right" responses. However, by excavating history and explicitly grappling with systemic inequities and injustices, we offered students an opportunity to question what they previously thought to be "right" and welcome spaces of not knowing, re-examination, and wonder. Moreover, refusing the dominant binary framing enabled us to engage in more nuanced and complex analyses of education and society. We modeled this disruptive approach after fugitive pedagogy (Givens, 2021), which is grounded in subversive actions undertaken by Black educators to disrupt the white supremacist education landscape. By transgressing the eurocentric canon, these educators challenged the right/wrong binary logic that maintains a hierarchy of knowledge and reinforces learning from a single, "right" perspective. For example, in our course module on the Black Panther party, we heard directly from those within the party (Peralta Colleges, 2014), who disabused dominant misconceptions about the group as one-dimensional villains and described the many ways the party fought for justice and pushed for education freedom. Dominant stories that paint the Black Panthers as dangerous while protecting white innocence, exemplify how the binary paradigm serves to separate us by creating an artificial us vs. them barrier based on harmful stereotypes and manufactured fear. Our identity often gets wrapped up in this oppositional discourse, pitting us against each other to maintain dominant hierarchies. Anzaldúa articulates how we might deviate from this bifurcated narrative arc to embrace our multiplicity of being: "Because our positions are nos/otras, both/and, inside/outside, and inner exiles—we see through the illusion of separateness, we crack the shell of our usual assumptions by interrogating our notions and theories of race and other differences" (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 264). Protesting the binary then paves a path to our full humanity in all its dimensions and complexity.

A common refrain we heard from students, in response to our course content, was that we only presented "one side" of the story or had a singular political vantage or agenda from which we curated the course. We had prefaced the course by explicitly stating our intentions to apply a critical lens in exploring education and society. Reducing our pedagogical approach to being simply "one-sided," underscored the normative expectation of neutrality or bothsidesism in discussions, often reinforced in popular media and rhetoric. Of course, the notion of impartiality itself is complicit in binary hegemonic societal structures. Neutrality, while posing as an ideal, is rooted in upholding dominance of some over others. This form of objectivity or notion of 'balanced' viewpoints was not our goal; rather, we sought to disrupt and complicate widely accepted narratives that emerge from the center of power. As such, we encouraged students to struggle with their conceptions of neutrality by asking questions about how they perceive balance in a binary context, and by exploring why they needed a reiteration of the normative story to weigh against critical viewpoints. In doing so, we invited them to grapple with how neutrality is conceptualized in narrow terms of either/or rather than the more expansive framing of both/and, which could hold multiple truths simultaneously.

Once again, Bob was the chief architect of the critique that our course was one-sided in a two-sided world. Dr. Brooks was exceedingly generous with her comments to Bob, but the interaction was draining and only fueled Bob's need to prove his point and re-assert the right/wrong binary. Most other students, save for one, did not challenge Bob's views or respond to his claims. The one female student who did challenge Bob, quickly realized that it was futile because he seemed less interested in complicating his own preconceptions than he was in "winning" the argument. Instead of continuing this pattern of debate with Bob, Dr. Brooks and I decided to take a step back and be more strategic in our approach. We offered all students individual feedback at different times during the semester and used that communication to thank Bob for his engagement with the course and encourage him to think beyond "winning" an argument because proving that you're "right" does not necessarily support your growth as a learner and scholar. Although Bob's viewpoints did not change, our shift in strategy helped us to avoid getting wrapped up in his simplistic binary frameworks of winning/losing and right/wrong. That is, our goal was not

to convince him to see things "our way"–this would have simply mirrored Bob's own logic of domination through argumentative discourse. Instead, we sought to change the terms of engagement such that we could stay true to ourselves in all our multifacetedness. Protests emanating from the streets and the classroom offered us an alternative framing through which we could formulate our approach. In particular, we drew inspiration from the movement for trans rights (Ring, 2023), which is in and of itself a protest of the binary in terms of gender and sexuality demarcations. Local activists recently disrupted rhetoric that is steeped in oppressive gender-binary ideology, while also creating discourse that complicates traditional notions of identity and acknowledges our full humanity (Schneider, 2023). Building on their example, we interrupted Bob's argumentative discourse aimed at proving himself "right" and shifted the framework to engage in reflective pause and complex dialogue.

*Protest pedagogy* resides beyond the dominant binary that cannot hold the richness of our complex histories and identities. This framing unveils the capitalist agenda of creating winners and losers, so that we might evade those trappings and move toward more expansive liberatory futures.

## Care as a Protest of Capitalist Productivity

We centered care across the design of our course and in our approach to teaching. Specifically, we incorporated compassionate policies, especially in relation to grades and deadlines, which are two primary causes of stress for students. Our grading with care policy (Dias & Brooks, 2023) extended grace to students if they needed extra time to complete coursework and assuaged grade anxiety by offering an above-passing grade for merely participating in the course. Additionally, when offering students feedback, we employed a positive response protocol (Dias & Brooks, 2023), which always opened with an appreciative comment about what students offered and concluded with questions and comments to help push their thinking further. By applying these tools, we sought to foster a course environment that cultivated authentic learning, free from the rigid controls that are often equated with academic rigor. Accordingly, we structured our course so that students could take the time they needed to engage deeply with course material, instead of feeling overwhelmed by a large volume of readings and assignments that they would struggle to keep up with. A care-based pedagogy is not invested in productivity and speed. Our goal was to move at a pace that allowed for students to think critically, formulate and grapple with their own lines of inquiry, and collectively make sense of broader concepts covered in the course. We looked to liberatory pedagogies (Perlow et al., 2018) as a guide for countering dominant academic productivity logics that are steeped in white supremacist and patriarchal hegemony. Cultivated through the work of Black women scholars, liberatory pedagogy offered us a pathway for embracing a humanizing praxis that could more meaningfully grow students' ways of knowing and being within a liberatory context.

In prioritizing care over efficiency, we presented a range of media for students to engage with (including readings, podcasts and videos); we offered students opportunities to choose the content they wanted to explore; we embedded a week of respite between longer course modules; and we were flexible with course deadlines based on student needs. As a result, our students, overall, felt supported and produced authentic and meaningful scholarly artifacts and discourse. For example, students worked on a final portfolio project where they reflected on their learning journey in the course through a variety of mediums including voice memos, infographics, papers and slideshows. These artifacts demonstrated their creativity and authentic voice. More importantly, the majority of our students shared that the course helped them grow and that they found joy through learning with us.

Navigating our classroom demographics as two dark-skinned, immigrant women of African and South Asian descent, forced us to recognize that while we had institutional power as professors, we were still vulnerable to the socio-political equations that undermined our value and credibility. This enabled us to make sense of student affronts as cooptations of protest in the form of complaint and defensive denial. With this recognition, we could step aside, disengage from toxic exchanges, and instead practice self care and attend to students who were genuinely studying and struggling alongside us. Anzaldúa describes this tension in the context of what we need in order to build bridges toward liberation:

> Not acts of barging in the door and ramming our ideologies down people's throats but of turning away, walking away from those who are not yet ready to hear us, who perhaps can never hear us. To stand our ground with those who look us in the eye, to wait for the glimmer of recognition to pass between us, to let the force of our being penetrate the other gentleness. (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015, p. xxviii)

Whenever Dr. Brooks or I became embroiled in exchanges with problematic comments or provocations from students, we returned to our values and relational guidelines to ground ourselves. We often had to remind ourselves that our role as educators is not to persuade students, but rather to expose them to new ideas and concepts and create the conditions for them to freely embark on their own learning journey. Attempting to prove ourselves or "win" an argument would be following the logic of conquest that extractive capitalism is built on. Instead, we chose to step aside and refocus on our goals and wellbeing as a radical act of care.

Protests in the streets are also built around a practice of care. With our collective bodies, we protect each other and offer comfort. We also support the group through nourishment and assistance, by way of passing water around or having medical support on hand. Moreover, when we move together, we travel at the speed of the group and take the safest routes even if they might take a

longer time. As such, protests do not adhere to capitalist ideals of efficiency and productivity and instead prioritize care and grace while agitating for justice. For example, while seeking to dismantle oppressive segregation laws, Civil Rights activists were also creating spaces where they could be fully human and preserve Black knowledge and cultural traditions (Hale, 2016). At times refusal is the mechanism for protest, and this action too is centered on community and care. The freedom struggle that Du Bois termed the "general strike" is a great example of this collective refusal of capitalist productivity. Instigated by enslaved people during the Civil War, "It was a strike on a wide basis against the conditions of work. . . . They wanted to stop the economy of the plantation system, and to do that they left the plantations" (Du Bois, 1935, p. 67). Within the context of our course, our efforts were designed to disrupt transactional education productivity aimed at producing volumes of academic output. Instead, we prioritized care through relational learning, deep reflection, and authentic exploration. Most notably, we honored the affective as scholarly, in resonance with Moraga's gravitation to feminism: "What brought me to feminism almost forty years ago was 'heart.' Feminism allowed 'heart' to matter" (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015, p. xxi).

*Protest pedagogy* is heart-work rooted in an authentic care for our collective wellbeing; it requires the audacity to see our emotions as scholarly wisdom and to value our humanity over productivity.

## Protest of the Western Self

Protest pushes us to embrace all the complexity of who we are even when those in power might deny our worthiness. Protest also allows us the freedom to imagine and build a world that fully embraces us. It is a struggle against the construct of 'the self' that comes from a dominant perspective and brings into question who gets to be an individual self and thus considered fully human.

As two women of color professors, we understood how we were positioned within a predominantly white institution. At the same time, we recognized our power to offer students perspectives outside of the status quo. However, in our efforts to subvert the status quo, the status quo pushed back. By decentering dominant narratives and voices, we awoke a form of backlash within our learning community. In our undertaking of protesting the self as constructed within a western, colonial, capitalist and individualistic framework, students who reside in this dominant context stood in defiance of our protest. Their counter protest reflected the ways we aimed to dismantle, change, and rebuild the self as a construct. Anzaldúa reminds us that:

> We must turn the heat on our own selves, the first site of working toward social justice and transformation. By transforming the negative perceptions we have of ourselves we change the systems of oppression in interpersonal contexts—within the family, the community—which in turn alters larger institutional systems. (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015, pp. 264-265)

*Protest pedagogy* is not possible without confronting the self, to take off the mask so that we might transform. In essence, it is a protest of self that challenges the ingrained vestiges of white supremacist thinking inside us and opens the door to a more liberated self.

