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RADICAL TEACHER

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




# "Screams" of Resistance:
## Public College Students Writing under Contemporary U.S. Authoritarianism

Artwork: "Dreams are stronger than fear", Melanie Cervantes 2020. Just Seeds Open Access Graphics Collection.

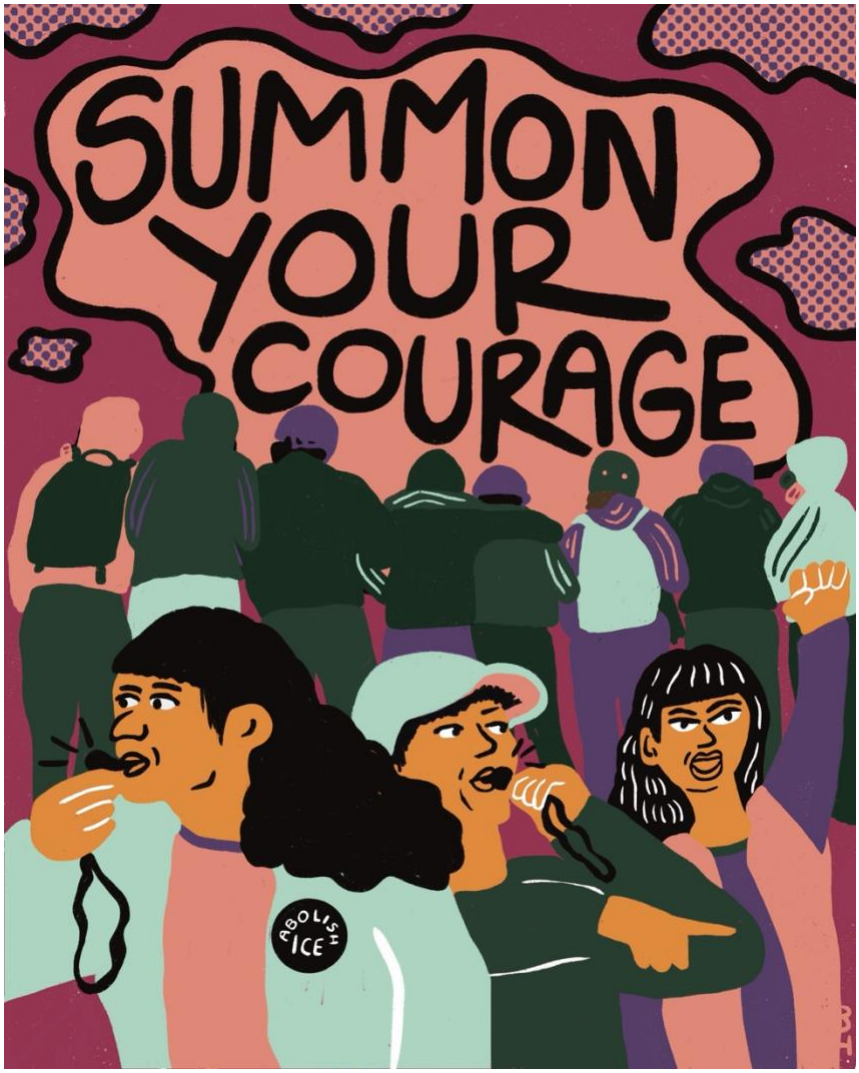
ISSN: 1941-0832

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

# "Screams" of Resistance: Public College Students Writing under Contemporary U.S. Authoritarianism

by Alan Aja, Joseph Entin, and Jeanne Theoharis




"SUMMON YOUR COURAGE" BY MONICA TRINIDAD 2025. JUST SEEDS OPEN ACCESS GRAPHICS COLLECTION.

## Introduction

> *I hope to inspire conversations about how to change policies, but also pedagogies in the ways future educators understand and support students like us. Too often, our communities are excluded from research, or included only as subjects rather than as full participants and shapers of knowledge. I want to disrupt that cycle, even if only in small ways.*
>
> – Morena

As President Trump returned for his second term in 2025, the fierceness of his Administration's attacks on immigrants, trans people, people with disabilities, poor people, and the teaching of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian history was breathtaking. Our students at Brooklyn College, one of the most diverse colleges in the nation, were reeling; some feared even coming to school.[1] There was so much pressure to keep your head down, to not speak out and to be unseen.

And we worried. That chilling effect meant that the perspectives of our students and their communities–in particular the granular, rolling impacts this ascendant authoritarianism was having on many of our immigrant, working—class, students of color and their families–weren't widely known. And the impacts of having to keep so much inside was harming our students, whose communities were being openly demeaned, and often actively punished, by the forces that had taken political power. At the same time, economic anxiety skyrocketed among our students, as family members were deported, lost jobs, or were unable to go into work. As our students' fear rose palpably, we realized that, as educators, we are often shielded from the details of what students and their communities are facing.

It was a harrowing time, and we wanted to find a way to help them document what they were experiencing and write back against the racism, xenophobia, misogyny, and emergent fascism taking hold in Washington, DC and beyond. We had secured a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation years earlier to support student research, and we asked our grant officers if we could reapportion a small amount to conduct an autoethnography project in June 2025 and give students $1000 to participate. They said: definitely.

So in June 2025, we began an 8-week summer program with 20 students, who talked, shared experiences, researched, and ultimately wrote autoethnographies exposing the impacts of this political moment on their families and neighbors. All of the participants were students or brand—new graduates of Brooklyn College, a four-year college in the City University of New York. CUNY educates almost 250,000 students in 25 campuses across the five boroughs; Brooklyn College has about 15,000 students.

Our BC students represent a stunning panorama of global, religious, and economic diversity: roughly 100 languages are spoken on campus and our students trace their origins around the planet—from Trinidad, to Russia, to Bangladesh, to Mexico, to Nigeria, to Puerto Rico, to the US South before the Civil War. Hailing primarily from working-class families, about half of CUNY students come from households that earn $40,000 or less. Most of our students work outside of school and have abundant obligations, including caring for younger or older family members and commuting long distances between home, college, and work. Many are first in their family to attend college. They are and earnest, and do not take their education for granted. They are also incredibly smart and committed and care deeply about the world around them. To us, they are a source of continual inspiration.

The idea for using autoethnography to expose the social and political realities facing our students had its origins in an earlier project we had done. Six years ago, as the COVID-19 pandemic descended with particular ferocity on New York City and schools pivoted to remote learning, the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) offered rapid response grants to researchers studying inequality and the pandemic. Our students were suffering mightily during the early pandemic, as their families—so many of them barely scraping by under "normal" circumstances—reeled from the economic devastation wrought by the shutdown. With New York City the initial epicenter of the pandemic in the U.S., there was some acknowledgment of its disproportionate impacts on urban, working-class communities of color, but all-too-few voices from inside those communities were brought into the public conversation. We worried that a similar research problem might occur as it had after Hurricane Katrina, when the people most impacted were treated as objects of study and not included at the research table. We reached out to SSRC and asked if they would be willing to fund students writing about their communities, some of the most affected in the city. These narratives would take the form of autoethnographies—first-person accounts that incorporated research to provide historical, social, and political context. SSRC said yes.

With this invaluable support from SSRC and then funding from Brooklyn College and the Mellon Foundation, we worked with three cohorts of students in 2020 and 2021 who crafted searching, heart-breaking, and inspiring narratives about how the pandemic played out in their communities. Some of the student writings were published in 2021 in Black Perspectives, the blog of the African American Intellectual History Society. The project expanded to California State University, Los Angeles (CSULA), which is similar to CUNY in its public mission and the students it serves, where a colleague-friend Alejandra Marchevsky brought several of her students into the project. A few months later, Alma Gottlieb, a series editor at University of Pennsylvania Press, approached us about the possibility of publishing the pieces as a book. We were stunned and excited by the opportunity. The result was *Until We're Seen: Public College Students Expose the Hidden Inequalities of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024).

Five months later, Trump's second term started with a bang.[2] The new administration's violent, white supremacist, xenophobic vision of the nation and its open assault on truth-based education represented a crisis for

our students. We knew their insights were needed to have the broadest, deepest understanding of the moment's impacts on working-class immigrants, communities of color, and public college students. And so we conceived of this new autoethnography project.

Meanwhile, this repressive climate was also playing out directly on campus. As 2025 unfolded, many CUNY faculty, especially through our union, the Professional Staff Congress (PSC-CUNY), formed rapid response immigrant defense groups, and fought against the Trumpist assault on academic freedom, scholarly research, and political dissent. We watched as Brooklyn College and CUNY administrators, who claimed to want to protect our students, in fact set about enforcing key aspects of the far-Right agenda. Most horribly, they allowed a massive squad of NYPD's SRG (Strategic Response Group), a militarized anti-riot police unit created amid the Islamophobia of the War on Terror, to break up a peaceful pro-Palestine demonstration on our main quad. This terrified many in the campus community, undercutting the claims that CUNY was committed to protecting its immigrant students.[3] The summer also brought the firing of adjuncts and disciplining of full-time faculty and staff and students for participating in—or just being present during!—the demonstration.

In this volatile context, we convened twenty Brooklyn College students to meet weekly for eight weeks in June and July of 2025 to discuss, draft, research, and workshop autoethnographies documenting what was happening in their lives and the lives of their communities and the larger structural histories that surrounded them. In addition to providing the stipend, we sent each student a snack box.

We had three primary aims. First, we wanted to provide a space for community in a time so many of our students felt profoundly unsafe. Second, we wanted to construct an historical record of this harrowing moment through the eyes of our students and their families and help their voices reach a wider audience. Third, we wanted to support our students materially as they struggled financially through a difficult summer.

The collective courage they summoned created a safe space, as their tenderness towards each other broke through their fear. Students took care of each other and affirmed to each other the importance of saying things out loud. Many wrote about things they had never shared before. An extraordinary community flowered, making room for students to be vulnerable and do some of the most courageous writing we've ever seen.

The topics they pursued ranged from the heightened pressures of being undocumented to being homeless and queer in this political moment. They explored the rising fears they faced as children in mixed status immigrant families, as disabled students seeing cuts to essential services, and as pro-Palestine student activists being targeted by the CUNY administration and the larger political system. Seven of those autoethnographies were then revised over the course of the 2025-2026 academic year and are published in this special issue of *Radical Teacher.*

In early January 2026, we zoomed in for a meeting with these seven writers. As we opened the virtual meeting room, we were all too aware that the world outside was in even greater turmoil. The Trump administration had just kidnapped Venezuela's President, while escalating a dramatic surge of ICE's street level, door-to-door violence from Los Angeles to Minneapolis. One by one, the student writers underscored how the barrage of news had forced them to revisit their drafts, as things got even worse.

These essays represent a collective portrait of this contemporary moment in the United States through the eyes of working—class immigrants and communities of color. They take us beyond the numbers of people being deported, of mixed—status families being torn apart, of ICE raids and police brutality and cuts to needed services, to what those look like in the everyday lives of young people living in NYC. We are confronted in vivid detail by the pressures on them never to make a mistake, their fears for their family abounding, their voices being muzzled. (All students chose a pseudonym so they could write these pieces with more safety.)

We witness the terrors of being a child in a mixed—status family, fearing family separation as Catarina does and of unchecked law enforcement, like Mercedes encountered, arrested without warrant or explanation. Getting to research this broader pattern of law enforcement harassment against Black women was transformative, allowing Mercedes to speak about the incident for the first time. For Morena and Junior, the power of articulating the difficulties of their experiences in school as undocumented students was palpable. In these essays, we see how political differences rend Latinx families like Chichi's, through anger at relatives who supported this current regime. We are shown the almost—impossible situation international students like Iris face, as they balance their studies with their desire to call out the injustices around them. And we confront the unbearable pressure on students like Junior, Morena, and Akin who are repeatedly told to keep their heads down and be quiet.

These writings defy the silences imposed on so many vulnerable populations by an increasingly repressive federal government, where writing an op-ed can lead to an ICE abduction, as it did so dramatically for Rumeysa Ozturk. Does studying in the US in this moment make you voiceless? The contributors to this essay respond with a resounding no! Together, these students refuse to be invisibilized and dare to think larger, to dream, even, as one of our student writers beautifully underscores, to scream! While each person worked individually, they were also writing in collaboration, alongside a group of others. They were not alone with their thoughts and struggles, and this helped provide the courage for them to write with such conviction and power and to pursue the research to undergird their stories.

Over and over, these students write about how they have played by the rules and done what they are supposed to, and it doesn't matter. They talk about the burden of always having to be good, to work harder and harder and harder to even just stand still. They show the level of daily fear, waking up in the middle of the night terrified that

family members will be stolen, worried that going to a Palestine demonstration on campus might cost them their place at the college or even in the United States.

These pieces also lay out a particular set of challenges for educators. Perhaps most importantly, they call on us as educators to step up. Students worry about who they can trust, and how educators don't always understand the stakes. Their writing reveals the responsibility on us as educators–not on them–to learn the many ways this repression is playing out and take steps to demonstrate it. We need to think creatively about how to name the horrors, to provide real assistance and affirming spaces, and to work to make sure that they don't lower their aspirations in the face of this terror.

Too many educators in this moment, understandably gutted by this terrifying political situation, are feeling paralyzed by fear or worry or despair: "What will work?" "What can I do?" It's easy to get tunnel vision; understanding the need to keep ICE off campus, we don't always recognize that this is just one of many things students need. These writings identify a few intersecting themes for radical educators.

First is the need for us as educators to learn and highlight the kinds of pressures students and their families are facing. It is not on our students to come forward in the midst of such widespread, politically authorized fear; we need to name it. By being reluctant to speak about things, educators risk normalizing the structures and narratives bearing down on students that stress personal responsibility and silence. Besieged by messages to be resilient, students often feel they need to figure it out on their own. This sends the inadvertent message to blame themselves when the pressure gets too much, rather than seeking out collective care and justice. As educators, we need to create the space to say this is horrible, it shouldn't be happening, what do you need? Or we risk leaving students to negotiate things on their own.

As educators understandably nervous about prying, we often don't realize the power of identifying the terrors of this political moment in class and in other educational spaces—of naming the specifics of ICE rampaging throughout the country, of TPS ending, of massive cuts to social services. Foregrounding the range of devastating consequences occurring for many students and their loved ones does not mean asking students to disclose what's happening to them personally. And this is crucial whether we're teaching German history, African American literature, health, or physics. In addition, affirming that it's okay to be human and make mistakes, we need to stress to students the undue pressure of having to be endlessly 'resilient.' Resiliency is not justice; it's not the measure of your worth; it's what you are driven to when injustice abounds. Over and over, students said they were exhausted. Naming that exhaustion, affirming that they shouldn't have to feel that way, gives students permission to take the time they need and share some of what they are experiencing, if they know they have someone to help.

Second is to continually remind students about the larger structures impacting their lives and to help them learn and research these. By connecting the personal to the structural (via autoethnography or other modes), educators can push against the pressure young people are feeling to make themselves small and the self-blame that this moment engenders. Assignments that help students research these larger histories and contexts can be powerful–both in the research skills they teach and in the ways students can see their own situations embedded in larger structural contexts.

Students need affirmation of their capacities as thinkers and researchers. At a time when they are being told to be "good" and play by the rules our society has set—or to cede their research capacities to AI—our job is to find ways to tell them to play big and push against the pressures on them to shrink. They have the insight and capability to lead us forward–but it's imperative to articulate the ways we will support them in pushing forward. As educators, our role is crucial in affirming students' sense of their own possibility—especially working—class, poor, and first-generation students growing up in a society that often devalues their own thinking and power. We need to be clear how wrong those messages are and affirm continually to students that dreaming big is both what they are entitled to and what leads to the possible, the material, the actual. That means offering to write letters of recommendation even before they might ask, looking for opportunities (scholarships, internships) for them to apply to. It means creating resource sheets, identifying both university and community programs and legal resources, and figuring out ways to have food around.

Third, faculty and educators need to listen–to hold space for our students, even if we don't have answers. Used to being the ones who know things, educators often find this hard. We need to let students know not only that we're in solidarity politically, but also that we're here to learn and understand where they're coming from–because it is our job to help them and we want to learn how to support them better. Reminding them that they don't need to suffer in silence can have a profound impact.

Finally, as educators, we need to struggle within, outside, and even with our own institutions. This can range from continually informing students about avenues for emergency financial, counseling, or other supports on campus, to calling nonprofits or government agencies by their side to access legal help or social services. It means using our privileges as faculty to help navigate bureaucratic hurdles. And it also requires holding administrators and fellow faculty accountable when the institution presents barriers to their potential. It's our job as educators to advocate, agitate, and maneuver for and with students (especially working-class, immigrant, and first-generation students) through the roadblocks designed to deter and disempower them.

Undoubtedly, this recommendation involves potential risk. Just as our students are disciplined, just as immigrant communities are harassed and deported, such punishment can also extend to others, including faculty, who push too hard on their behalf. We need to recognize that, but also

not be paralyzed by it. Our responsibility as educators demands that courageous persistence.

And of course it cannot be done alone. The three of us have leaned on each other, on our colleagues in the union and on comrade-educators in other contexts who share similar commitments to our students. Intellectual work is never done in isolation, and in terrifying times like these, creating spaces of solidarity and mutual support for students and for faculty to do the hard work of thinking and writing against the grain is more vital than ever.

We hope these pieces will inspire you and your students, too, and so we hope you will teach them. By documenting the experiences that so many immigrant, international, and working-class students are facing, these seven pieces offer powerful and provocative grounds for classroom discussion and models for your own students' writing and research. We have found autoethnography a powerful format. It is a great way to teach writing, and it invites students to connect their own experiences to larger social, historical, and political forces, to see the importance of their voice and perspective, and to unpack and research the larger contexts in which their own experiences unfold. Autoethnography works against the individualization and self-blame that students are often taught. So we encourage you to consider how these could fit into your own teaching.

After Hurricane Maria, Puerto Rican scholars and educators took up the idea of coraje, or productive rage (in Spanish, it can simultaneously mean rage and courage), articulated by interdisciplinary scholar Marisol LeBrón.[4] The pieces in this issue of *Radical Teacher* were written in a similar rage—a rage channeled into research and speech. Educators are often uncomfortable with rage. At times paralyzing and immobilizing, rage can interfere with thinking and be destructive. But it also can be generative. By disrupting the silence, rage can also point to something terribly amiss. A starting point to disrupt fear and move towards social critique, rage can underscore an awareness that something is horribly wrong and mark the urgency to address it. As radical teachers, using our own rage can be productive. We need to hear and respond to Akin's scream!

## Notes

1. This is via the most recent rankings by U.S. News & World Report (which have also reported that Brooklyn College remains the most ethnically diverse for 7 straight years). https://www.brooklyn.edu/bc-news/u-s-news-world-report-again-ranks-brooklyn-college-among-best-colleges-2/

2. CUNY, like many other public universities, has faced years of austerity via inadequate local, state, and federal level funding. This long-term disinvestment means that students encounter (if not expect!) daily infrastructural challenges while conducting their studies, including deferred maintenance on necessary repairs; non-working elevators, bathrooms, and water fountains; limited hours for administrative, library, and support service offices; and other challenges more well-resourced universities often don't face. Thus, the Trump administration's renewed threats to higher education—the cuts to research and institutional funding, the threats to academic freedom, the denigration of higher education itself—have arguably heightened the consequences for already vulnerable students in the "CUNYs" around the country.

3. This occurred only a few weeks after the SRG also violently disrupted a student-led, pro-Palestinian encampment at City College (CUNY).

4. For more, see Marisol LeBrón, "Policing Coraje in the Colony: Toward a Decolonial Feminist Politics of Rage in Puerto Rico," *Signs: Journal of Women and Society* 46.4 (Summer 2021). This piece beautifully underscores how coraje was channeled by the Puerto Rican people in the aftermath of hurricane Maria through solidarity networks and refusal to accept the status quo of government neglect and repression.

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**Joseph Entin** is Professor of English and American Studies at Brooklyn College. His latest books include *Living Labor: Fiction, Film and Precarious Work* (2023) and, co-edited with Jeanne Theoharis, *Until We're Seen: Public College Students Expose the Hidden Inequalities of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (2024). He is a member of the *Radical Teacher* editorial board.

**Jeanne Theoharis** is Distinguished Professor of Political Science and History at Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center. Her books include *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks, King of the North: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Life of Struggle Outside the South*, and co-edited with Joseph Entin, *Until We're Seen: Public College Students Expose the Hidden Inequalities of the COVID-19 Pandemic*.

Together, Aja, Entin, and Theoharis co-founded and co-direct the Brooklyn College Mellon Transfer Student Research Program.

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This journal is published by Pitt Open Library Publishing..

ISSN: 1941-0832

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# Dear America: An Autoethnographic Love Letter

By Akin Wai



BEYOND THE STAINED GLASS, SOMEWHERE IN GUYANA. PHOTO CREDIT: AKIN WAI

*Scream. Scream. Scream. Scream. Scream. Scream. Scream. Scream.*

*Silent screams buried in brown skin, never heard, never healed.*

*A dream silhouette chased by a straggling strawman.*

*The unchained belief that when truth meets light, one's faith sustained finds rest.*

*Many poets share their truths in unbound soliloquies,*

*unbridled metaphors, and unabated emotion.*

*Yet my penchant penmanship sits in a quiet corner for fear of color correction,*

*fear of blotting, fear of the stains of ink spills, fears of the free writing repercussions.*

*Run, Akin, run.*

*Waking up daily with the notion that if for one second, I should stop and breathe, life will catch up to me.*

*People say when you love something, let it go, and if it's meant for you, it will come back. I refuse to let America go. So, I pen this love letter to her with hopes that we find the happiness of which we are so feverishly in pursuit.*

## My Body as a Battleground

I am an immigrant. A first-generation student. A bearer of many silences. My body, mind, and spirit are all sites of resistance and targets of harm. In the United States, especially in New York City, my reality is shaped not by visible battles, but by invisible wars: those waged through policy, poverty, and cultural erasure. I'm told I should be grateful to be here, to smile when people call it the land of opportunity. But what they don't see is the price I paid for this story. To belong, to stay, to survive, **$6,389.92**, to be exact. Not to publish this story, but to live it.

In October 2021, I left the shores of Guyana, not with the intention to migrate permanently, but to escape threats to my life from agents of my own government. After the most recent General Elections, the new administration proceeded on a tribal cleansing of employees who wouldn't pledge allegiance to their political party (Village Voice News, 2020), those who had binding contracts faced intimidation to force their resignations and anyone like me--strong willed and incorruptible--started getting late-night car drivebys and calls from unknown numbers with either heavy breathing or words I won't repeat here. Through the United Kingdom, I arrived in a post-pandemic America. It wasn't my first time here; I had visited many times before over the years. I had always chosen my home "the land of many waters" (Guyana) over the American dream. But this time, survival demanded a different choice. Legal fees. Filing fees. Medical clearance. Background checks. All with a price tag. And somehow, I was still expected to eat, laugh with friends, and contribute to the household. I don't know how I did it. I often credit my sustenance to the prayers of my tribe; those individuals who continue to see the potential I carry especially when all I can see is the boulder shackled to my feet. Prayers that God has heard and continues to answer.

This letter is not just a keepsake. It is a cry from beneath the weight of current Immigration policies and economic cruelties such as the mass deportation mandates, removal of protected status from individuals fleeing persecution, and vilification of immigrant communities through false national rhetoric of the burden they cause on the economy. It is a chronicle of the emotional and mental casualties sustained in Black and Brown bodies, particularly among men of color like myself. This serves as both documentation and a warning. If America continues on this path, they, no, WE, will lose not just lives but the ability to feel, connect, and be human.