## Conclusions

My articulation of a *protest pedagogy* emerges from what Moraga terms a 'theory in the flesh,' which is "...Both the *expression* of evolving political consciousness and the *creator* of consciousness, itself. Seldom recorded and hardly honored, our theory *incarnate* provides the most reliable roadmap to liberation" (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015, p. xxiv). When we demand to be heard, when we reject the dominant narrative, when we embrace our full humanity in all its complexity and beauty, we create possibilities for our freedom futures. This is the function of protest. In this paper I offer a pedagogical construct of protest through my lived experience with the first course I co-taught as a new assistant professor. This framework is rooted in a collective mindset as a protest of individualism, complexity as a protest of the binary, care as a protest of capitalist productivity, and a protest of the western self to pave the way for a liberated self. These concepts bring the ethos of street protests into the classroom, pushing us to question and challenge dominant framings, and create space for more equitable, just, and liberated possibilities in education. By enacting the spirit of protest in our course we built a counter-space where the affective was honored as part of our scholarship, where not knowing was valued as an avenue for further inquiry, and where collaboration was recognized as deep and meaningful work. My conception of protest pedagogy builds on the tradition of defiance and creativity encapsulated in *This Bridge Called My Back* (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015):

> With *This Bridge*… we have begun to come out of the shadows; we have begun to break with routines and oppressive customs and to discard taboos; we have commenced to carry with pride the task of thawing hearts and changing consciousness… Women, let's not let the danger of the journey and the vastness of the territory scare us—let's look forward and open paths in the woods… Voyager, there are no bridges, one builds them as one walks. (p. 254)

Moraga & Anzaldúa's (2015) book shaped my early years of activism in education, and now informs my approach to pedagogy, as a fellow radical woman of color, striving to contribute my ways of knowing as a theoretical foundation that moves us toward liberated education futures.

In closing, I return to my imposter self and internal protest. Perhaps I was not meant to be here. Still, here I am, because those who came before me dared to dream my existence in these spaces into being, and I in turn will create space for those who will follow me.

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**Beatrice Dias** (she/her) is an Assistant Professor of Digital Media, Learning, and Leadership at the University of Pittsburgh's School of Education. As a scholar, she is invested in grappling with broad questions about our humanity and society, with a particular focus on the intersections of technology, learning and community. In particular, her research engages with pedagogical and philosophical questions about education and society in the age of modern technologies, including AI. Beatrice has published work in the *Journal of Applied Instructional Design* and *Cultural Studies of Science Education*.

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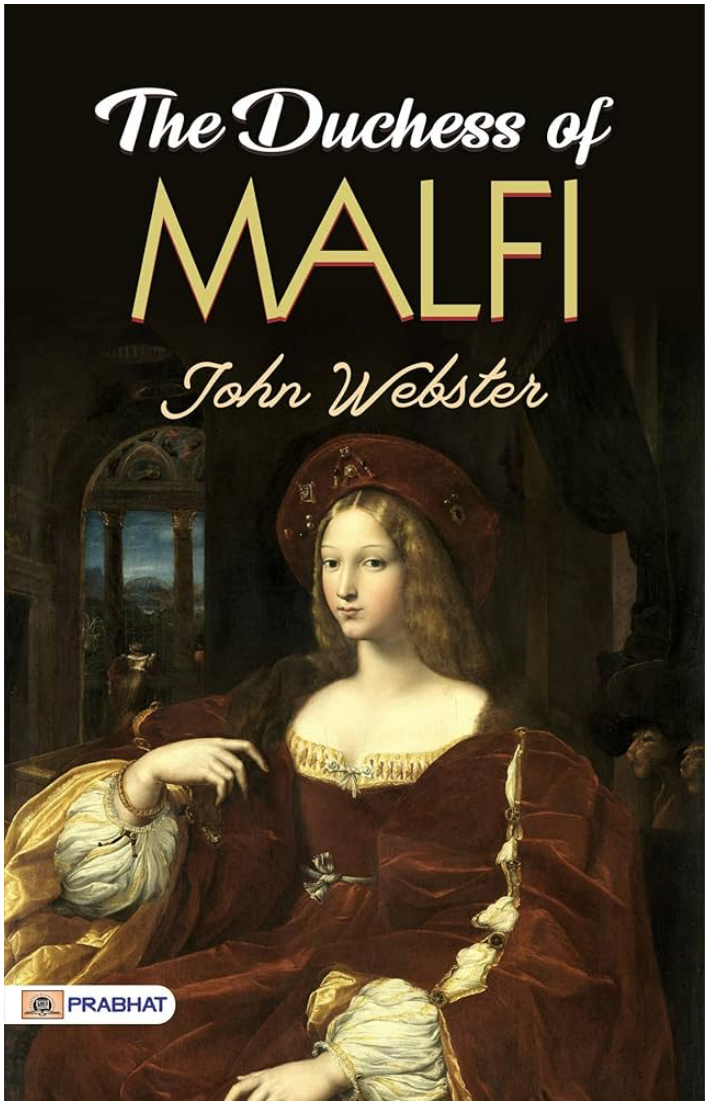
RADICAL TEACHER

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

*Teaching Note*

# So Much More Than Honour Killing: Reading *The Duchess of Malfi*

by Anna Kurian

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Many of the plays taught in the Early Modern literature survey courses in India are useful to demonstrate the almost-unchanged ways of perceiving women and their straitjacketed roles, both at the time the plays were written and when they are read in the 21st century in India. *The Duchess of Malfi* is an often-taught text in survey and elective courses related to Renaissance Drama and Early Modern Literature, in undergraduate and postgraduate classrooms in India, and the students usually focus on the honour killing aspect, the patriarchal imperatives, and the attempts by the Duchess to escape the narrow confines prescribed for her by her brothers, in addition to Bosola's role and desire for social mobility, of course. However, while discussing the play in an MA classroom in Hyderabad, India we moved past these to consider the messy merger of the Duchess's personal and political personas, and engage with the Duchess's multiple roles within the text: as sister and widow, as ruler of Malfi and the prince of her court, but also as wife and mother. It was in considering the personal and political roles of the Duchess that the class understood the personal was the political then and that the same situation obtains in the world we inhabit (India in the 21st century) four hundred years later.

The Duchess's hold on political power as the ruler of Malfi is rendered precarious by her desire for marriage and a family life. But even in the latter, Antonio, her husband, and she have to hide their marriage and initially her pregnancies too. The Duchess's negotiation of her political role as it intersects with her personal roles is uneasy and eventually leads to failure and death for her and all her family. Many of the students were familiar with essays which dealt with the Duchess's identities as ruler, wife, and mother, her public and private roles, and the conflicts that their messy entanglements give rise to. However, the direction of the discussions changed when we began to explore the parallels between the Duchess and Indian women who as professionals hold salaried jobs as well as look after their homes and families. This interested several students whose mothers were career women but also homemaker-in-chief within their families. We heard from a student who told us about her mother who would return from her day-long shift at the airport where she was an Air Traffic Controller and then check on her children's homework before putting dinner on the table. If one of the children was unwell, the mother would call to check on their food intake and medication even while ensuring the safe flow of aircraft at the airport. The juggling of multiple roles and responsibilities with little support and often with much criticism coming their way from their own family members was something quite a few students recognized. We focussed on how the Duchess is hemmed in by her role as the widow of the Duke of Malfi, and hence the ruler of Malfi, primarily by her natal family, which, with the death of her husband, is determined to organise her life for her. Their insistence that she be only a ruler, even though she has "youth/and a little beauty," comes into conflict with her desire to marry Antonio: both of which are embedded in patriarchal systems. Her inability to escape those systems is made clear when, prior to her death, she exhorts her maid and friend, Cariola, to give some syrup to her little boy for his cold and make sure that the girl will "say her prayers ere she sleep."

That the care of the children is primarily the mother's job in India even today, even when both parents work outside the home as well, was underscored for the class with anecdotal evidence from some students. A student whose parents were separated told us how, as a child, each time he started a throat infection and his hearing would be affected, if he was at his father's place, the father never noticed it. But the day he returned to his mother's, she would return from the college where she taught, discover that he was unable to hear and rush him to the hospital. The onus was on her to ensure the health of the child and his well-being, even though she held a full-time job and a position of considerable responsibility at the college. That the woman will perform the primary nurturing function is a given in our world, expected of her by others who may be within or outside the immediate familial contexts, but also, quite often, by herself, irrespective of how well educated she may be, or how highly placed at work. The Duchess's dilemma remains that of the Indian woman as well, one who is both a professional and a homemaker.

A public role, as the ruler of Malfi, and a private one, as Antonio's wife and mother to their three little children, and the impossibility of doing justice to either or to her selfhood, was the takeaway for my class. They saw the Duchess as caught in a quandry where her agency was circumscribed by internalised patriarchal norms which eliminated all possibilities that were not patriarchally inscribed. The parallel to the ways in which thousands of Indian women work outside the home and then return home to cook, help children with their homework, and take care of the many chores that homemakers do on a daily basis was inescapable, especially to the women in the class who expected their future to be similar in many ways. In the Indian household, irrespective of class, home chores and looking after children are largely still seen as the domain of the woman. At the same time, women are educated by their natal families and encouraged to take up jobs as it is seen as evidence of a more modern outlook. To be a stay-at-home traditional wife is not something that middle-class families in particular encourage, unless the husband's family desires it. However, expecting the husband to look after the children or the home is also not seen as acceptable. A student spoke of how her mother was criticised in dramatically opposed ways by her grandfather and grandmother: by the former because she was not advancing rapidly in her career, in spite of being well-educated and extremely hardworking, by the latter because she saw her daughter as prioritising her career above her husband and the family. The impossible nature of the situation where there is no winning for the woman in either her personal or her professional life was something that resonated with the students and the parallels with the Duchess were inescapable.

The Duchess who tries to fit the frames imposed upon her by the patriarchal structures of Early Modern Europe bears a close resemblance to 21st century middle-class Indian women who must bring in a salary, bear children, and look after the husband, the children, and their home,

while not neglecting their professional duties. The patriarchal expectations which burden the Duchess of Malfi continue to burden Indian women in the here and now. While women such as the Duchess and women in today's Indian contexts perform their personal and political roles and labour within both, both are rendered routine and invisible, as is the labour itself, by the structures they inhabit.

**Anna Kurian** teaches in the Department of English at The University of Hyderabad, India. Her areas of interest include Shakespeare and Early Modern English Drama, and the pedagogy of English Literary Studies in contemporary India. She is the Principal Investigator of the world's first OER for Indian Writing in English and Faculty Fellow, UNESCO Chair in Vulnerability Studies.

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# Talking Back to Dominant Narratives in a High School's Daily Morning Announcements

by Hannah Edber


OPPORTUNITY AGENDA GRAPHICS. NINA MONTENEGRO. JUST SEEDS OPEN ACCESS GRAPHICS COLLECTION.

In a leafy neighborhood outside Atlanta, surrounded by wide sidewalks and stately, multi-story homes, Suburban High School (SHS) enjoys a district-wide reputation for its impressive test scores, admirable graduation rate, and highly involved parent groups. The school's calendar brims with the stuff of White middle-class high schools from the movies–homecoming queens, spirit days, football rivalries, well-attended PTA meetings. Staff across the district recognize SHS, where I taught between 2020 and 2022, as a "good school" --a term that is often code for "White" (Wright, 2019).