## America, June 2025: The Slow Burn of Oppression

The foundational principle of "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness," as outlined in the Declaration of Independence, is why I chose America as my new home. Where else can you find a melting pot of culture like New York City? Where else can you drive from a state with frigid temperatures to a state where your melanated skin gets kissed by a summer's sun? America, at her core, is beautiful and marvelous; America's torch remains a beacon for many lost dreams.

However, this summer (2025), the news cycle is relentless. Headlines declare the tightening of F1 visa policies, the exclusion of undocumented and international students from federal aid via FAFSA, and the expulsion of students who dared to protest through demonstrations. Entire academic futures have been gutted with the stroke of a policy pen (Associated Press, 2020).

Meanwhile, in New York City, rent is astronomical, gentrification spreads like wildfire, and Black and Brown communities are pushed farther into the margins. Police presence intensifies (New York Post, 2025). The National Guard now guards against those they once protected. Surveillance expands, and a quiet state of fear suffocates our neighborhoods (Hoodline, 2025). In these conditions, the mind becomes a warzone, especially for immigrant students who exist in the dual space of outsider and overachiever.

*I cannot afford to fall apart. But I am falling apart.*

This summer I've found myself often reminiscing about the first time I stepped onto the Brooklyn College campus, carrying a dream in one hand and a dilemma in the other. I walked into the Immigrant Student Success Office looking for guidance on how I might afford a psychology degree. If I'm honest, I had already given up hope of hearing anything useful. But I met an earthly angel who set me on the path to something bigger.

I didn't expect to be mentoring other students during my time there. I didn't expect to be trusted with a Peer Advocate and Wellness Fellowship role that gave me space to speak up for students who are underrepresented and often misrepresented. I didn't expect to be asked to speak at Black Graduation or the Immigrant Student Success Graduation. I never imagined I'd become the flame in Lady Liberty's hand. There's a unique kind of resilience and persistence that lives in the hope of an immigrant. And I used all of mine.

The immigrant community is praised for its "resilience," but I now understand that resilience can be another word for abandonment. Among men of color, in particular, the pressure to be emotionally stoic is deadly.

I have spent nights shaking alone in my apartment, having panic attacks as I waited for US Customs and Immigration Services (USCIS) notices. I have watched friends spiral silently, too ashamed to admit they needed help. We don't cry in public. We joke. We grind. We disappear.

We aren't taught to feel safely. We aren't told that anxiety, grief, and fear are normal in a system designed to make us feel disposable.

In 2025, policy is no longer just legislation. It is psychological warfare. Recent executive decisions by the Trump administration have triggered widespread fear and emotional instability, particularly for communities already at the margins. The announcement to cut $28.6 billion from behavioral health and science-related agencies is not just a fiscal decision. It is a moral indictment (Hollowell, 2025). It sends a clear message: our mental health is dispensable.

The administration's decision to terminate the 988 suicide prevention hotline's specialized services for LGBTQ+ youth strips critical support from those most vulnerable (Howard, 2025). These should be classified as moral turpitudes. They are coordinated assaults on our humanity, layered with the rollback of DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) initiatives and accessibility efforts that once offered a sliver of hope for systemic change (Moore, 2025).

These policies do more than hurt. They isolate. They force silence. They compound grief. And for many of us, especially those navigating the intersection of immigration, Blackness, and poverty, they make waking up each day feel like both a rebellion and a burden.

According to Joseph (2025), prolonged political divisiveness and instability contribute to a unique form of high-functioning depression. It is an exhaustion that masquerades as productivity, burnout worn like a badge of honor. We keep going, not because we're okay, but because stopping feels like giving up.

I have felt this deeply. I have written love letters to my tribe and hosted wellness sessions by day and cried into my pillow by night. I have given speeches to celebrate achievement while battling the quiet anxiety of deportation threats and policy whiplash. Every news alert is a trigger. Every headline another weight added to the chest. I am not alone in this. So many of my peers are drowning silently in spaces that applaud our resilience but ignore our pain. In the wake of the detainment of Green Card holder and Columbia Student Mahmoud Khalil by ICE, many university students like me realized that regardless of immigration status we were fair game in this administration's war on immigrants (NPR, 2025).

Just recently, despite my own uncertainty about my legal status, my future, and my job prospects, I felt compelled to reach out to a former mentee. He was overwhelmed, spiraling under the weight of policies that seem designed to crush hope. He asked me, "What do I do now?" And the truth is, I didn't have an answer. I'm jobless, not for lack of effort, but because the market is frozen by fear. Companies hesitate. Some fear legal repercussions. Others fear that hiring someone like me, a Black, immigrant man with locs, might be seen as a DEI risk. (*Wait till they find out I also have ADHD…lol.*)

Despite being in therapy on and off since 2021, I was only diagnosed with ADHD in 2023. It's under control now, but every time I reach the "disabilities" section on a job application, it feels like a giant "screw you" with a cherry on top. Don't get me wrong, I've held more jobs than many of my peers. I've hung from a boom lift 90 feet in the air to install antennas, packed boxes in warehouses, bagged groceries in supermarkets, and even given pedicures in a spa. Maybe these are the "Black jobs" people talk about. Or maybe they're the ones immigrants are accused of stealing from citizens.

Tariffs, executive orders, and surveillance have turned employment into a minefield. But in that moment with my mentee, none of that mattered. What mattered was making the call. Seeing what resources I could connect him to. Listening. Because that's what we do in moments of distress; we look out for each other. Even if our own hands are shaking, we reach for someone else's. It's how we survive. It's how we refuse to disappear.

To cope, many turn to numbing, weed, alcohol, endless scrolling, hookups without intimacy. All ways to feel something, or nothing, even briefly. Others throw themselves into hustle culture, believing productivity will buy them value and visibility. Thankfully, I'm not without income. My years as newspaper journalist in Guyana have given me skills that I can always fall back on between jobs. Adaptation and pivoting are ingrained into my being. The occasional self-talk and vision boarding, "*I'm getting that house in 2028,*" doesn't hurt either.

But these are temporary shields that eventually crack. Families fall apart. Friendships fade. We become islands, each of us drowning silently.

Yet, I have also witnessed glimmers of hope. Men gathering in circles to talk without judgment. Elders offering prayer and healing. Potlucks that turn into therapy sessions. Protest spaces becoming sanctuaries. These are our healthy coping strategies. These are the breaths we steal in between suffocation.

Even I started a YouTube channel, to share mental health tips and my story in hopes that I can keep someone else from giving up, even as I continue to struggle. Sometimes I feel like a hypocrite, but I can't stop running.

Even if I'm running myself into the ground. Irony is, I just graduated with that bachelor's degree in psychology I was dreaming of. I should know better, right?

If we stay on this trajectory, we are heading toward emotional extinction. The current path leads to a future where:

- Black and Brown youth avoid school out of fear of surveillance and deportation (National Immigration Law Center, 2023)
- Men of color are twice as likely to die by suicide (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2023)
- Families become emotionally fractured and culturally uprooted (Children's Equity Project, 2024)
- We raise children who have never seen their parents cry, never been told it's okay to feel (UC Riverside School of Medicine, 2025)

Our silence will bury us.

Our sons will die quietly, our daughters will scream in the dark, and no one will answer.

Again, this letter is not a lover's plea for sympathy. It is a demand for accountability. For immigrant mental health support. For therapy that understands our cultural contexts. For policies that treat us as people, not a number on DOGE's (Department Of Government Efficiency) docket.

We must build a culture of collective care through storytelling, mutual aid, intergenerational healing, and the radical act of feeling (American Psychological Association, 2023; Blueprint.ai, 2024).

We must scream. Together.

What keeps me going is remembering who I come from: Ancestors who survived boats, borders, bombs, and betrayals. What keeps me going is the laughter of my brothers, my friends who keep forcing me to go on food runs, the spices in my mother's food. What keeps me going is knowing I am not alone.

I write this as an offering. A map for someone else in the dark.

*Scream. Breathe. Cry. Heal.*

*Scream. Breathe. Cry. Heal.*

*No longer silent screams but living testaments.*

*Your dearest Love,*

*Akin*

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**Akin Wai** is a first-generation immigrant and a graduate of Brooklyn College, where he earned a BA in Psychology. Born in Guyana and now based in Brooklyn, he writes at the intersection of mental health, migration, and the quiet survival of Black and Brown communities. He believes storytelling is a form of collective care.

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This journal is published by Pitt Open Library Publishing..

ISSN: 1941-0832

RADICAL TEACHER

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

# Gaining Legal Consciousness

by Morena



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*"No ando en este camino porque quiero andar, si no porque se andar" - Mom Kary*

As an undocumented child, I was participating in social structures without fully understanding what they were. I was forced to grow up at a faster rate than many of my peers because I was exposed to realities most of them never had to face. By the age of three, I was already hyper-aware of myself and my interactions with legal systems. My curiosity to understand was driven by fear, and that fear ultimately pushed me to develop a form of legal consciousness in order to make sense of my reality.

*"Legal consciousness refers to how individuals perceive, understand, and interact with the law in their daily lives."*

On the first day of my Intro to Sociology class, my professor presented this definition, and everything clicked in a way that overwhelmed me with emotion. This knowledge was huge, transformative. I thought: everyone needs to learn this. When I learned about statuses and the social positions we hold as individuals, such as daughter, sister, student, I questioned my personality and how it was influenced by my upbringing in a machista household. When I learned about social roles and the behaviors expected of us in those statuses, I gave up on trying to fit in. I realized I could let go of the pressure I felt because I didn't want to follow those expectations anyway. Later, when I studied social institutions like education, religion, government, and legal systems, it made me angry to confirm how deeply broken and unfair these systems are. I hoped more people in my community had access to education. Too often, we are excluded from academic spaces and research, or only included as subjects rather than as full participants, thus continuing the cycle of oppression.

Through each lesson I felt less scared. Nothing in my personal life changed, but I learned so much about the parameters that I feel have been set on people like me. I slowly felt like I had gained another building block. Some of my classmates gave their opinions based on what they had heard, read, or been taught, while I spoke from my own lived challenges. For me, these spaces became empowering, because I began contributing not just academically, but also personally.

I can't think of a better way to describe this process than through autoethnography. My hope is to offer insight into how undocumented children find themselves navigating life with little to no access to support systems, and how that shapes their growth. I hope to inspire conversations about creating change not only in policies, but also in the ways future educators understand and support students like us. By sharing my perspective, I want to disrupt that cycle, even if only in small ways.

## How Categories Began to Shape My Identity - Three Years Old

When I was three I went through my first big move: immigrating from my home country to the U.S at an age where most children are just beginning to understand the feeling of safety through their parents. My family was my grandma, my "mom," my aunts, my uncles, and my cousins. They were all I knew, they were home to me. I was too little to understand what having to emigrate meant. I heard I was leaving and no one would be coming except my brother and me. What I knew was what I heard and how it made me feel was how I was told to feel. I was told I was leaving to visit my aunt, everything would be okay, and I needed to be strong for my brother. I didn't know then but I felt pressured to protect my brother from all the changes we were experiencing. I took on the role of emotional support for him.

As I've gotten older, I've have been described as "muy valiente"; my family will say things like "ella es muy Fuerte," and although there is no doubt that I am, this made it difficult to be vulnerable with them and tell them how scared I was, and that I deserved to be taken care of too. I will always empathize with little me because I was just a baby internalizing all these things on my own and I shouldn't have to do that.

I didn't want to be brave. I didn't want to be strong.

I believe immigrant children experience these things and have no one there to help them through it. In different ways throughout our life we are forced into precarity that forces us to grow up faster than our peers. We grow distant and feel disconnected from our family as a result of the pressure we are under to be strong not only for ourselves but our families. This shapes our identities, our journey, our aspirations and our way through the social structures we are in.

My first time traveling outside my home country was without my parents' supervision with a sleeping pill, a strange woman, a distant cousin, and my twin brother. My first time meeting my mom, I was three.

I don't remember much of the trip, just crying, car lights, and passing by really tall buildings. I got sick in the car. My body felt off; it was reacting to more than just the motion. Everything felt hazy, like I was awake but not fully there.

I was waiting in the back of this stranger's car for my "aunt" to come pick us up. I remember comforting my brother: "Ya no llores, tía ya viene," and watching as my "aunt" approached us. She resembled my mom, but I knew her as my tía. I couldn't cry. I wanted to but I had to be strong for my brother.

Moments like this shaped my earliest understanding of trust. I had no context for why we could no longer see my family, or how I got to wherever I was. I missed my family in Mexico. I didn't understand why we had to leave them behind. All I knew was that now it was only my mom, my brother, and me. I carried clear instructions from multiple adults to keep this private because "you can't trust everyone and not everyone understands." Looking back, I see how

that shaped me into the anxious, quiet toddler I was. This experience planted the first seeds of my legal consciousness.

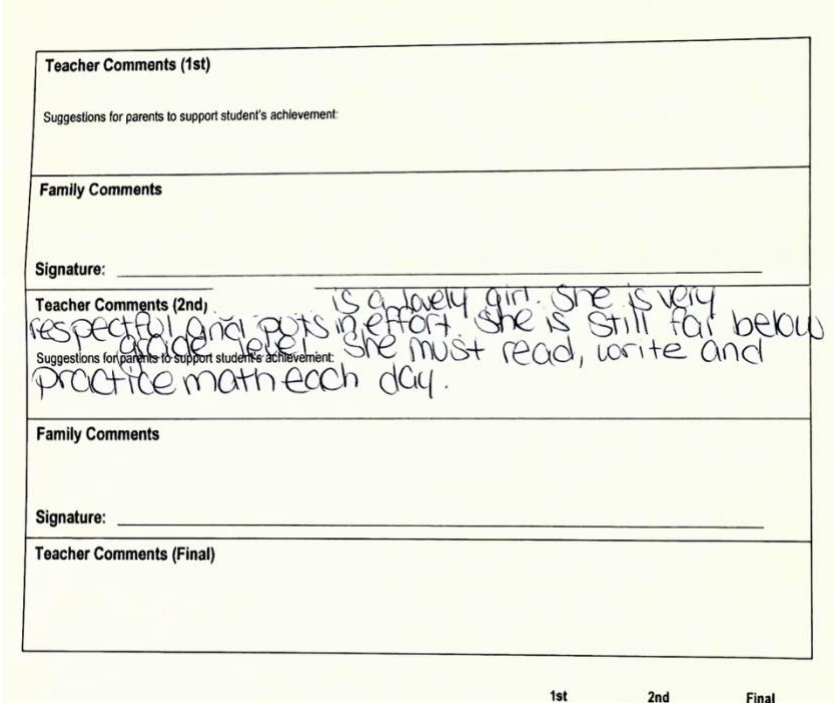
In migration studies, researchers like Cecilia Menjivar and Ulrike Bialas illustrate how migrants are placed into categories that shape their futures (Menjívar, 2025). For asylum seekers in Germany, being classified as minors could determine access to benefits and protection but it can also push them to "fabricate parts of their identities" to fit the category. These classifications don't just open or close doors, they mold their lives, their ability to work, and how they have to learn to see themselves.

Being a confused and scared kid with no guidance isolated me. At home I was brave, and tried to embody the brave label because it helped me to endure all the things I was going through. At school I had to fit into the "good student" label to prove I was deserving of my place. I fabricated the identity of a "normal" kid who could travel during summer, who had family in different states, and who knew "proper English." I built an identity that could carry the emotional weight of being an undocumented child, because there was no going back. I learned to suppress my vulnerability and project strength, even when I was scared or lonely.

My undocumented status wasn't visibly present to me yet but it was in the background determining for a long time what I was living through. The transition of going from living in my home country with a full household, being loved, cared for, taken care of by so many people to a one-bedroom apartment with my brother, my mom, and six strange men--broke me completely.

The first few years of a child's life are widely recognized as critical for overall development. In "The Formative Role of Home Literacy Experiences Across the First Three Years of Life in Children from Low-Income Families," Rodriguez et al. (2009) accentuate the importance of understanding how poverty and environmental factors shape early cognitive development. They emphasize that a child's participation in daily routines serves as a building block for developing conceptual knowledge and language. According to Rodriguez et al., "Exposure to repeated and familiar events provides infants and toddlers with the structure for interpreting others' speech acts and drawing inferences from new experiences." Their research demonstrates how children enter the education system with different levels of preparedness for the demands of a formal education. With that in mind I bring up the complexities of being an undocumented student/child, starting from the environment we are raised in, to the educational system that fails us. I infer that most undocumented children grow up with absent parents. In my case my mom had to work constantly to pay off the debt she took on to bring us here. I grew up knowing about my mom's financial burdens and experiencing a lot of neglect.

If the first initial experiences can affect the trajectories of our cognitive development, literacy, and academic achievement, then our environment alone always keeps us a step behind. Rodriguez et al. write: "On average, children in poverty enter kindergarten with a vocabulary of



Teacher Comments (1st)

Suggestions for parents to support student's achievement:

Family Comments

Signature: _____

Teacher Comments (2nd)

is a lovely girl. She is very respectful and puts in effort. She is still far below grade level. She must read, write and practice math each day.

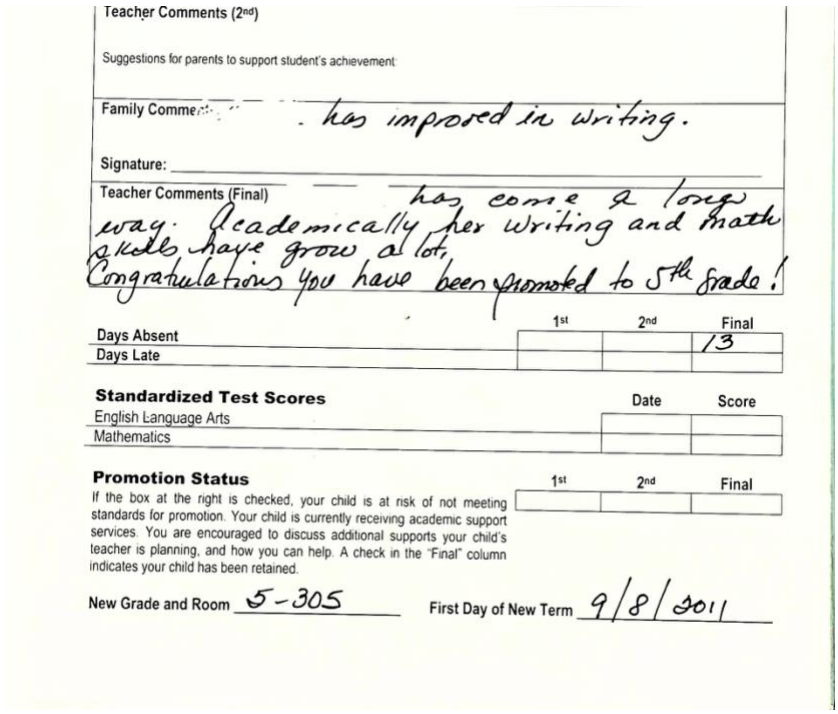
Suggestions for parents to support student's achievement:

Family Comments

Signature: _____

Teacher Comments (Final)

| | 1st | 2nd | Final |
|---|---|---|---|
| Days Absent | | | 13 |
| Days Late | | | |



Teacher Comments (2nd)

Suggestions for parents to support student's achievement:

Family Comments: has improved in writing.

Signature: _____

Teacher Comments (Final): has come a long way. Academically her writing and math skills have grow a lot. Congratulations you have been promoted to 5th grade!

| | 1st | 2nd | Final |
|---|---|---|---|
| Days Absent | | | 13 |
| Days Late | | | |

| Standardized Test Scores | Date | Score |
|---|---|---|
| English Language Arts | | |
| Mathematics | | |

**Promotion Status**

If the box at the right is checked, your child is at risk of not meeting standards for promotion. Your child is currently receiving academic support services. You are encouraged to discuss additional supports your child's teacher is planning, and how you can help. A check in the "Final" column indicates your child has been retained.

| 1st | 2nd | Final |
|---|---|---|
| | | |

New Grade and Room 5-305 First Day of New Term 9/8/2011

PHOTOS COURTESY OF AUTHOR.

about 5000 words compared to 20,000 words for children from higher-income families." While undocumented children are not included in this research, it can reflect, but doesn't fully encapsulate, the struggles immigrant children face in school. We are at a disadvantage because of the language barrier, the financial burdens, and the emotional toll of academic failure all while doing it alone.

## Early Stages of Assimilation - Four Years Old

Waking up at 4 a.m. was our daily routine. My brother would cry, my mom would rush to get us ready and we'd be taken downstairs to our aunt who watched us so our mom could go to work. This was normal to us. On the days I missed my family, I couldn't help but ask questions:

*Why do you have to work so early? Where's grandma? When is she coming? Why do we have to stay with that mean aunt?*

My mom could never answer without crying. She would get upset and I came to understand that these questions reminded her of the loneliness she carried in a country where no one could support her. Just her and her two kids. One day, my mom took us to work. She had no other choice. My aunt refused to watch us anymore and there was no one else. She tried to make it fun. We were going to help her by going with her to her job in maintenance at an electronics store. What I didn't understand then was that she was taking a huge risk. She gave us strict instructions:

*Don't talk to anyone. Don't say anything. Be polite. Don't disturb anyone.*

We stayed in the employee cafeteria, watching her mop floors and wipe down surfaces as we sat quietly. At the time, I didn't realize I was learning how to adapt to this new environment by learning how to go unnoticed not out of shyness but out of fear. My mom, because of her own fear, taught us to be silent, obedient, and small.

In his book *Engage and Evade: How Latino Immigrant Families Manage Surveillance in Everyday Life*, Asad L. Asad makes me reflect on my mother's journey and the decisions she made as an undocumented woman, and mom of twins. His research shows how undocumented immigrants make sense of institutional surveillance. He believes that by focusing on how they manage their social roles and responsibilities across their journey, he will have a deeper understanding of how they make decisions to avoid or engage in surveillance.

To explain how the decisions undocumented immigrants make are always influenced by their legal status, Asad references the phrase "master status" used by sociologist Everett Hughes to indicate a characteristic that "tends to overpower in most crucial situations any characteristics which might run counter to it." Asad emphasizes how most times undocumented immigrants choose to engage in hopes that their cooperation with the state could redeem them and help in the future to change their legal status. An example of this is how undocumented immigrants interact with social

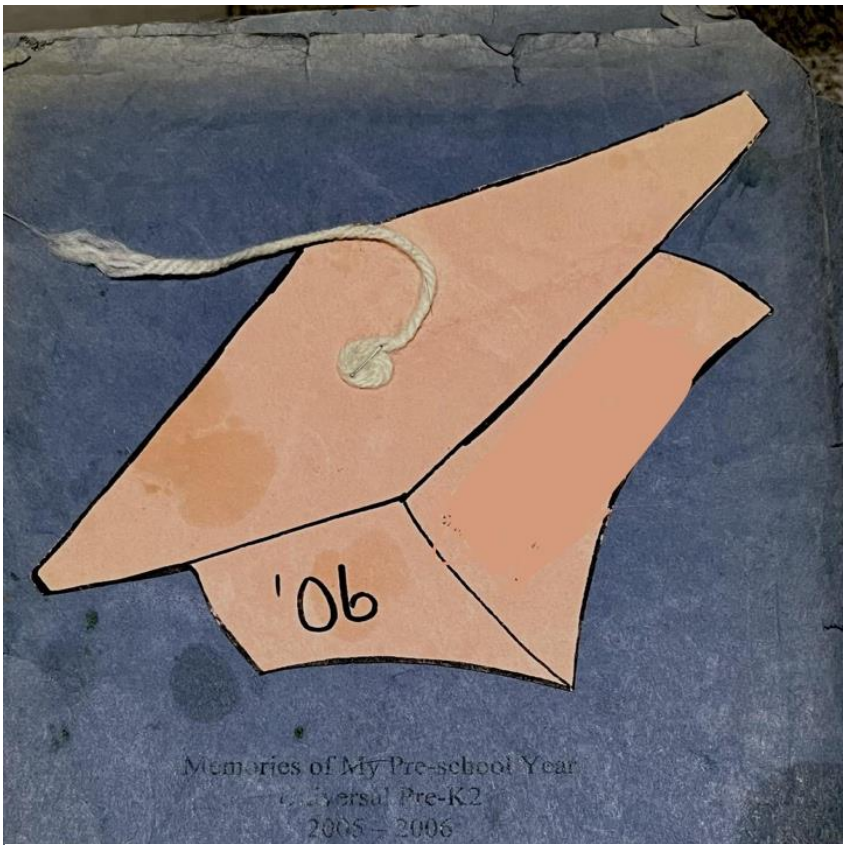



PHOTO COURTESY OF AUTHOR.

institutions like school, work, and hospitals, knowing that they are willingly exposing themselves to these institutions but doing so because of the other responsibilities they have. This is "coercive inclusion," where people are allowed in, but live with the constant fear that any small misstep could expose them or their children to deportation. Immigrant parents especially enter these institutions carefully, engaging and performing in ways that they can be deemed "good parents."