The whitewashed public image of Suburban High, however, misses the fact that over 50% of the student body is not White. As opposed to their White peers, who walked or drove to school from the surrounding wealthy neighborhood, many of the Students of Color at Suburban High took school buses from immigrant and Spanish-speaking neighborhoods across an industrial corridor. Because buses arrived at 7:45 a.m. and departed right at the end of the school day, students who took buses were excluded from clubs, tutoring, and other extracurricular opportunities. And, in addition to the *de facto* divisions of geography and transportation, the student makeup of academic classes at Suburban High School also reflected a stark racial divide. Overwhelmingly, students in the Gifted, Accelerated, and/or Advanced Placement (AP) courses were White and from the neighborhood, while students in the on-level "College Prep" or remedial courses tended to be Students of Color from the areas further from school. As elsewhere in the country, discipline data at SHS showed similar discrepancies between the experiences of White students and those of Students of Color: in 2021, half of all student discipline issues at Suburban High School involved Latino/a students, and 47.4% of Latino/a students had been involved in a discipline incident—in a school where only about a third of students were Latino/a (K12 Discipline Dashboard, 2021).

I arrived as an English and ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) teacher in fall 2020, a recent transplant to the South from the California Bay Area. I taught both on-level 12th grade Multicultural Literature and Gifted/Accelerated 9th and 10th grade Composition. As a White woman who is queer and Jewish, I am interested in how subject positions and identities are reflected, negated, uplifted, and/or subsumed in school cultures. And because I was new to the school and to the South, and because I taught students from a range of race and class positions–in separate classes–I was curious why and how my experience at SHS felt so catered to White, upper-middle-class students. Was it that Students of Color generally lived farther away? That the bus schedule they relied on caused them to miss after-school activities? That the signs and posters in the hallways were only written in English? How was culture and belonging shaped by the individual students and staff, and how was it produced by the structure of the school day itself?

As I learned the rhythms of the day at SHS–the particular sounds of the tardy bell, the smells by the cafeteria, the swells of energy and emotion around a pep rally–I grew attentive to the feel and sound of daily announcements, given over the loudspeaker every morning at the end of second period. Suburban High's administration had adjusted the daily bell schedule to include eight additional minutes for these announcements before students were released into the halls, which created an odd emphasis on their importance and content. While most of my students spent this time reuniting with their phones–scrolling and taking bored-looking selfies while slumped in their seats, hands on their backpacks and ready to spring out of class as soon as the bell sounded–some of us tuned in to what was being said, listening closely whenever the crackle of the classroom loudspeaker came alive. In the announcements that followed, I heard an overwhelming emphasis on male sports, a financial expectation for participating in extracurricular activities and a view of success as individualized, achievement-focused, and college-bound. The announcements also emphasized a culture of discipline and punishment that framed rule-breaking students as deviant; this finding, in the context of the school discipline data described above, is accompanied by raced and classed dynamics of belonging and alienation. Finally, non-White racial identities were overwhelmingly situated as "others" in need of service and action.

Taken together, the announcements messaged the school's priority: protecting a status quo of power, privilege, and wealth. Students were acknowledged only for their academic or athletic achievements; they were warned and threatened for participation in school events outside what was officially sanctioned or made possible by cultural or financial capital. The announcements created a sense that school was for those who already belong--those who are easily folded into clubs and teams via their race, gender, and class privileges. There is nothing wrong with celebrating students who are athletic, who have access to wealth, or who are White. But the announcements rarely, if ever, acknowledged students who did not fit into those categories—who had their own vibrant and important presence in my classroom every day. I grew curious about what interventions could be put in place to more broadly include student voice, identity, and experience.

## Talking Back to the Dominant Narrative

Ladson-Billings's culturally responsive pedagogy calls for students to be able to critique "the existing social order" (1995, p. 474). Enacting this critique requires that students be included in a collaborative process, alongside school faculty, to consider who is made visible, and who is made invisible, not just by the morning announcements but by school-sanctioned activities and opportunities. Inspired by Ladson-Billings, I tried an experiment: using my position and access to invite student voices into these announcements. I created a survey, which I shared with my students via a QR code on my weekly PowerPoint, to invite students to share announcements and/or shout outs to highlight peers. I then used my access to the faculty announcement site to post the texts to be read out as announcements. Inviting students to participate in writing their own announcements did result in announcements that reflected not just a wider array of students at the school, but broader interpretations of what might

determine student success, beyond academic and athletic achievement. In addition, these student-generated announcements offered meaningful critique of school discipline policies and practices, and honored student mental health within larger social contexts for expected success.

The student-generated announcements offer a glimpse into some of the many youth sources of strength, connection, and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) not previously reflected by the school-generated announcements. Students used the space to "shout out" each other—not for academic accomplishments or athletic wins, but for under-recognized peer leadership ("answering our many art-related questions") or for sticking with a difficult, future-oriented process ("the very confusing and sleep-depriving process" of college applications). These announcements point to community and social capital characterized by an ethic of care shared among students seeking and offering encouragement. Notably, they refer to student experiences that many or most adults at school don't see: illness, sleeplessness, private worry. Hearing these announcements was a sometimes humbling reminder of the worlds students inhabit that teachers have little access to, and the wealth of student experiences and emotions that accompany them to school each day.

Student announcements sometimes suggested wry resistance to Suburban High School's student discipline policies, practices, and messaging. One student submitted an announcement with a straightforward message: "Detention for tardiness isn't gonna fix me." His words offered a rebuttal to a discourse that frames rule-breaking as indicative of something wrong with a student, and that collapses problematic behavior with moral or personal failures. His submission refers to his own experience with school discipline, and to the frequent school-generated reminders about tardiness, parking passes, and other infractions. His words showcase a humorous flex of resistance to both school discipline and to "school appropriate" syntax and grammar. This student submission "speaks back" to the scolding tone of the many reminders and rebukes for behavior infractions read aloud by the administration most days.

The student-generated announcements impacted school culture and student engagement to an uncertain degree. Some students began anticipating the announcements, and asking me when I thought their additions would be read out over the loudspeakers. Others reacted to hearing the announcements of their peers with the same level of enthusiasm they used to greet the school-generated announcements (that is, none). I wondered whether having student voice incorporated into school-sanctioned practices had the unintended consequence of coopting potentially resistant voices by absorbing them into dominant cultural practices.

Ultimately, the school's announcements were both a symptom and an element of how Suburban High School enacted cultural and material problems: worthy of attention, but also embedded in a network of other actors. By working with students to submit their own announcements, we created an opportunity for young people to audibly register their own ways of relating to school, and to each other, for all to hear.

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**Hannah Edber** has worked in educational settings for fifteen years. She has taught middle school and high school English and History, facilitated college courses at UC Santa Cruz and at San Quentin State Prison, and led school-wide efforts to expand Restorative Justice practices in response to harm. Hannah has been published in *The Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, *The Journal of Educational Foundations, The Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, and several NCTE books and journals. Originally from Northern California, Hannah is now the Director of Education at Global Village Project, a nonprofit school for refugee girls in Atlanta.

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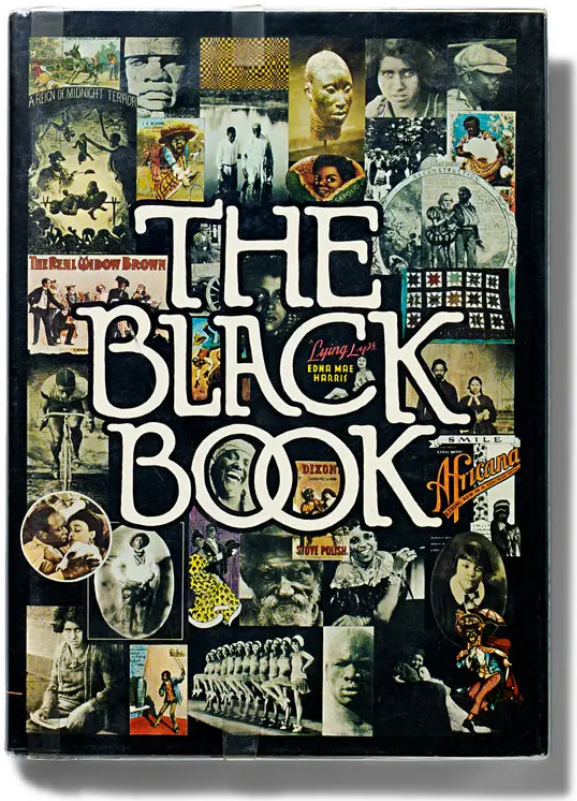
*Teaching Note*

# Reading Blackness as a Rhizome with Toni Morrison's Preface to *The Black Book**

by Laboni Mukherjee




TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLACK BOOK*

In an M.A. (English) class in the University of Hyderabad, I discussed Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of a rhizome, as outlined in their "Introduction" to *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Deleuze and Guattari define the rhizome as a system formed of collections with multiple dissimilar, heterogenous components. These components are not trapped inside a closed system. Rather, they can separate from the collections and join infinite other collections, and are not arranged or controlled by a unitary ideological principle governing the collection. Deleuze and Guattari posit the rhizome as an antithesis to an "organism" and a "root" system, which they define as closed and bound, and arranged in strictly controlled, hierarchal, and homogenous layers ("strata") within a single domain. The "organism," or the "root" system, is governed by an omnipotent, unitary ideological principle. Unlike the root system, the rhizome's components can be detached from the collection and be connected to infinite other collections through "lines of flight," which are pathways made when potential connections between components and collections become actualized. Further, to differentiate the rhizome (open, playful, and continuously re-constituting) from the "organism," Deleuze and Guattari refer to the rhizome as an "assemblage".

As I conducted this particular class as part of a Literary Theory course, I was expected to focus primarily on the definition and characteristics of a rhizome, but since it is a difficult and abstract concept, I also wanted to provide the students with an example of the application of the theory onto a literary text. In particular, the rhizome contains strategies which can be used to read marginalised communities' liberation from oppressive communities, regimes, and narratives. Concepts like the "root-book", "organismic metaphor", "stratification", "territory" can be used by students to read the fixing of certain communities to narratives and signs justifying their subordination to dominant communities. On the other hand, concepts like the "rhizome", with its capacity of endless proliferation in all directions, the "assemblage", the "body without organs" (a system that escapes the above-mentioned metaphor of the organism), and "lines of flight" can be used to read marginalised communities' liberation from oppressive ideologies and their multifarious proliferation and connection to various other alternative and subversive ideologies. The inherent political position of a rhizome against the consolidation of power by any ideology merits discussion in a literary theory classroom along with discussions of its more technical aspects. I realized that to discuss the ideas of the rhizome, it would be best to discuss what a theory *does* as much, or even more, than what a theory *is*.