My mom tried to protect us by teaching us how to live like this. She started by demonstrating what her role would be in this country. She will be a provider. She will spend as much time as she can with us but she might not always be present. I had to learn what my role was. Once I joined school, I knew I had to learn to advocate for myself, because she wouldn't be able to. It was challenging. I didn't know how; all I knew was staying small, and how to be quiet. Immigrant parents teach undocumented children to survive the way they do, but the problem is we have completely different experiences. This makes us easy targets; it leaves us vulnerable because we have to learn how to navigate these institutions on our own.

## Surviving - Five to Six Years Old

School is something I was looking forward to ever since I was little. I really needed to have "normal" experiences with other kids my age since by then it had only been my mom, my brother, and me. However, it felt like it was just me dealing with learning a new language, learning how to ask to go to the bathroom, feeling anxious about being asked "Where do you come from?" or any questions regarding my place of birth. It's difficult because this comes up often even with little kids. My Mexican characteristics made me stand out amongst my classmates, who would point out my mannerisms, how I talked, my "colitas," my food, everything that reminded me of my home and my family.

The first time I spoke up against something really hurtful that was said to me by a classmate set a tone for all my interactions with teachers moving forward. I remember I was in the cafeteria. We were all eating and my brother was getting picked on by one of the bigger, taller boys in our classroom. Clearly this wasn't something I was going to ignore so I stood up for my brother. I knew it was coming because it was always used against me: "Shut up you Mexican." But he continued: "You're Mexican, you guys are dirty… you guys are w*tb**s." I didn't know what to say. I froze, I wanted to cry. I looked around, no one said anything, but it looked like everyone knew he had crossed a line. One of my little friends pulled my brother and me aside and told us to tell the teacher "that's wrong, he shouldn't say that to you guys" and even then, I didn't know how to react because until then I had never heard that word before. It felt like a dirty word used to describe my people, but I didn't know what he meant by it.

I went and told my teacher what just happened and she froze as well. She told me, "You should not repeat that word, you guys should not argue like that," and that was it. After that I avoided "standing out." I stopped putting my hair in my "colitas," I stopped bringing my regular "Mexican food," and started bringing sandwiches' I stopped speaking Spanish; I listened to all the popular pop songs at the time; I had a Hannah Montana bookbag even though I didn't watch the show till I was much older.

It was that experience that made me erase my identity, my culture, my background.

In *Becoming Transnational Youth Workers*, Isabel Martínez focuses on unaccompanied minors and their journey entering the migration field. She shares how these minors deeply reflected on their roles as they entered the labor force. Forced by financial burdens at a young age they learn how crucial their financial contributions are to their household and as a result they leave behind their parents, culture, and childhood in search of social mobility. Although I know my experience will never compare to their sacrifice and labor, I see parallels with my own journey entering the educational field. I empathize and admire them as they were also forced to grow up fast too. Martínez defines migration as a "field that reflects both local and global class relations in which individuals play." The people that these teenage migrants interact with are other players in the field, sometimes they help, sometimes they don't, but regardless they play an important role. Similarly, the educators I came across all played an important role in how I lived my reality. I chose to keep that side of me a secret for as long as I could because I didn't feel safe sharing that with the adults around me.

Martinez suggests that the lack of support the teenage migrants experience teaches them to believe their experience is what they most go through; they find it difficult to see it any other way. In sociology, doxa represents the shared, unspoken, and deeply ingrained assumptions, beliefs, and practices that are considered "natural" and unquestioned within a particular society or cultural context.

In this context, the experience of feeling undeserving is common; the lack of help, resources, aid towards a community that is visibly present is the painful reminder for many of us that this is what our experience looks like. For many undocumented students, not having access to education feels like something we should be used to, like it is not worth it to seek support. Asking for help most times puts us at risk of exposing our status, putting us in a vulnerable position without even getting any help. For as long as I have been aware of everything, it has been uncommon to find undocumented peers and even more uncommon to see them get any kind of support.

## Federal Policies and Personal Challenges - Fifteen Years Old

To qualify for DACA an individual must meet the following requirements:

- Be under the age of 31 as of June 15, 2012
- Came to the United States before turning 16
- Continuously resided in the United States since June 15,2007
- Was physically present in the United States on June 15, 2012 and at the time of making a request for DACA

  Currently in school, has graduated or obtained a certificate of completion from high school, has obtained a GED, or is an honorably discharged veteran
- Has not been convicted of a felony, significant misdemeanor, three or more other misdemeanors, or does not otherwise pose a threat to national security or public safety

  (Migration Policy Institute, 2013, 1-2)

I remember taking a day off from school to commute to Queens to look for an immigration lawyer for my brother, my cousin, and me to apply for DACA. I didn't want to be excited about this. I was scared I would end up getting disappointed, but I was also hopeful. For the sake of brevity and my heart, I won't make it a long story; we each got scammed $3,000-4,000. The Trump administration had just recently taken office and being eligible didn't even matter at that point. We all have binders full of memories, documents, awards, report cards, immunization cards, dentist appointments, confirmations--anything that could prove

that we were 'eligible,' that we 'deserved' this 'opportunity' and yet it all didn't matter and didn't change anything.

The idea that you have to fit certain requirements to have the 'opportunity' of pursuing higher education continues to enrage me. Why do I have to fit and follow so many steps to access education, when up until high school I have been able to go to school. How is it fair that now that I want to continue I can't?

There are several factors that shape, control, and restrict undocumented students' academic journey. To understand how, we need to look into the policies, both federal and state, that have led up to this current legal framework and the impact it has on undocumented students.

Under federal policy undocumented students have the right to public education until they graduate from high school. This is due to the Supreme Court ruling in the case, *Plyler v Doe* (1982), where the Supreme Court ruled that K-12 schools are **required** to provide **equitable** access to education for all children. The decision was based on the Fourteenth Amendment which prohibits the State from denying "any person within its jurisdiction the equal protections of the laws." However, federal policy **does not guarantee undocumented students the right to postsecondary education**. This makes pursuing higher education for undocumented students a treacherous, stressful journey.

At the state level, undocumented students are entitled to access to any kind of financial aid based **on the state where they reside**. States like New York, New Jersey, California, and Texas, which were the first to offer in-state tuition for undocumented students, allow undocumented students to continue their academic pursuits. But given the absence of federal policy, what happens to undocumented students after high school is limited by locale and situation.

As I continued pursuing higher education the obstacles continued to get bigger. I've gone through years of struggling to apply for scholarships, fellowships, research opportunities, anything. I made it through my associate's degree, and then my bachelor's degree in part because I met people who cared and wanted to help. These educators cared enough to ask--they noticed the signs and didn't push me to open up, but guided me to keep going. This journey has taken my whole life. I've been pushing and diving deeper into spaces that helped me put pieces of my experience together for as long as I can remember. These spaces are made up of educators, counselors, staff, administrators, non-profits, community organizers who continue to serve a community even when it's under attack. It is important to highlight that these spaces have never been and are not enforced or protected by any law or policy; these spaces in fact have been targeted by the current administration.

## Still Dealing With the Overlap of My Life and My Legal Status – Twenty-four

My research interests stem from the first emotion I ever felt in relation to the law: fear. That fear transformed into a need to understand how the legal structures around me were shaping my life. In "State Categories, Bureaucracies of Displacement, and Possibilities from the Margins," sociologist Cecilia Menjivar critiques the state's use of categories, rules, and bureaucracies that create, sustain, and amplify inequality. Her research reaffirms how these systems are not neutral and have historically been shaped by settler colonialism, capitalism, and prevailing ideologies of race, class, and gender all "baked into the administrative standard." Menjivar argues that "as state bureaucracies apply rules and regulations, they draw lines between the eligible (and presumably deserving) and the ineligible (and supposedly undeserving)."

I have spent the last twenty-four years negotiating those state bureaucracies and making sense of everything that happened to me. Reflecting on it as an adult, I am exhausted. My personal challenges are as present now as they have ever been. I find myself feeling anxious to apply to graduate school, fearing not being able to continue, having to take on the same financial burdens my Mom has dealt with her whole life. And despite all of that, I have found comfort in the fact that I now have more than I thought I would. When I started, I was a little scared girl with so many obstacles ahead of me; now I have my experience as proof that I have survived and can continue. My support systems are proof that there is help, and I deserve it as much as anyone else does. And my education is proof that I am well on my way.

Through my research, I propose that the experience of an undocumented child is shaped by the way they are forced to interact with the legal framework. Each experience adds to their legal consciousness and how they decide to live knowing these things. Sharing my experience as a form of resistance, I am hopeful that my story can be used as a tool for change. I hope future educators, policy advocates, or anyone that reads it can understand undocumented students a bit better and actively support them as best as they can.

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## Author's Note

Hi, I was born in Puebla, Mexico and raised everywhere in NY including Staten Island unfortunately. I've grown up liking and consuming American pop culture. I've followed trends, traditions; I even know references to movies, jokes, and songs. I have lived my whole life here, but I have never forgotten that "I'm not from here." My experience has never let me forget.


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This journal is published by Pitt Open Library Publishing..

ISSN: 1941-0832

RADICAL TEACHER

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

# The Inevitable Threnique

by Mercedes Threnique[1]




GRAPHIC COURTESY OF AUTHOR. "SILENCED BUT NOT SILENT".

Imagine coming from a Caribbean background, which emphasizes education, manners, and a strong work ethic, and learning to walk a straight American line. My Mom immigrated from Haiti and taught me the three Haitian Ls—legliz, lekòl, and lakay—which means church, school, and home, with no room for friends or getting in any trouble. As my Dad would say, no time for idles; my Dad is from Trinidad and he taught me to always be honest, keep my hands clean, and read my Bible. Even if I tried to be rebellious like my brother (he was a ti gason decode, doing pranks on everyone and talking back), there was always a corner waiting for me to ajenou (to kneel in the corner like a time out). Basically, my childhood taught me to avoid bad consequences and always follow the rules. So I always tried to be the best person I could and never got into any trouble at home or anywhere else. Now imagine growing up and realizing all of your efforts mean nothing: being a decent law-abiding person doesn't matter and you'll always be a target because of the melanin in your skin. You can't escape it —it's literally your body… so what do I do? I had chosen to believe in this thing called the US Constitution— to give America the benefit of the doubt and believe in freedom and equal rights. But the Constitution doesn't hold as much weight as it used to; before it was like a diamond plate, there for protection, but now it's like paper in the wind, there for decoration.