Studying literature of a particular community or class is bound to have some impact on reading literary theory. My studies in African-American women's literature have considerably inflected and refracted my approach to literary theory with critical race theory and thoughts of Blackness and anti-Blackness. In India, much of the Black theoretical tradition is addressed in separate, sporadic and usually optional papers or modules on African American literature, which leaves the more widely attended literary theory classroom largely whitewashed. As a result, I considered interrogating and reading "colour-blind" literary theories from Black perspectives to make the classroom adequately anti-racist. To do this, I decided to introduce Toni Morrison's preface to *The Black Book*, edited by Middleton A. Harris et. al as a conversation-piece to the "rhizome". I planned my class around the argument that an anti-Black "root" system exists in which anti-Black society narrates Blackness in terms of its difference from normative whiteness and the Black person's position of an "ex-slave". Such a limited narrative of Blackness attempts to trap Black people within an anti-Black closed, strictly controlled and layered root system, akin to an organism, and tries to prevent their attempts to get out of the system and connect themselves to other sign-collections, in order to define Blackness in non-oppressive ways. The anti-Black ideology of white supremacy is the unitary, totalitarian principle governing this "organism". *The Black Book* represents a creative attempt to detach Blackness from the anti-Black "root narrative". The preface to *The Black Book* destabilises this anti-Black narrative by connecting the sign "Black" to several other external collections like food, inventions, music, sports, artifacts, military and historical achievements, mysticism, spirituality, and fashion. It simultaneously acknowledges and undermines the sign's old connections to slavery, racism, and Black death. It allows multiple positive meanings of "Black" to proliferate in all directions, away from the ideological supremacy of signs of trauma, death, and non-being, without holding up any particular meaning of the sign "Black" as the single, controlling ideology. Further, the preface and the scrapbook prevent dehumanising associations of Black people with the body as opposed to the mind by connecting Black people not only to collections of signs connoting food, entertainment, or sports, but also to collections of signs connoting inventions, arts and spirituality.

This argument enabled the application of the rhizome on a literary text, and also foregrounded a discourse on the multiplicity of Blackness. I hoped to destabilise the usual training in African-American literature the M.A. students were acquainted with, which concentrates largely on narratives of Black suffering or struggle (like the Middle Passage, Jim Crow, or the Civil Rights Movement). A syllabus of Black studies should not make suffering or struggle its sole epistemological axes, and should account other forms of Blackness, particularly iterations of Black joy.

The structure of *The Black Book* itself influenced my decision to introduce its preface as a text in the classroom. Presented as a scrapbook of Blackness, replete with scraps from archives detailing the history of slavery (like newspapers and bills of sale), racist advertisements, patents of inventions by Black people, playbills and flyers detailing Black entertainment, lynching postcards, photographs of Black-made artifacts like quilts, and news reports of Black achievement. *The Black Book* shows a collection made of heterogenous components with no component becoming the sole organizing or controlling idea of the collection. Apart from the obvious physical

limitations of the printed book's first and last pages, the scrapbook encourages its readers to read it *in medias res*, and many of its pages are arranged to discourage easy top-to-bottom, left-to-right reading. For example, many of the pages are composed of newspaper cutouts, images and other pieces of text, each piece of text bearing different fonts and font-sizes, and many of the cutouts interrupting and taking space within other pieces of text. This book helped me introduce a rhizomatic text to the classroom in a very short period of time, while solely textual works (like novels) may have needed more time to unpack.

The classroom proceedings started with in-depth readings and discussions on the features of a rhizome. We discussed the rhizome's counter-point – the root-book – as well as the hierarchical and unitary ideas of the organismic metaphor, stratification, and territory, and then contrasted these concepts to the heterogeneous, open and continually shifting concepts of the rhizome, the body without organs, and lines of flight. I also explained how each component of a rhizome can possibly connect to infinite external collections, and there is no beginning, middle, or end, and no single principle or ideology governing the rhizome. I cited a piece of ginger as an example of the rhizome. One of the students voiced her confusion, and argued that an isolated piece of ginger, once planted in the soil, becomes the beginning, the unitary condition governing the whole plant system. I attempted to counter by stating that the ginger piece planted in the soil is a "break" in an erstwhile rhizomatic system, and that the re-planting of the piece of ginger is not the start of a new plant-system but a continuation of the old, broken one. However, I also acknowledged the difficulty in finding a perfect representation of Deleuze and Guattari's unending rhizome in real life. This detour proved important to my subsequent discussions about the scope and limits of *The Black Book*.

Another student asked me the difference between a "bricolage" and a "rhizome," a question that bears strongly on our subsequent study of the scrapbook format of *The Black Book*. From their individual study of Claude Levi-Strauss, they understood the bricolage as something new made out of various pre-existing materials available at hand. In a bricolage, the materials constituting it "had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used" (Derrida 360). I explained that, to an extent, the bricolage can be thought of as an example of Deleuze and Guattari's "assemblage." Both are

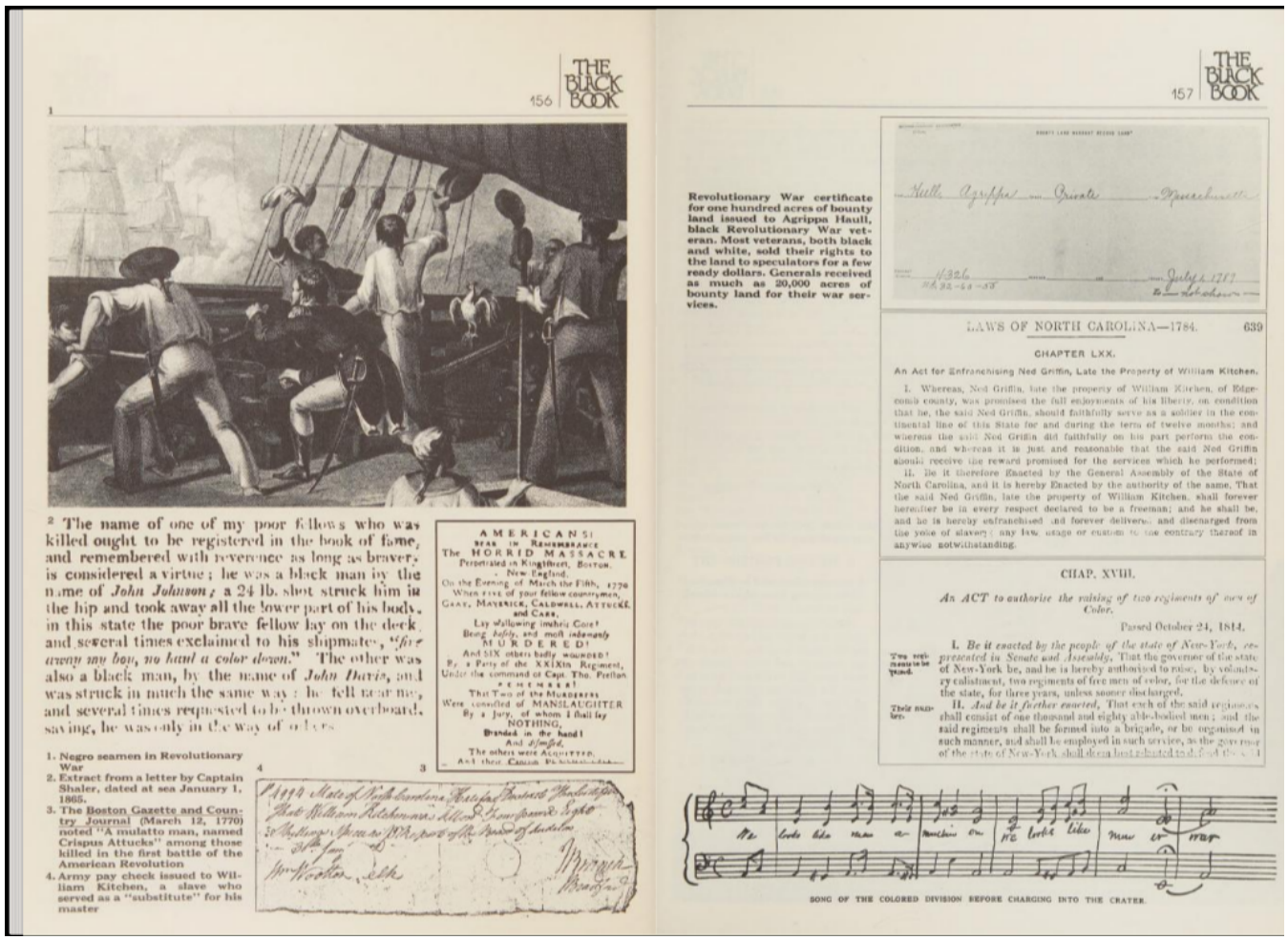



FIGURE 1: PAGES FROM *THE BLACK BOOK* AS AN EXAMPLE OF ITS SCRAPBOOK-LIKE STRUCTURE (HARRIS 156-157)

collectives made out of components which can exist outside the collective, and function in ways different from the mandates of the collective. Neither an assemblage nor a bricolage is controlled by a sole organizing ideological principle. However, the bricolage does not have the ever-changing and ever-expanding properties of a rhizome – once constituted, the components do not detach from the collective and join other collectives. The student, in a note he generously shared with me, wrote how the rhizome is "generative" and "always in flux," as opposed to the fixity of the constituted bricolage.

The conversation ended there, but it set me thinking about the "bricolage"-like structure of *The Black Book*. The archivists in the project can be read as "bricoleurs," handymen – they made a collective out of whatever scrap they could find. The scraps and materials in the book were not made for the purpose of filling in the book (unlike the words and sentences in a novel, for instance), but were rather brought together in an uneasy, contingent unity to make the book. It proved interesting to me that a text like *The Black Book*, cited by me as an example of one theoretical concept (a rhizome), became an inadvertent example of a completely different theoretical concept (a bricolage). Further, the bricolage aspects of the text influenced my subsequent reading of its structure, which I will illustrate a little later.

Through Toni Morrison's preface to *The Black Book*, we first discussed "Blackness" and found that, in white supremacist society, the term tends to be inextricable from racism, police brutality, and slavery, with a few mentions of Black triumph (like Barack Obama and Oprah Winfrey). Morrison's preface initially acknowledges the narratives of slavery and colorism, but then shows how the sign "Black" exceeds these narratives. Her description of *The Black Book* as a keeper of all things "Black" *between* its physical dimensions situates Blackness in a state of "in-betweenness", spreading outwards towards all possible directions (top, bottom, left, right) and connecting to multiple assemblages in its wake. This echoes Deleuze and Guattari's claim that the rhizome has "neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overspills" (21), and posited Blackness as being innately rhizomatic. Morrison destabilises any chronology with which we can approach Blackness, and therefore challenges our reading of Blackness as a residue of Slavery. Rather, she posits Blackness as a vibrant, thriving phenomenon in the present. Morrison then connects Blackness to various other collections as an act of "survival", and pointed out the various collections – food, entertainment, science and technology, sports, spirituality, arts, and everyday life. By pointing out these various collections, and by showing the students their corresponding pages in the book, I tried to show them how "Blackness" is an ever-expanding multiplicity, and that there are as many definitions of "Blackness" as there are Black experiences.

I then challenged the students to think how the printed book form is restricted by a boundary, to an extent. Despite the book's claims of dispersing "Blackness" to different external collections, it binds all these different collections within its physical limits (the cover, the first and last pages). In that respect, *The Black Book*, by itself, is more like a bricolage than a rhizome. However, Morrison suggests that "Blackness" itself escapes the bounded collection of *The Black Book*: "I have journeys to take" (Morrison n.p.). Taking cue from the student's earlier question about the limits of considering a piece of ginger as a rhizome, I proposed that *The Black Book* can be treated as a broken-off piece from a larger rhizome of Black texts, images, artifacts and other scraps of a Black archive. We ended our discussion with a brief discussion on the importance of multi-textuality in adequately apprehending Black experience.

## *Acknowledgment

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**Laboni Mukherjee** has recently submitted a thesis titled "Everyday Narratives and Black Feminist Liberation in Select 1980s-1990s Black American Women's Writings" towards the fulfilment of a Ph.D. degree in the Department of English, University of Hyderabad. She was a UGC Research Fellow from 2019 to 2024, and has published papers in journals like *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry* and *Literary Voice.* Her research interests include African-American studies, Feminism, Queer Studies, and the Everyday.

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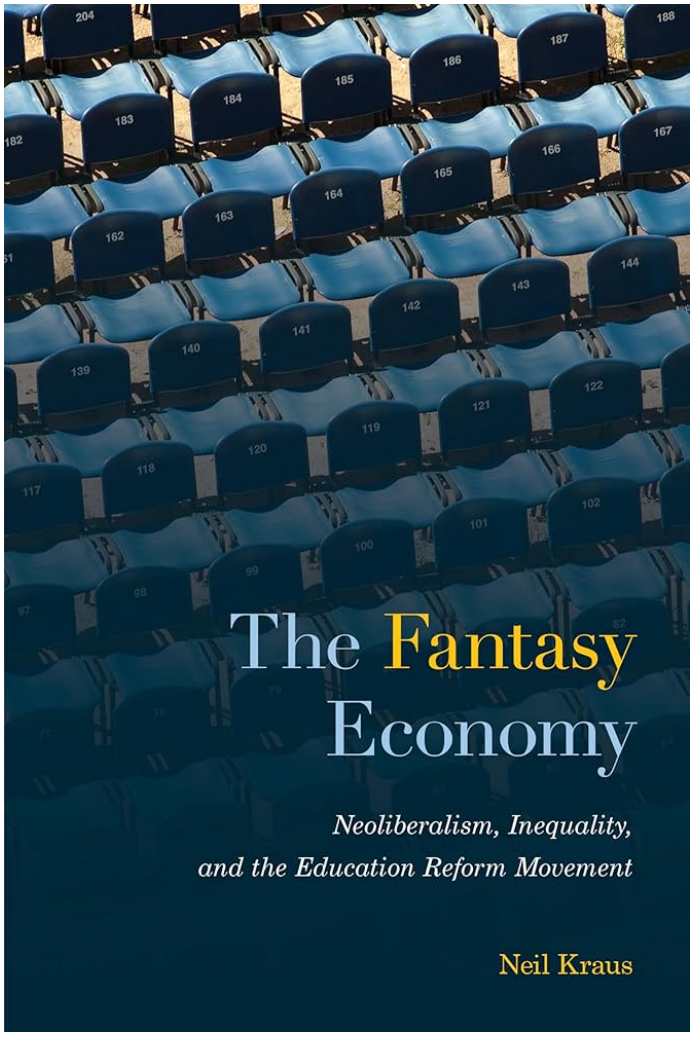
*Review*

# The Fantasy Economy: Neoliberalism, Inequality, and the Education Reform Movement

by Jocelyn Wills




THE FANTASY ECONOMY: NEOLIBERALISM, INEQUALITY, AND THE EDUCATION REFORM MOVEMENT, BY NEIL KRAUS

***Kraus, Neil. The Fantasy Economy: Neoliberalism, Inequality, and the Education Reform Movement. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2023. Cloth. ISBN: 978-143-9923-702. 282 pp.***

Neil Kraus's *The Fantasy Economy: Neoliberalism, Inequality, and the Education Reform Movement* makes a significant contribution to the expanding body of work on the corporate corruption of higher education and the long-term, adverse consequences of neoliberalism. As such, it should interest readers of *Radical Teacher* looking for further evidence (as if we didn't have enough already) of the necessity of freeing public education from the clutches of business, libertarian policy makers, and austerity budgeting.

Through copious research into the corporate foundations, lobbying efforts, and data used by neoliberal interest groups masquerading as progressive education reformers, Kraus exposes the ways in which America's corporate elite and ultra-wealthy have led a campaign against public education (both K-12 and beyond) for more than five decades–gaslighting the public into believing that economic opportunity, racial inequalities, and expanding disparities in wealth *and* income reside not in corporate strategies that include keeping labor costs down, offshoring jobs, expanding markets for educational (and especially technological) products and services, and encouraging obscenely high incomes for education "reformers" and austerity implementers (such as university presidents, provosts, and their expanding armies of administrators). At the same time, these "reformers" place little to no blame on neoliberalism's "real" economy of deindustrialization, wage stagnation, underemployment for all but the favored few, job insecurity, austerity budgets, and increasing poverty itself, but rather in a "fantasy" economy that ignores structural labor market realities and points the finger of economic precarity on a failing education system that has produced under-prepared students, failing schools, and a workforce with inadequate skills for an imagined 21st-century economy requiring more highly educated workers, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM).

With "alternative data" and "human capital theory" at the center of the fantasy economy's narratives and reports, including those produced by the Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW) at Georgetown University and other corporately funded and university-affiliated centers–the Business Roundtable, Brookings Institute, the Gates, Walton, Ford, Carnegie, Pew, and other corporate foundations, and neoliberal institutes placed strategically across the country–as well as special commissions set up by each and every presidential administration since Ronald Reagan's, Kraus deftly employs official data from places such as the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) and the Federal Reserve Bank of New York to debunk the many myths used to take the focus off corporate and public policies for creating the context for economic insecurity by placing them squarely at education's door until they have become conventional wisdom, especially the ludicrous assertion that schools and universities can and do control wages levels and jobs or that educators (particularly unionized teachers and faculty) are responsible for racial inequalities and need to be held accountable for a lack of economic opportunities.

Divided into five chapters beyond an introduction, conclusion, and epilogue, Kraus first examines the historical trajectory of the fantasy economy and the economic elite who have worked consistently to frame policy discussions, even when their proposed solutions to mythical crises met with public resistance (at least at first). He then turns to the tenets of the fantasy economy's narratives and the misleading research (much of it without attribution) and alternative data neoliberal reformers have employed to advocate for the need for more educated workers, most of whom got saddled with unconscionable student-loan debt and the reality of precarious work and underemployment after graduation. Kraus also devotes one chapter to the "educational accountability" narratives and politics of school choice that have guided the fantasy economy from the start. One can read the introduction and conclusion, as well as each chapter as stand-alone pieces, for Kraus does an excellent job of summing up the arguments he advances as well as the entities educators need to focus on in the days ahead. That said, the whole is greater than the parts, because *The Fantasy Economy* systematically and relentlessly exposes several myths worth considering for anyone seeking to build momentum behind grassroots movements to overturn the policies that have crippled education, created perverse incentives to bolster the fantasy economy from within educational institutions, and created the context for austerity budgeting, particularly in the wake of 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, The Great Recession, and other recent events that have allowed disaster capitalists to socialize the risks and privatize the profits of the neoliberal agenda.

Among the myths Kraus unmasks, a couple stand out as critical to dismantling the fantasy-economy narrative. The first is the unending drumbeat of the "skills gap," a political campaign begun under the Reagan administration. Juxtaposing official data with the alternative forms of data produced by the fantasy economy's educational reformers, Kraus reveals time and again that students are neither under-performing relative to earlier generations and their counterparts elsewhere around the world nor that a skills gap ever existed at all. Historical numbers also show that American student attainment levels have in fact *increased* over time, while BLS, Federal Reserve, and other government data and reports find that approximately 61% of all jobs in the United States require nothing more than a high-school education, which results in chronic and steadily expanding underemployment among those with college degrees (71-5). This makes the campaign to designate education the sole provider of economic opportunity (rather than the provider of opportunities for lifelong learning, critical thinking and questioning, and finding a fulfilling life no matter work or career choice, as participants in and informed members of functioning democracies) all the more alarming, particularly when one considers that funding for schools and research has become increasingly

dependent on private foundations with ties to corporate strategies, including the expanding shift to shareholder value over all others. Moreover, the real economy of low-education, low-wage jobs in the United States also undermines the STEM shortage myth: The few high-paying jobs in STEM involve management, not rank-and-file work. The latter often involves relatively good pay after graduation but falls into the trap of a looming threat–and often reality–of layoffs, offshoring of jobs, and the hiring of vulnerable foreign workers (H1-Bs) who in turn find themselves tied to particular employers that can raise or lower their pay at will.

The "demographic cliff" myth also emerges as an important theme in Kraus's research and work. In short, the cliff does not exist, but is used as a device to cut funding, conduct anti-tenure campaigns, and keep higher education in constant crisis mode upon the threat of collapsing enrollments. Those co-opted by this myth have helped to fuel the fantasy narrative with dire consequences. Although enrollments have declined slightly since the height of the Great Recession, Kraus uncovers BLS and other official data, examined over the long term, that shows steadily increasing or stable enrollment numbers. As a result, neoliberalism's educational reform movement only serves the interests of those who want to obfuscate the real economy for an imaginary one, or use public funding for but private control over school, such as tech companies and their foundations, which are involved in high-stakes testing, on-line learning platforms, and other products and services). Reports and public relations produced by the campaign also require further scrutiny and resistance, including the narratives that have employed "innovation," "diversity and inclusion," and other catch phrases when the public became increasingly skeptical about the promise of "free market" and "technology" solutions as well as "culture of poverty" narratives.