One day during the spring semester, I went to school and attended my first class. But my other classes were cancelled. Excitedly, I called my boyfriend to pick me up so we could get Korean Corn Dogs. He picked me up in a U-Haul truck because I was moving and my Mom asked us to pick up the rest of the stuff since I was out of classes early. Coming back from the old house turned into the worst day of my life. We made a left turn and we heard sirens behind us. My boyfriend pulled over and two cops came to the car, looked at us, and told us to get out. They didn't ask for license and registration, and they didn't tell us why we were being pulled over– just a look and then "Get out!" I'm clearly black and my boyfriend is Puerto Rican and as history indicates, that combination really bothers some blonde hair, blue-eyed officers. There were about eight male officers surrounding our truck, the majority of them white. At this point I didn't know we would actually get arrested, so I took off my seat belt, stepped out and IMMEDIATELY I was handcuffed. They put the handcuffs on so tight I got a bruise. But now I'm trying to understand what was happening. I'm asking "Why am I being arrested?" but I am just ignored. No one read me my Miranda rights.

Officer K, the one that arrested me, radioed for a female officer to search me, but she didn't arrive quickly. That meant I was on a busy street in handcuffs with cars and people staring and recording. I felt so embarrassed. At that moment, if you opened up a dictionary and looked for the word "embarrassment" you would have found my picture--like there was a 10-ton weight on my back and everyone was just watching my struggle to keep it up. No help and surrounded by 6-8 officers with hate in their eyes. I just started to look at everyone's badge and name so I could remember them. While we waited for officer A (the female officer), Officer K was very antagonistic. I asked a question about my belongings in the uhaul and he kept saying "what you think, I'm your boyfriend" and to the other officers he said, laughing and pointing, "she thinks I'm her boyfriend." I didn't react angrily, I just looked at him in disgust. I was calm and composed which didn't make sense to him because of course I'm an "angry black woman." Eventually one of the other officers said they would get my belongings.

The more I ignored Officer K, the more he continued to try to find a way to get under my skin, but failed miserably. Finally Officer A showed up, searched me, and put me in a car to go to the Precinct. On the way there, Officer A sat next to me in the back while another officer drove. I asked them, "Do you know why I'm being arrested?" Officer A said she didn't know and the one in the front said "probably a summons."

I said, "No one asked for my name so how is it a summons?" They looked at each other, then me, and we sat there like the three stooges. Before we get to the precinct, let's speak facts. Black women are substantially overrepresented in police stops. Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw states that in 2013 in New York City, of the women stopped by the police, 13.4% were white and 53.4% were black women--even though Black people represent only about 25% of the NYC population (5). This indicates that four times as many Black women as white women get stopped by the police; this doesn't account for the Black women that are actually arrested, harassed, or killed, or those who went missing.

In my own case, I found out later that Officer K had 86 cases of misconduct levelled against him: 20 complaints and 55 allegations (complaints have documentation of proof whereas allegations have no evidence) for physical force, abuse of authority, failure to show his badge number, and wrongful stops. Eleven of these charges were substantiated yet he is still active on the force. Officer Z, whom I met later in the precinct, had 3 complaints, 8 allegations, and 0 substantiated.

The abuse I suffered at the hands of the police was not an isolated incident, but part of a broader pattern of police violence against Black women. We all know the names Breonna Taylor, a black woman who was shot and killed by the police who had a no-knock warrant but raided the wrong house, and Sandra Bland, who was stopped and brutalized during a "routine traffic stop" and was later was found dead in her cell, and whose death was labeled a "suicide." In 2014, nearly 250 black women were killed by the police and many went unreported like Tanisha Anderson[2], a mother who died after being slammed on the concrete by a police officer, and Aura Rosser, who died after being tased and shot when the police entered her home. In response to the number of black women dying at the hands of the police, #Sayhername was created. This hashtag turned the names of victims into a page *https://www.aapf.org/sayhername*, so people can learn about their stories and see how cops can escalate a situation and take the lives of Black women, as well as Black men. So we cling on #sayhername to point out all the lives impacted and ruined: Mothers who left behind children, families that will forever grieve a person taken before their time, and fear for the rest of the Black community wondering when it will be them. The hashtag was made in hope that society will see all these cases and

question the police system and the ways women as well as men are impacted, eventually bringing justice back to the families and the wider Black community.

However, what about the women that #sayhername doesn't cover? Women who don't die at the hand of police, but go through physical, mental, and sexual abuse are still often left with lasting forms of physiological damage. My case was one of these.

Under Trump, police brutality, especially against women, continues. Trump's famous quote, "Grab em' by the pussy," exposes his openly misogynistic morals. Trump's dismissive, demeaning attitude reflects not just ignorance, but a fundamental lack of care for women as people. His disregard for women is matched by his support for the police. In late 2025, when Kathy Hochul decreased funding for counterterrorism, Trump reversed the cut (Ashford and Pager). In addition, Trump enables police violence. He believes that officers have the right to handle people they have arrested without any care; he thinks it's justified for police officers to handle people roughly. Trump said to police officers on July 28, 2017: "at the end when you see these thugs being thrown into the back of a paddy wagon--you just see them thrown in, rough--I said, please don't be too nice. (Laughter.) Like when you guys put somebody in the car and you're protecting their head, you know, the way you put their hand over? Like, don't hit their head and they've just killed somebody--don't hit their head. I said, you can take the hand away, okay" (Robinson, 1).

When dominant voices in society express unqualified support for police and downplay police violence, it creates a context for abuse. When there is no real executive power pushing for oversight, the police can close investigations into officer violence without any answer for the communities or families of the victims. This is what happened to Eleanor Bumpurs, a 66-year old grandmother who was shot twice and killed in her own apartment by NYPD officer Stephen Sullivan on October 29, 1984. Bumpurs was known for being quiet and kind, and minding her business. However, she had a mental illness that made her talk to herself and carry around a knife. This detail was used to acquit the officers who killed her. Despite her family, neighbors, and even prisoners fighting for her, the police never gave details about how they handled the investigation. During the trial, Judge Eggert ruled that Sullivan's legal team was able to prove beyond reasonable doubt that his second shot was legally justified. The effects of this were devastating, as LaShawn Harris has explained: "The lack of legal accountability gave the [Bumpurs] family the impression that Eleanor's life and death did not matter and that her murder did not warrant institutional retribution" (Harris 231). The government, primarily the executive branch, enables police officers by allowing their brutal actions to continue without serious consequences.

Knowing that they won't get in real trouble, police officers use their authority to commit violence and also sexual brutality against Black women. If there is any uproar towards them at the time they will say we are working towards getting answers or working on the case, but without pressure from the government there is little incentive to start an investigation. The NYPD needs to be held accountable, and the consequences need to be as heavy as the loss for the victims' family. According to Kimberlé Crenshaw, there were "548 cases of arrests of police officers for sex related crimes between 2005 and 2007" (2). However, many cases of black women getting abused by the police go unreported because the police often aren't held accountable. Crenshaw states: "According to a study of 548 cases of police officers arrested for sex related crimes between 2005-2007, 51.3% were for sexual misconduct on duty, 32.2% involved forcible/ statutory rape, 19.5% involved forcible fondling, and 10.8% involved statutory rape" (2). Police sexual abuse was made clear in September 2024 in a case filed by a Black teen against the NYPD. Two plainclothes officers raped her while she was handcuffed in a police van, but claimed that it was consensual sex. When questioned about the article in the penal code that details sex offenses, a police spokesperson said "it is against department policy to have sex on duty [but] the law does not preclude consensual sex between an arresting officer and a person in custody" (Neely, xi). The cop claimed the teen consented even though he threatened her by showing her a gun. She was also handcuffed so she wasn't in the right state to resist the officer or to even properly consent. The lack of consequences normalizes police violence, and gives police officers loopholes to hide their illegal actions. With only their word against police officers--and with little public attention–Black women suffer due to racism and sexism and are often later silenced or made invisible. "Invisibility is not to be taken in the literal sense," sociologist Cheryl Neely writes, "but to connote society's attempt to render black women as inconspicuous and obscure, to marginalize the importance of their life experience in a white society. In a patriarchal society, the lives of women have less value than those of men. Black women not only face sexism as females, but they also are discriminated against on the basis of race and class" (Neely xi).

Police brutality victims are typically thought to be male yet thousands of women suffer because no one believes their stories or because people don't realize what a big problem police abuse is for women as well as men. The prevailing belief is that white cops protect society, and are forced to use their weapons because Black people are wild and dangerous. So if a Black woman tries to go against the norm, she is often portrayed as a liar because there are no prior reports, witnesses, or evidence for her plea.

Back at the precinct, what was the most traumatizing day of my life was just another day for Officer K. The police took my ID, my laces, my cute pink sweats, and my hair scrunchie because it was a "safety hazard." Police officers have tactics to humiliate Black women that stem from racism. Fannie Lou Hamer talked about how police officers in 1963 sought to humiliate her by lifting up her skirt to expose her undergarments. In the same way, the police officer cut the scrunchie out of my hair to dishevel my appearance and violated my hair to try to embarrass me.

Then they put me in a tiny cell with two other women. As ironic as this may sound, this was the best part of it all. I'm sure they put three Black women in one tiny cell to instigate a hostile environment (or maybe because they didn't care if we were crowded and uncomfortable). But to their surprise, the opposite happened. We literally had a

food party. It sounds nice but in reality we had pizza only because Officer M wrongfully arrested Ceecee, one of the black women in the cell with me, and we had Chick-fil-A because Officer E ALSO wrongfully arrested the third woman in the cell. I guess food was their bribe.

For about an hour, I demanded that Officer K give me my one phone call. Finally, Officer M came and asked who I wanted to call. But he completely ignored what I said and asked me and the other women in the cell, "you guys know each other?" Then another officer came along and was in awe that three Black women were not fighting but sharing food and making the most of the situation.

Time passes and still I am not allowed to make a phone call, but a new officer, Officer Z, says they are going to question me downstairs. I ask him for my phone call and he just plain walks away. When I'm downstairs, a man in a white shirt tells me, "There are no cameras down here, we didn't read you your rights, if you cooperate I'll let you go." I was cooperating the whole time, even when they were violating my rights, but I felt in that moment that if I didn't want to be #Mercedes, the best thing was for me to just stay quiet and comply. I was down there for a couple minutes getting threatened, mentally and emotionally harassed because, like he said, no cameras. The only thing that stopped him was the fact that I told him I was a student at Brooklyn College.

All I learned from this incident was that the precinct was crooked from the higher ranks and the lower ranks had to take the fall for the higher ups. When I went back to my cell a few minutes later, Officer Z came back and told me that I didn't need my call because I was going home, but he seemed really nervous. He handed me a ticket for not having my seatbelt on!! The same seat belt I took off when Officer K told me to get out of the car. Officer K was nowhere to be found, so Officer Z, a brown-skinned Asian man, had to take the fall if I reported anything, and he did. When I reported the ticket and received a court date, the officer that arrested me did not show up. Instead it was Officer Z who had to answer to the judge. He said "I did not recall the events that took place" and that's because he wasn't there at all; he was just in court to hide officer K's illegal actions.

There's an aftermath of being wrongfully arrested that not everyone thinks about--as long as they let you go and you get to go home, you should be fine. But that's never the case. After getting arrested, Black women deal with mental health issues and PTSD that change our personal views on law enforcement and impact our health. Harris and Cortes explain: "Available data show that African American and Black women are more likely to experience or witness police violence and worry about a family member becoming a victim. These experiences of police violence have been linked to psychological stress, sleep disturbances, and pregnancy loss. The expectation of negative encounters with the police leads Black women to live a life of hypervigilance, which may increase stress, inflammation, cardiovascular reactivity, and blood pressure" (Harris and Cortes 2).

Even just hearing a story about police violence can make people feel vulnerable and fearful. Those who experience this first-hand will always be on edge. Now when I hear sirens, whether it is in person or on media, and when I see cops, I no longer wonder if they're the good or bad kind. I just pray they leave me alone. Police violence has deep and lasting mental health impacts on Black women. The emotional and psychological harm goes beyond the immediate moment of violence and can reshape their our sense of safety, self-worth, and mental well-being.