So, what is to be done? Although Kraus does an excellent job of exposing the fantasy economy's goals and narratives, his solutions sound far too familiar, and therefore ultimately feel somewhat weak because he hopes that educational administrators and the mainstream media will help to catalyze change. As those steeped in the realities of neoliberalism know, that is a fool's errand: Administrators by and large have become careerists with little interest in students, staff, or faculty. What we need is radical change, with teachers and faculty willing to educate both students and colleagues about the realities they face and employing the fantasy economy narrative to upend it. Unions also have a role to play in educating members, students, and the larger public. Recent articles in such unlikely places as the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* have reported that people on both the left and right have had quite enough of neoliberalism and seek alternatives. Their reporting also covers the disappointing job prospects for computer scientists and other STEM workers. That provides opportunities for unionized workers to strike and stand with their contingent colleagues, to spend more time exposing the world to the austerity implementers within education and beyond it, and showcase how much those highly paid administrators are harming young people's futures by taking as a given that there is no alternative to austerity, neoliberalism, or the fantasy economy they have swallowed whole and perpetuate. Their interests are not the same as educators, students, and families. We need to follow Kraus's and others' leads, digging into and examining the data so we can make a stronger case for education as a noble and important profession. There is no enrollment crisis; there's a crisis in overcrowding classrooms, hiring freezes, and contingent labor practices. Importantly, educators need to take lessons from the Occupy movement, creating common cause with students, their family members, and grassroots organizations working against the corporate corruption of education, politics, and every aspect of life. As student encampments have recently revealed, corporate interests feel threatened by those critiquing the systems that work against them, the environment, and humanity. If not now, when?

**Jocelyn Wills**, Professor Emerita at Brooklyn College, City University of New York, and *Radical Teacher* board member, focuses her research and writing on the history of capitalism; surveillance studies; technological innovation and historical amnesia; American dreams and realities; microhistories of everyday strivers; and Brooklyn in the world.

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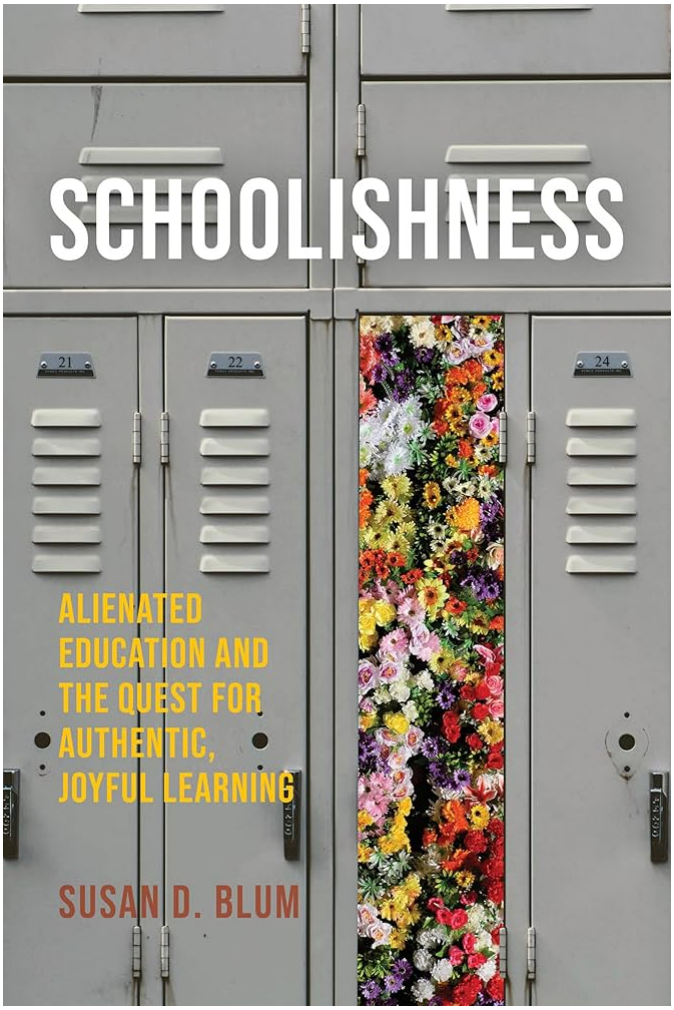
RADICAL TEACHER

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

*Review*

# Schoolishness: Alienated Education and the Quest for Authentic, Joyful Learning

by Jake Mattox




SUSAN D. BLUM. SCHOOLISHNESS: ALIENATED EDUCATION AND THE QUEST FOR AUTHENTIC, JOYFUL LEARNING. ITHACA: CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS.

***Susan D. Blum. Schoolishness: Alienated Education and the Quest for Authentic, Joyful Learning. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.***

This book seeks to help the reader understand, and possibly see anew, how our existing practices and structures–which Susan Blum labels "schoolish" (an intended rhyme with "foolish")–work against authentic, meaningful, and joyful learning. Blum is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Notre Dame, editor of the collection *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)* (West Virginia University Press, 2020) and author of *"I Love Learning; I Hate School": An Anthropology of College* (Cornell University Press, 2016). *Ungrading* explained the many poisons of traditional grading practices while also exploring concrete classroom-based alternatives; its chapters were written by instructors teaching anywhere from middle school to college as well as familiar reformers such as Alfie Kohn and John Warner. This focus on grading is one throughline connecting Blum's work, and another includes her overall desire to show just how odd, arbitrary, and destructive the practices and "genres" specific to contemporary schooling are.

*Schoolishness* is structured in three parts. Part I's introduction discusses the book's central term and offers an overview and some autobiographical framing of Blum as an experienced educator and member of a field (anthropology) that seeks "to make the familiar strange." Chapter 1 narrates the emotional trauma and suffering that schools actually bring to students, and Chapter 2 uses Marx's concepts of use value and exchange value to frame its discussion of the many–often contradictory–justifications regularly put forth as the purposes of schooling in the United States. Chapters 3 through 12 make up Part II, the main body of the work, and each offers a focused, (usually) shorter discussion of one specific troubling dimension of schooling. In Part III, the most important section examines one example of authentic learning that comes directly from Blum's experience.

All along the way, the book compellingly makes clear that our current structures and practices ignore research on so many issues, from grading to the use of instructional technology to the need for experience-based learning.

The chapters of Part II are, collectively and individually, very successful in collecting and presenting research and experience that clearly state what we know about the harmful practices of our educational system. Blum uses varying blends of ethnographic description, historicization, research from multiple disciplines, and her own experience in first rethinking each dimension and then briefly sketching out alternatives. Subtitles of these chapters follow the pattern of "From [harmful practice X] to [healthier alternative Y]"; examples include Chapter 3, "Pedagogy and Pedagogizing: From Direct Instruction to Independent Learning" and Chapter 4, "Teachers, Students, Classes: From Authorities and Competitors to Communities of Varied Learners." Covering so much ground, the book might best be digested in smaller chunks, and a reader could probably pick and choose based on interest and need. But whatever you read, all the chapters seek to defamiliarize existing practices and show just how strange and troubling they are–which is very important for faculty but could also be potentially shared with students. For instance, the chapter on "schoolish" roles and relationships could be assigned to first-year college students as they reflect on their K-12 experiences and subsequent expectations for college. Or Chapter 10 on "Genres of Production," for example, which could help a writing class (and its instructor) understand and avoid the arbitrary, stressful "rules" of writing–so often taken as writing itself–that alienate, frustrate, and confuse students. And Chapter 1, "Experiencing School," could be used with students to frame why and how their K-12 experiences might have ended up as more suffering and emotional trauma than inspiration or joy.

Some chapters theorize more robustly, others historicize more deeply, and others offer more detailed and concrete ideas for what instructors might try in their own work. Across the board, though, Blum engagingly cites an eclectic (and occasionally dizzying) body of thinkers and sources. One example: Chapter 13 ("Selves: From Alienation to Authenticity, Wholeness, and Meaning") starts with an epigraph from the *Urban Dictionary* (definition of "random") and ends with a short quotation from Theodor Adorno on authenticity, along the way alluding to or citing figures and sources such as cultural theorist Lauren Berlant, linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, Deuteronomy 11.14, sociologist Arlie Hochschild (and her 1983 study on flight attendants who "were *required* to *appear genuinely*–sincerely, authentically–*happy* to see passengers"), and Aristotle and Karl Marx on use value and exchange value. Such a range usually holds together well and is brought directly back to education scholarship; Blum draws in that same chapter, for instance, on education researchers Yong Zhao and George Kuh. In fact, this is one of the main contributions of this book: readers can take advantage of Blum's wide reading and citations, especially in terms of the research behind troubling practices and ideas for concrete examples from current teachers.

Essential to the book is Chapter 14 in which Blum discusses one counter-example of authentic learning called the Bowman Creek Educational Ecosystem. This was a multiyear community-based project addressing serious water quality and vacant-lot issues in one of the most neglected neighborhoods in South Bend, Indiana. Collaboration involved Notre Dame students and professors, faculty from the regional campus of Indiana University in South Bend (where I teach), a local community college, students from at least two area high schools, city officials, churches, local residents, and at least two neighborhood organizations. From 2015 to 2021, nearly 300 students and/or student interns participated, including a team of Blum's students conducting ethnographic research that studied the learning process of other teams. Blum uses this as an extended example of authentic learning that works both within and outside of existing structures and avoids each of the ten poisonous

dimensions she outlines in previous chapters. For one, Blum notes that "activity and inquiry were *led by questions and problems* rather than a pre-ordained syllabus" (289). An example of this was the team overseeing new tree nurseries so that healthy, inexpensive young trees could be transplanted to benefit the neighborhood and improve vacant lots. But this included complex problem-solving and improvisation that had no clear textbook: "[Student interns] learned how to negotiate with neighbors. They found property records. The requested estimates from plumbers. … They developed skills and vocabulary, and both technical and bureaucratic knowledge" (276). Among other benefits, the overall project demanded independent learning; assessment was authentic; outcomes and goals were material and "real" rather than the more abstract results produced in classrooms (papers, tests); learning and working were cooperative and social. Blum's examples in this chapter are extremely compelling, even if one can't help but despair at what feels like the impossibility of implementing (and funding) such a project at most universities and in today's climate of austerity and hostility toward the notion of the public good.

This volume embodies a key contradiction facing radical educators who believe in teaching even though successes with individual students and classes occur within a larger education system that exists to serve the needs of capitalist production, which raises a series of difficult questions: What goals in working with students could ever go beyond simply creating a slightly more humane capitalism? And are smaller-scale, classroom-based "reforms" ultimately ineffective and/or easily co-opted for reactionary ends? Though any one book diagnosing the ills of our current practices and systems cannot be expected to solve that contradiction, the book often recognizes these and other questions relating to class, power, and ideology. Blum notes, for instance, our "immorally unequal society" (82) and "It may be that until we fix poverty, we can't fix schools" (321). Regarding concerns raised after studies suggest the damage the pandemic did to student performance, Blum says that "[T]he solution is not school-school-school. The solution is greater equality" (98). Some readers might simultaneously agree with these statements and then wish Blum's book devoted more attention to the material, ideological, and political factors specific to contemporary American capitalism and governance that drive such poverty and inequality, and also make more explicit how the changes she proposes in education could contribute to a dismantling of that larger system.