In order to bring attention to police violence against Black women, the Black community started a platform called "Missing," where Black female victims in predominantly white Southern cities in America share their experience of police brutality through video footage: "Virtual witnessing is a strategic response utilized by black women most often when they are alone with officers and do not have access to physical witnesses. … Specifically, Black women discuss how virtual witnessing helps preserve a record of police interactions, which they plan to use in the future to hold officers accountable. As such, Black women use their phones and social media platforms to counteract institutional power dynamics and prepare for justice-seeking processes within the carceral system" (Gonzalez and Deckard 905). The platform "Missing" gave black women a chance to share their personal stories and experiences with police officers. In the interviews they shared what happened and the way officers are able to escalate a situation because they had the power, while the victims were ignored and had their rights violated.

These testimonies have raised awareness and encouraged public dialogue about the mistreatment of Black women by police. As a result, communities have developed strategies to increase safety, such as ensuring there are always witnesses either in person or virtually during police encounters. Recording any interaction with the police can push them to behave within their regulations. In many cases, officers' behavior shifts from aggressive to cooperative once they realize they're being recorded, as they seek to avoid viral backlash or disciplinary consequences like termination.

Black women are disrespected, unprotected, and silenced in a country that uses freedom and equal human rights as a mascot. In this current political moment, many people are being accosted by law enforcement. In Minnesota, ICE agents rampaged through the streets and conducted sweeps to find illegal immigrants. However, they aren't doing it the right way; they are kidnapping people and not giving them due process, just sending them off to jails where they are brutally tortured before being deported; some of the people being kidnapped or killed by ICE are citizens or here rightfully on visas. On January 7, 2026 in Minneapolis an ICE agent shot a woman, Renee Good, a 37 year old citizen and mother. As ICE agents were trying to arrest |immigrants," a cop, Jonathan Ross, approached Good's car and tried to open the door. When Renee reversed a little, the cop sent three shots to her head and chest. He wasn't arrested and only placed on administrative leave. Once again the police force left children without a parent and got away scott-free. However, this isn't surprising because this was the same city where a cop Derek Chauvin killed George Floyd by kneeling on his neck for over nine minutes.

Raising awareness and sharing your story of police violence on the "Missing" platform or in other ways can

motivate and encourage other women to speak out, and then we can fight collectively to give Black women a life where they can let their guard down and live normally, without wondering how different life would be if they weren't Black. I chose to share my story to expose the twisted racism and also sexism that Black women face when interacting with law enforcement. Without sharing the experiences or reporting the cases, Black women will never get justice. We can't say Black lives matter and leave out Black women.

## Notes:

1. Threnique is a quiet internalized grief.

2. "The family of 37-year-old Tanisha Anderson reached out for assistance to calm their daughter during a mental health crisis. Anderson grew increasingly agitated when the police separated her from her family and attempted to place her in the confined space of the police vehicle. During the struggle, a police officer performed a 'takedown' move on her, slamming her against the concrete sidewalk. He placed his knee on her back and handcuffed her as she lay face-down on the pavement. The officers refused to allow Anderson's family to comfort her as she lay dying and exposed on the snow-covered street. She was pronounced dead upon arrival at the hospital. The Cuyahoga County medical examiner ruled her death a homicide. Anderson's family has filed a wrongful death lawsuit against the City of Cleveland and two of its police officers. Anderson suffered from bipolar disorder, but her mother, Cassandra Johnson, explained that as long as she was on her medication, 'you wouldn't know anything was wrong with her.' Johnson indicated that despite media narratives, Anderson was not violent, and that it was the behavior of the police in isolating her from her family that made her panic" (Crenshaw, 16).

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**Author's note:** I'm a Political Science major at Brooklyn College. Doing this research showed me how important it is to tell your story. Research on this topic is hard to find; I discovered that many Black women experience police mistreatment, but stay silent because they fear they won't be believed. Carrying that trauma can have lasting effects on mental health. Sharing these stories helps other Black women feel less alone and encourages them to speak out, which raises awareness about this overlooked issue.


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This journal is published by Pitt Open Library Publishing..

ISSN: 1941-0832

RADICAL TEACHER

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

# Latine, Complicit, Conflicted

by Chichí[1]



PHOTO: CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY. (2000). *FLAG OF THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC (WFB 2000)*. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

For me, and for many other Latinos, the reality of intra-group conservatism is not surprising. My own father, born in the Dominican Republic, holds many conservative beliefs that are rooted in bigotry. It's both confusing and heartbreaking to know that my father supports politics that are hostile to his own community. Many Latinos seek to align themselves with whiteness. They feel that whiteness reflects their values more accurately. Many Latinos also feel that adopting conservative values that uphold white supremacy will guarantee them safety. "Proximity to whiteness has historically offered protection and status, and that legacy still lingers" (Edsall, 2025). The racism we see in the U.S. mirrors the racism in Latin America. We can't forget that Latin America was also colonized by Europeans. Both are rooted in the same idea of Western European superiority.

I've always sensed it, even when I couldn't name it. Racist speech is normalized in Dominican culture. I don't know when I first recognized it as racism, and that's the insidious part. Racism can be loud, like a fallen tree, or subtle and infectious, seeping into every corner of life until you can't tell where it begins or ends. That's how it works in Latino culture. You can say it began in Europe, or in 1492, or anywhere else… but no one can say where it ends.

With my father, I don't know when it started for him either, but it certainly hasn't ended. Even now, he can pray to God in one breath and, in the next, insult a Black person or someone he assumes is "illegal"… whatever that means, anyway.



ATROCITIES OF THE SPANIARDS ON SANTO DOMINGO. WOOD ENGRAVING AFTER A DRAWING BY FELIX DARLEY (AMERICAN ILLUSTRATOR AND ENGRAVER, 1824-1888), PUBLISHED IN 1876.

When my father talks about Trump, he sounds proud, even smug. He often says, "Men like Trump want to improve the country," or, "Solo quieren mejorar el país… solo quieren deportar a los ilegales…" How could he say this when he is virtually indistinguishable from "los ilegales" Many would see my father in the same social class as an undocumented Latino. As American economist and social scientist William A. Darity notes, "Hispanics collectively are unlikely to share common cause with black Americans over a common racial identity" (Darity 2016). That is why, in my father's mind, he is much different from other Latinos. My father sees himself as a white man.

My father's statements stem from a larger issue spread by American media and politics: immigrants are undeserving of social safety nets. There is a myth in this country of immigrants *stealing* benefits. In reality, immigrants pay billions into our country's economy, and do not reap any benefits. In 2022 alone, undocumented immigrants paid nearly $100 billion in federal, state, and local taxes (Tax Policy Center 2024). Many file their taxes using Individual Taxpayer Identification Numbers (ITINs) (Tax Policy Center 2024). Despite contributing billions in payroll taxes, including to Social Security, they are ineligible for most federal benefits (Tax Policy Center 2024). In 2022, undocumented immigrants paid an estimated $25.7 billion into Social Security, even though most will never qualify to collect benefits (Rachamallu 2025). Also, contrary to the claim that immigrants take more than they give, studies show that, regardless of immigration status, immigrants contribute more in taxes over their lifetimes than they consume in government services. So, where does this hostility toward undocumented Latino people come from, especially within our own communities? I believe part of the answer lies in how Latinos, especially Dominicans, have been taught to understand race.

Hartig et al. from The Pew Research Center (2025) found that one-quarter of U.S. Latinos identify as Afro-Latino, Afro-Caribbean, or of African descent. This population is particularly concentrated in places like New York, where Dominican communities are prominent. Yet, even within these communities, there is often a refusal to acknowledge or embrace Blackness (López & Gonzalez-Barrera 2016). This contradiction of expressing anti-Black sentiments while having Afrocentric features is not unique to my family. Ginetta E. B. Candelario helps explain it through her discussion of Dominican racial identity and beauty norms. In the Dominican Republic, racial belonging is not determined by ancestry but by physical appearance, particularly hair texture, skin tone, and facial features, which conform to what she calls the "somatic norm image" (Candelario 2007, 223). A person can have dark skin and African heritage, but if their appearance approximates whiteness, especially through practices like hair straightening, they can still be seen as "not Black." In this way, Blackness is not just racial; it is also political, economic, and moralized. Candelario argues that the "Iberian variant" of whiteness in the Dominican Republic allows for the inclusion of racially mixed individuals into a broader definition of whiteness, so long as they maintain distance from anything coded as explicitly Black, particularly African-descended peoples like Haitians (Candelario 2007, 224). For many Dominicans, rejecting Blackness, especially Haitian Blackness, is a strategy for survival and upward mobility. In this context, my father's anti-Blackness is a learned performance of Dominican identity, shaped by generations of colonial violence and internalized racism.

Nancy López et al. (2018) expand on this idea through their concept of "street race": how individuals believe others perceive their race in public spaces. In their study, perceived racialization, especially when others assign one as Latino or Black, was linked to poorer mental health outcomes. For Latino men, in particular, identifying as Latino in public contexts correlated with higher odds of reporting mental health challenges.[2] This speaks directly to the internal conflict my father faces. On the street, he is often racialized in ways that contradict his self-perception, reminded that no matter how much he tries to align with whiteness, his appearance still racializes him as "other."

My father would not want me to be with someone who is considered "other." He would want me to be with someone undoubtedly white. My father would praise me if I married a white man: "Mejorando la raza" (e.g. "improving the race") is what he would say. This is a phrase that explicitly states that one is improving the race by whitening the bloodline. This mindset is deeply embedded in Latin American cultures and persists in the diaspora. Ostfeld and Yadon (2022) explain that lighter skin is often seen as a proxy for status and proximity to whiteness. Their research shows that some Latinos overestimate their skin's lightness to align more closely with conservative political identities. This is not just about beauty, it's about power. My father's alignment with anti-Black, anti-immigrant ideals is not just a personal failing; it's the product of a system that rewards the performance of whiteness, even when it is unconvincing to others.

This racist ideology is not limited to my father. It's reflective of a broader sentiment within Latino communities. In 2024, Donald Trump received nearly half of the Latino vote, a 12-point increase from 2020 (Hartig et al. 2025). Edsall (2025) challenges the assumption that Latinos naturally support Democrats or align with other communities of color. Latino culture, he argues, is not monolithic. Many of us have internalized white American ideals, particularly around race, family, and belonging. Cadena (2025) further explains that Latino support for Trump has challenged prior assumptions that Latinos would overwhelmingly defend immigrants and Latinos at the polls. Though still a minority, Latino Republicans are an increasingly larger share of the electorate, especially in swing states and contested districts.

This political behavior can be explained more clearly in their article "Bleach in the Rainbow" by Darity et al. (2005). Their research found that racial self-identification among Latinos is deeply influenced by perceived social rewards. Many Latinos do not identify as Black- even when they possess visible African ancestry--because whiteness is understood as a path toward upward mobility and acceptance in American society. The study reveals a preference among Latinos for whiteness not only in terms of romantic or beauty ideals but also in their political affiliations, suggesting that many view whiteness and conservatism as intertwined markers of legitimacy and belonging. This explains why behaviors like downplaying one's Afro-descent, voting Republican, or adopting anti-immigrant rhetoric can be seen as investments in social capital. My father's conservatism, in this sense, is less about ideology and more about assimilation. To him, voting for Trump or criticizing immigrants is not necessarily contradictory-- it's a performance of American success, a way to declare, "I've made it," even if that declaration comes at the expense of people who look like him.

At the same time, the internalization of white supremacist values does not grant immunity from structural racism. This is the painful contradiction that many Latino conservatives, like my father, live with. My father's ideas touch on a larger issue: the idea that fixing himself as an individual (e.g. emulating whiteness) will move Latinos up on the social ladder. When Latinos fail to climb this social ladder, my father sees it as a failure. What my father sees as a personal failure of Latinos is actually a structural issue. Through the lens of stratification economics, we see how my father's approach could not be further from the truth. Stratification economics is a subfield of economics that recognizes the structural forces limiting opportunities for Black and Brown people (Moore 2022). These structures were created by white Americans to preserve their economic dominance (Moore 2022). It does not matter how hard my father tries to assimilate to whiteness. He is only doing himself and the Latino community a disservice.