It could also be argued, and this seems implicit through the book, that changing the relationships and the very idea of "learning" might assist in helping students see alternatives to individualist, neoliberal ideas of social relationships, help them discover more about non-alienated ways of being in the world, and even potentially better grasp the ravages of a system based in private property and wage labor. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis's *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life* (1976, reissued 2011), written in the immediate aftermath of the failure of many reform movements of the 1960s, argued that "To capture the economic impact of education, we must relate its social structure to the forms of consciousness, interpersonal behavior, and personality it fosters and reinforces in its students" (9). So many of Blum's examples take up this challenge and are precisely about consciousness and behavior. If traditional grading, for instance, is largely about the arbitrary expression of capricious power that rewards compliance (as discussed, for instance, in chapters 2 and 5), then perhaps using more truly democratic forms of engagement in schools can help pave the way to a better, freer world. Similarly, teaching students what "real" questions look like as opposed to "schoolish ones" (as discussed in Chapter 5) could help them develop both the genuine curiosity and critical thinking skills required if we are to begin to dismantle long-accepted beliefs and practices. And a thread throughout on the social nature of humans and of human learning seems crucial in counteracting individualist modes of existence.

Blum's diagnoses and approaches–with ideas for how classrooms, programs, and schools might transform themselves–are, on the whole, very persuasive and make a case for transforming from within. Her book thus joins a larger conversation about radical (or not) potential; as John Marsh suggests in *Class Dismissed: Why We Cannot Teach or Learn Our Way Out of Inequality* (Monthly Review Press, 2011), all the reforms and best practices and new teaching ideas cannot get us to our goal. Relatedly, as Bowles and Gintis argued, "movements for educational reform have faltered through refusing to call into question the basic structure of property and power in economic life" (14). It can certainly be debated just how far we need to go, whether we need to abandon our existing models, as discussed, say, by Eli Meyerhoff in *Beyond Education: Radical Studying for Another World* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019) or at the 2019 conference "Whose Crisis? Whose University? Abolitionist Study in and Beyond Global Higher Education." And Blum's experiences at Notre Dame, as she knows very well, are about training the members of the future ruling class. As someone who works on the other side of South Bend at a very different kind of institution, I find her work here and in *Ungrading* to be immensely valuable, though I struggle with a few key questions: How does, and how should, education take into account the economic and social backgrounds of the students involved, the type of institution in which learning takes place? And do alternative practices in and out of the classroom, so valuable as described in this book, go far enough; how explicitly does/should the "content" of a course reveal to students, elite and non-elite, the true conditions of their existence? Raising these questions is not pointing to serious flaws here but to the position of Blum's book, even if implicitly, in larger questions facing radical educators.

Readers hoping for clear answers to those questions might be disappointed, as might those expecting a more discernible SOTL volume or collection of "best practices." As Blum herself notes, the book is essentially "a manifesto and tirade, pamphlet and prayer, autoethnography and annotated bibliography, lament and dream" (xv). *Schoolishness* truly is all of these things. But Blum's expansive reading/citing, her conversational prose, and

her spot-on diagnoses provide a compelling and incisive analysis.

**Jake Mattox** is Associate Professor of English at Indiana University.

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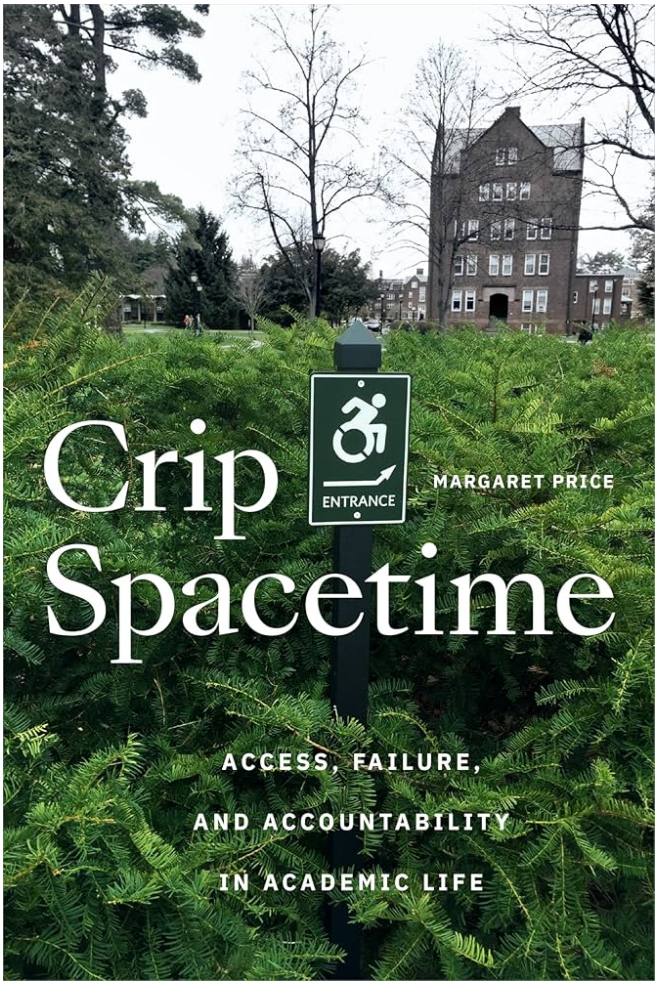
RADICAL TEACHER

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

*Review*

# Crip Spacetime: Access, Failure, and Accountability in Academic Life

by Sarah E. Chinn




MARGARET PRICE, CRIP SPACETIME: ACCESS, FAILURE, AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN ACADEMIC LIFE

***Margaret Price, Crip Spacetime: Access, Failure, and Accountability in Academic Life. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2024***

The passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 promised a reworking of how disabled people navigated public and private spaces in the United States, how their disabilities would (or would not) be accommodated in the workplace, and how US society more generally would create an environment better prepared to make space for people with a variety of experiences of disability. And while the ADA was rightly celebrated as a long-awaited recognition of how disabled people were structurally excluded from buildings, jobs, opportunities for social and economic mobility, and meaningful accommodation, it was hardly a cure-all for the pervasive ableism that generated those exclusions in the first place.

For many activists and scholars, the ADA's focus on "reasonable accommodation" was as much an obstacle as it was a doorway into equal access. Whose responsibility was it to define "reasonable," for example? What was the limit or extent of the kinds of accommodations available? And–of course–where was the money going to come from to widen doors and hallways, install elevators, and provide ASL interpreters or captioners, let alone offer manageable work environments for people disabled by panic attacks, seizure conditions, chronic fatigue, and other invisible disabilities?

In *Crip Spacetime: Access, Failure, and Accountability in Academic Life*, Ohio State English professor Margaret Price reports on and analyzes the experiences of a number of disabled academics to spotlight how discourses of accommodation have been seamlessly integrated into the neoliberal mechanisms of higher education. *Crip Spacetime* expands the purview of Price's 2011 book *Mad at School*, which explored how students, faculty, and staff with mental disabilities (including herself) have to contend with expectations about learning, teaching, "collegiality," and other academic norms. The result of a multiyear project in which Price interviewed more than three hundred disabled academic workers (primarily but not exclusively faculty), *Crip Spacetime* challenges the routines of accommodation and access that, she argues, "as practiced in contemporary US colleges and universities, increases inequity rather than mitigates it. In other words, the current approach to access isn't just ineffective, it's actively making things worse" (7).

While this claim might seem counterintuitive, Price uses the analytical tools of Critical Disability Studies (CDS), which "regards disability as part of a larger system that labels some bodies deviant, broken, or subhuman" due to intersecting structures of race, gender, sexuality, class, (dis)ability, and other modes of marginalization, to demonstrate that what academic institutions provide is often woefully far from what actual disabled people need. As she demonstrates throughout, needs for "accommodation" and "access" are measured against the priorities of institutions. While disabled people (especially those of color) are routinely trotted out in recruitment materials to show how progressive a college or university is, those same institutions evince little meaningful understanding of what actual access requires.

By dividing the book into sections–space, time, cost, and accompaniment–Price works through the complex of obstacles faced by disabled people in academia. Her underlying argument is that academic spaces are built on a foundation of colonialism, racism, misogyny, and ableism: few if any were founded with an expectation that anyone but white, able-bodied, cisgender, owning-class men would be entering their gates. The architecture itself makes clear who is and who is not welcome (as a personal aside, I don't remember seeing a single person in a wheelchair during my undergraduate days in a campus with endless stairs and few elevators. By contrast, every building in my college workplace today is equipped with elevators, and wheelchair users are far more common–although given the routine breakdown of elevators and escalators, there are certainly fewer than there might be).

Disabled academics must, perforce, be hyperaware of the spaces they occupy and those they encounter. For example, interactions at conferences that are routine for able bodied academics–approaching new people at conferences, reading nametags, listening to presentations, asking a question, moving from one room to another–pose a variety of challenges for people with disabilities, who are often required to provide their own accommodation or deal with whatever the conference organizers expect or can afford.

Likewise, time is interwoven with academic life. Is the time between classes or conference sessions or meetings adequate for neurodivergent people to reset for the next activity? Or for a person in a wheelchair to navigate the twisting alternate routes they might have to take from one building to the next? Is a teacher or presenter speaking slowly enough for an ASL interpreter to effectively communicate? Price's interviewees are eloquent in narrating their struggles with the strictures of time, either the "unwanted slowness" that accompanies securing the right accommodations, dealing with bureaucracy, or filing for medical leave; or the "unwanted quickness" of deadlines, turnaround times, and transitioning between spaces (the campus visit for job prospects is the paragon of unwanted quickness, with candidates being whisked from job talks to teaching demos to meetings with students, faculty, and administrators, to meals, and almost always lots of walking in between).

Price's culminating argument is not about logistics or institutional failures (although there's certainly plenty of that). Rather, it is that structures of accommodation and access themselves are inadequate for the lived experiences of disabled academics. *Crip Spacetime* asks us "to question notions of consistency, individuality, functionality, and coherence when they are applied as evaluative tests for who and what should be valued, and in what ways" (158). It is very difficult to write specific accommodations into policy because for many disabled people, each day might be different; that is, each day

brings with it varying levels of energy and/or mental function, varying levels of mobility and/or sensory acuity, varying levels of ability to engage with others and/or with work. Chronic migraines, for example, fluctuate in severity. Multiple sclerosis symptoms wax and wane. Different weather conditions affect how quickly someone in a wheelchair or using a cane can move across space.

These shifting circumstances require a distinct and malleable set of expectations, which the neoliberal university is poorly equipped to address. Price calls for "shared accountability" towards each other around diverse vectors of ontological embodiment. But this is ambitious, to say the least. As she points out, how might this be imagined, let alone achieved in "a workplace as competitive, as driven by scarcity politics, as focused on individual merit as academe?" (168). There is no specific answer to this, even as Price offers up examples–few and far between–of academic institutions in which collaboration and shared accountability are practiced. But for most of us, this seems virtually impossible.

*Crip Spacetime* makes important arguments and creates a valuable archive for thinking about how disabled people in academia have to wrestle with the contradictions of what passes for access. Occasionally she overstates her case, though. For example, she cites the "violence and harm" that are visited upon disabled people in academic institutions. "Violence" is a serious charge, and I would have liked to have seen Price define what "violence" means in this context. Is harm the same as violence? Certainly, the kind of gaslighting and questioning of the validity of someone's experience and needs is insulting, harmful, and undermining. But if Price wants to equate those phenomena with violence, I think it would be helpful if she was more specific about how they are encountered by her interviewees, and how they qualify as violence as she defines it.

At the same time, there were moments in which she could have pushed harder towards the work of scholars in Critical University Studies, which has launched a multifaceted critique of neoliberalism and regimes of austerity in higher education (although, and this undergirds Price's larger argument, they rarely index disabled people as especially disadvantaged by the reigning regime of doing more with less). One of the crucial insights of current critiques of hierarchy that has emerged is that an equitable world benefits both the historically marginalized and those at the top of the ladder. Price gestures towards this, particularly towards the end of the book, and I would have liked to have seen her make a more robust connection between interrogating the logic behind current decision making in higher education and how the struggles that people with disabilities endure represent the crystallization of those administrative and legislative trends.

Nonetheless, *Crip Spacetime* makes a valuable contribution to Critical Disability Studies. By framing a thorough sociological project with a sophisticated theoretical apparatus, Price deftly toggles between the personal and the structural, showing how those two modes are inextricable for people whose disabilities would be better served by operating in crip spacetime rather than the timetable of contemporary academia. And for those readers who are less familiar with work in CDS, *Crip Spacetime* serves as an accessible (no pun intended) guide to the crucial and clear-eyed contributions CDS makes to a radical analysis of academic life.

**Sarah E. Chinn** teaches 19th Century US literatures and cultures in the English department at Hunter College, CUNY. Her most recent book is *Disability, the Body, and Radical Intellectuals in the Literature of the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Cambridge UP, 2024).

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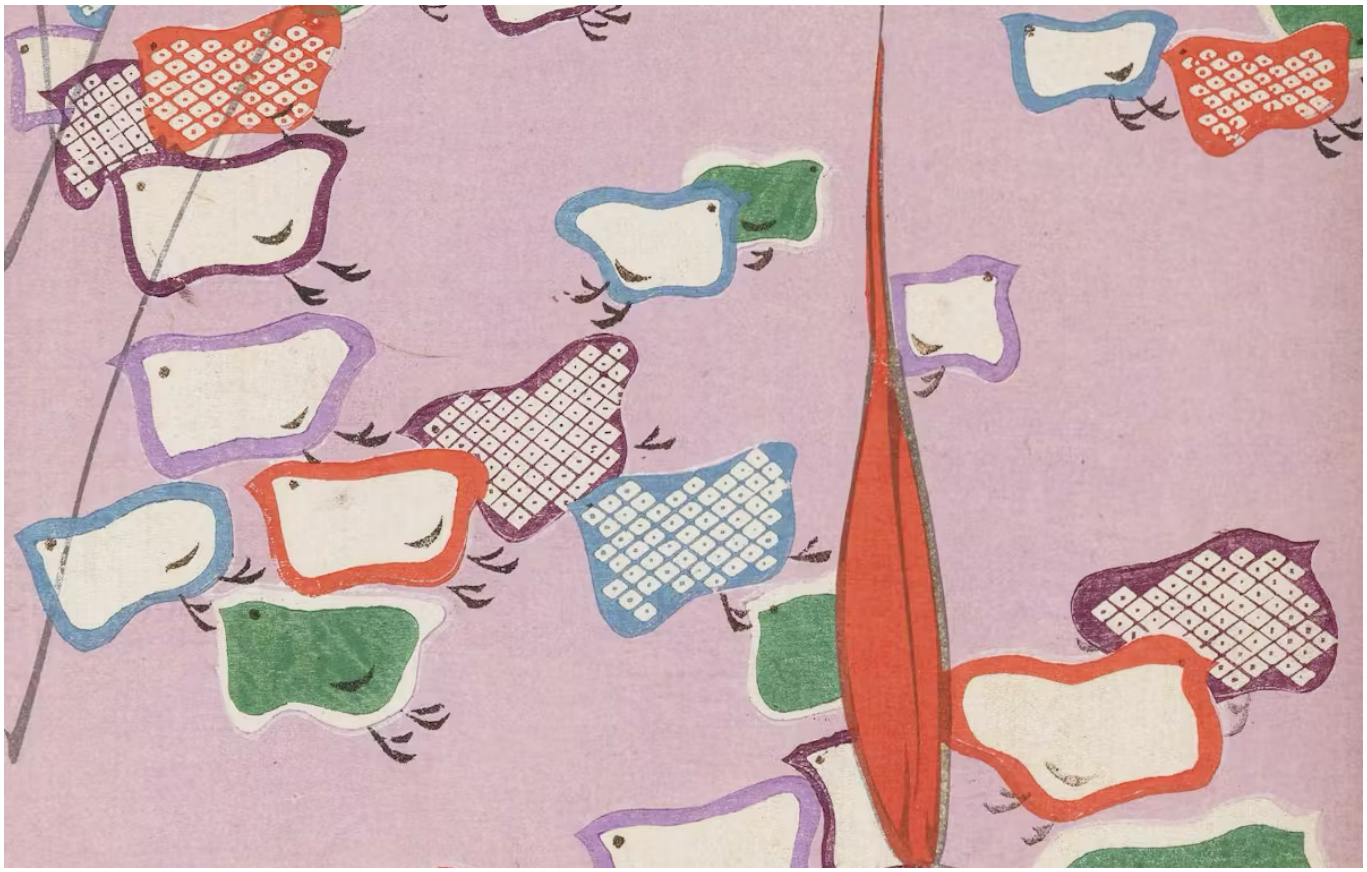
*Poetry*

# Two Poems

by MEH



DESIGNS FROM KIMONO PATTERN BOOKS (CA. 1902) SOURCE - INTERNET ARCHIVE - SMITHSONIAN LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES

## when asked why I don’t play well with others

I was asked to develop an antiracist workshop
to address the white dis-ease—and over-ease—
around use of “the N-word” in school.
I made ready for progressive hand-wringing
over silencing Black authors—strategic banning
of *The Bluest Eye, Native Son,* and *Fences,*
the need for smelling salts after reading only
Dick Gregory’s title—all while *Of Mice and Men,*
*To Kill A Mockingbird,* and *Huckleberry Finn*
continue to burrow like a blood-drunk tick.
I prepared comments on anthologies complicated
by Agatha Christie and Flannery O’Connor, and
the pitfalls of employing hip-hop as confessional
poetry. I planned to discuss teachers who explode
that linguistic grenade aloud in class, or play
Russian roulette with round-robin readings, or
designate Black students to knot the word
around their throats (others who think Hispanic
and southeast Asian kids will do in a pinch).
I anticipated calls for academic freedom, assessing
authorial intent, and combating “cancel culture”
as the background radiation of the universe
we’ll share for two and a half hours. but when I arrived,
they were focused on curbing student culture.
they had slapped repeated detentions on thirteen
Black boys for their continued use of the word—
with each other—in the hallways and the cafeteria.
one young man was suspended for four days
after referring to Hamlet’s delayed, futile revenge
as “decidedly bitch ass nigga behavior” in an essay.
they’re looking to me for recommendations
on how to address this growing crisis.

## when asked why nothing really surprises me anymore

once, while casually
searching the internet
for reporting about
an unfortunate incident
at my former place of work—
an affluent educational
institution—I Googled
my school's name
with the term "nigger."
I expected any number
of hits dismissed
by the community
over the years—
where the word
was sung
or hurled
or scrawled
or carved
or posted
or tweeted
or snapped—but
the first result
was an article
about me.

**MEH** is Matthew E. Henry, a multiple Pushcart nominated poet and short story writer. His works appear or are forthcoming in Radical Teacher, Kweli Journal, Longleaf Review, Poetry East, Spillway, Rigorous, Rise Up Review, and 3Elements Review. MEH is an educator who received his MFA from Seattle Pacific University, yet continued to spend money he didn't have pursuing a M.A. in Theology and a PhD in Education.

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# Erratum to: Shankar, A. (2025). Developing Annihilationist Strategies: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and The Racial Capitalist University. *Radical Teacher*, 131, p. 11-19.

by Radical Teacher Editorial Team

This is an erratum to the article: Shankar, A. (2025). Developing Annihilationist Strategies: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and The Racial Capitalist University. *Radical Teacher*, 131, p. 11-19. The submission has been updated to reflect the correct title, "Developing Annihilationist Strategies: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in The Racial Capitalist University".

A link to the original article can be found here: https://radicalteacher.library.pitt.edu/ojs/radicalteacher/article/view/1241

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# Erratum to: Patel, C. (2025). DEI as a Practice of Assembling: Translation and Transformation. *Radical Teacher*, 131, pp. 20-27.

by Radical Teacher Editorial Team

This erratum is to address a missing term not included in the original article's abstract. The term "scyborg" has been added, and appears as follows: "Utilizing la paperson's conceptualization of the **scyborg** --as a concept that identifies the messiness of agitating towards change within a system that is designed to maintain the status quo --I describe what..."

A link to the original article can be found here: https://radicalteacher.library.pitt.edu/ojs/radicalteacher/article/view/1300

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# Erratum to: Stewart, N. and Bigirindavyi, M. (2025). Conversational Reflection on the Co-Creation of the Principal Preparation Answerability Rubric (PPAR). *Radical Teacher*, 131, pp. 49-57.

by Radical Teacher Editorial Team

This erratum addresses an error in the original article's abstract, which included a sentence from a previous, anonymized version of the submission. The phrase "[University Name]" was removed from the abstract in the following sentence: "The Principal Preparation Answerability Rubric (PPAR) was co-created by Joy, guided by Dr. Chadwick, to assess principal preparation syllabi and other pedagogical materials at [University Name]."

The original article can be found at online at: https://radicalteacher.library.pitt.edu/ojs/radicalteacher/article/view/1274

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# Erratum to: Asare, A. (2025). DEI in a Time of Genocide or Re-Calling June Jordan's Years at Stony Brook. *Radical Teacher*, 131, pp. 68-75.

by Radical Teacher Editorial Team

This erratum address an error made in the original article's abstract. The text included unintended line breaks and a revised version has corrected this to remove all breaks.

The original article can be found online at: https://radicalteacher.library.pitt.edu/ojs/radicalteacher/article/view/1324