Despite my father's efforts to align himself with whiteness--through his political views, work ethic, and rejection of Blackness--he is still treated as an outsider. Candelario (2007) highlights how Dominicans who adopt Eurocentric beauty standards and disavow their African heritage are still racialized in the U.S. context as non-white. This disjuncture between how Latinos see themselves and how they are seen by others leaves them suspended in what Candelario refers to as "racial liminality." They are not white enough to benefit fully from white privilege, nor are they always willing to claim solidarity with Black communities. This in-betweenness fosters resentment and confusion, feelings I recognize in my father's rants about crime and immigration. These rants are not just personal; they reflect a community-wide struggle to reconcile racial ambiguity with the desire for social certainty. It is easier, sometimes, to cast blame downward than to accept one's own marginality in a system that will never fully accept you.

It's strange, knowing all of this should make my father's political views less shocking, but it doesn't. I still feel the same disorientation every time I hear him defend Trump. I still wonder how someone so kind and generous in his personal life, someone who donates to Afro-Dominican communities, hires Haitian workers, and cooks for them, can also hold such harmful and exclusionary beliefs.

Sometimes I think that loving my family means abandoning parts of myself. As a Latina, I often feel like I'm performing a kind of emotional labor that has long been expected of women: to love, to nurture, and to uplift our men, even when they were raised in machismo. I don't believe I can change him. As the saying goes, "When someone shows you who they are, believe them." My father has shown me who he is. I do believe him. Still, I want to love him. I want to be there for him. This country does not love him, but I do, even when it hurts.

After learning what I've learned, I find myself asking what is left for me to do. To truly get along with my father, I know I will have to wear a mask. I am not sure if carrying

this frustration is healthy for me, but it is something I am willing to do for the time I have left with him. At this point, I see no reason to try to change his mind, or anyone's, really. My father, like so many others who have been shown every side of the "argument," has chosen to be content with what he knows. He will continue to reject what feels unfamiliar, perhaps because admitting he is wrong would demand a courage he does not possess.

I will choose to live differently. I refuse to be held captive by stereotypes or the cultural expectations I grew up with. I have spent my whole life pretending it was acceptable for Dominicans, and Latinos in general, to say the things we say. But we are living a lie. How can we speak this way when we know what our ancestors looked like? Yes, some were white Spaniards, but they were also African and Indigenous. How would they feel hearing us deny them like this? I will choose another path, and honor them.

Loving someone who is complex, racist, homophobic, and yet somehow loving, kind-hearted, and dependable is its own kind of conflict. I am left with questions that will never be answered in any neat or traditional way. What am I supposed to do? Maybe the better question is this: what is left of me? Sometimes I feel complicit in my father's bigotry simply because I still love him, even though I reject his values. I disagree with him openly. I do not hide my beliefs. But the tension is always there.

My father is 72 now. I choose to believe that his heart is in conflict with the values society imposed on him. Maybe that is naïve. Maybe I am still looking at him through the rose-colored glasses of a loving daughter. So I will act according to what I see. When he is kind, I will honor it. When he is harmful, I will speak up. His mother once said, "He has the heart of an angel and the tongue of the devil." Many of my peers understand this feeling: loving someone whose beliefs wound you, yet also seeing real warmth in them, is complicated. In the end, you are left asking which version of them you choose to believe.

## Notes

1. A term of endearment used in the Dominican Republic referring to the youngest sibling, a small child, or a baby.

2. Among women, none of the non-White street race social locations were statistically different from street race White women for mental health. For physical health, street race Mexican women reported lower optimal health when compared to all other categories. This reflects previous research from Vargas et al. 2016 and Brown et al. 2007, which found that women report lower self-rated health than their male counterparts, and that being socially assigned "Mexican" race is associated with negative health outcomes, even if you are not of Mexican origin.

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## Author's Note

I am a May 2026 graduate of Brooklyn College. I want to go on to study immigration and human rights law, hopefully at NYU or CUNY Law. I love reading, walking, hanging out with my friends, and drawing. My dad wants me to draw something for him, and I think I will.


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This journal is published by Pitt Open Library Publishing..

ISSN: 1941-0832

RADICAL TEACHER

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

# Forced into the Shadows: Undocumented, Unafraid, Unapologetic

by Junior




PHOTO COURTESY OF AUTHOR. WASHINGTON D.C.

*"The United States is not the passage of death, the United States is 'Death itself.' At the border during the day, temperatures go from 120 up to 140 degrees… It is proven that at the border, out of every 100 migrants, between 10 and 20, or more, will die. Maybe many of you here will die. Many of you will never see your families again. Many of you here will never return to your countries because you will die on the way. Now, who here really wants to get to the United States? Raise your hand!" *Everyone in the crowd raises their hands.**

- *Which Way Home (Rebecca Camissa, dir., 2009)*

## "Undocumented" - A person who doesn't have a legal right to be or remain in the United States (Gasson)

For immigrants, the United States is not just a land of opportunity; the United States is hope itself. A place where people do what it takes to build a better life for themselves and their families. For your parents, that meant accepting hardship in exchange for possibility. Like many others, your family's journey is shaped by sacrifice and uncertainty. You arrive in the United States at the age of one. Only later do you learn that you were smuggled in, given false documents, and quieted with medicine to carry you across the border. Your family relies on the goodwill of others, finding ways to get by, even as these years mark some of the most difficult of your parents' lives, defined by injustice and constant fear.

Your parents rarely speak about this time, but some moments stay with you—like when your father was rushed to the emergency room in critical condition. Ironically, his injuries were likely what spared your family catastrophic medical debt. Because it was deemed a "medical emergency," he qualified for emergency Medicaid. Had his life not been at risk, he would have been denied coverage altogether. Your status disqualifies you from Medicaid: the system intervenes only when you are at death's doorstep (Kullgren). After surgery, the care he needed for recovery, rehabilitation, and follow-up treatment was not covered. Your mother was told to "figure it out." And so she did. She worked multiple jobs while your father stayed home to care for you and your siblings out of necessity; he learned how to move again.

As a child, you don't recognize your family's circumstances, not because they shield you, but because survival leaves little room for explanation. Renting a single room for a family of five doesn't feel like a struggle when you are together. These years when you are indifferent to your status are blissful. You'll often find yourself recalling these years later in life. But you don't get to grow up at your own pace. Before you can fully understand it, you're told you're undocumented; it means you don't have the papers that say you belong, even though this is the only home you've ever known. It means pretending everything is fine even when it feels like the ground could shift at any moment. Like that time when your landlord raised the rent after a minor disagreement and threatened to call ICE; your parents don't know if they had rights or if fighting back would only make things worse. So you left. You were given a week. You remember feeling helpless, voiceless, and so alone. Regardless of those feelings, you move forward. You finish elementary school, surpassing your father's formal education. By eighth grade, you are only the second person in your family to graduate. Throughout high school, one question follows you: belonging. You belong, don't you? So what is a piece of paper or nine digits to tell anyone else otherwise? You find others who ask the same questions, people with stories like yours, people who believe you belong. You find your community.

## "Unafraid" - Feeling No Fear or Anxiety

Being part of an immigrant-led community organization grounded in service, education, and collective care changes something in you. It is a space for organizing, learning, and mutual care in the absence of state support. For the first time in your life, you openly talk about your status. Growing up, you were always taught that sharing your status was dangerous, that safety meant insisting you were "legal." Yet there you were in your first summer meeting, naming it aloud, half-hoping no one noticed, half-hoping someone would know what to do. Your youth organizer could not change your status, but for the first time the whole of you was recognized. Being seen was more than enough. You learn that people with your status have always been involved in this work, challenging silencing narratives and pushing for lasting political change. You learn about the 2010 "Coming Out of the Shadows" demonstration, where hundreds of mostly young, undocumented people demanded legalization under a banner reading "Undocumented and Unafraid" (Sepúlveda). These activists took the stage and openly shared their status. Learning about this courage pushes you toward action. Even before you had the language for it, you knew you wanted to support those around you, knowing harder years were coming.

As the fear from the results of the 2016 election takes hold in your community, you and many others stand against relentless waves of anti-immigrant rhetoric. You continue this work despite the fear your family and status carry. But over time, the conditions harden. It becomes more difficult to gather signatures or canvass for change when your efforts are met with increasing rejection. When you're told to "never take this work personally," you wonder, of all people, how could you not. When people rally behind ethnic cleansing dressed up as immigration policy, they are including you. When courts threaten DACA, they endanger people you love. When politicians speak of "removing illegals," they are speaking about families like yours. How could any of this not feel personal? You are repeatedly forced to prove your worth, your value, your humanity. For most people, not having their right to belong constantly questioned is an unacknowledged privilege.

Still, there were days you wondered what it would be like not having to take this work personally. Living in New York makes the contradiction impossible to ignore. You are told your community takes from this nation, despite

undocumented immigrants paying $6.7 billion in state, local, and federal taxes in New York alone (American Immigration Council). That money is funneled into social safety nets like Social Security, Medicaid, and most public benefits, and still your community is excluded (Office of the New York City Comptroller). The pandemic descends. Nearly 70% of undocumented workers are essential, running restaurants and grocery stores, building infrastructure, keeping transit moving, and caring for the sick, elderly, and young (Center for Migration Studies). The truth becomes unavoidable: you are more than essential to the lifeblood of this nation; you are its lifeblood. That knowledge sustains your hope, even as the world emerges from a pandemic and the possibility of change feels within reach. In 2020 and 2021, you saw a glimpse of what the nation could be if forced to confront its inequities, suddenly aware of how much it relied on the very people it had spent decades excluding. There was a sense that the future might finally include you.




PHOTO COURTESY OF AUTHOR. THE PHOTO ON THE LEFT IS FROM THE FIRST-EVER PROTEST I ATTENDED IN HIGH SCHOOL; I WAS TERRIFIED. WE ENDED UP WALKING ACROSS THE MANHATTAN BRIDGE. THE PHOTO ON THE RIGHT IS FROM MY FIRST-EVER TRIP TO DC; WE MARCHED ALL DAY, PASSING BY FEDERAL BUILDINGS, EVEN AT ONE POINT STANDING RIGHT OUTSIDE OF THE ICE BUILDING. THAT'S WHERE, IN THE HEAT OF THE MOMENT, I FLIPPED IT OFF; IT FELT RIGHT, REGARDLESS IT WAS SCARY BEING THAT CLOSE TO A PLACE I NEVER WANT TO END UP INSIDE. I HAVEN'T GONE BACK TO D.C IN YEARS NOW.

Then it shifts again. The summer and fall of 2024 echo your worst fears in 2016, only sharper. "Latinos for Trump," once an ironic fringe, grows rapidly, with men across communities of color backing a far□right regime defined by family separation, getting the 'criminals,' and the dismantling of social programs, including cuts to food assistance, Medicaid access, and housing support--supported by those it will harm most. You find that this alignment isn't new. A generation ago, conservatives of color were already appearing in state and federal races, but the scale of support in 2024 reveals a deeper shift. Analyses show that 21% of Black men voted for Trump (up from 12% in 2020), and 50% of Latino men voted for him (up from 39%). Among women of color, the numbers rose too 10% of Black women (up from 5%) and 46% of Latinas (up from 33%) but the gender gap is unmistakable (Pew Research). You recognize something else too, the role traditional masculinity plays in these far right movements. They offer men of color a seductive promise of belonging built on dominance, exceptionalism, and proximity to power. They tell them they can be "different" from other men of color, that they can rise above those deemed undeserving, that exclusion is proof of their strength.

Beyond electoral politics, far-right groups like the Proud Boys, Patriot Prayer, and the "Stop the Steal" movement have elevated men of color into visible leadership roles, offering them a place in the hierarchy, a chance to feel exceptional, to believe they 'earned' a belonging that others supposedly have not. Issue-focused campaigns have followed suit. Anti-abortion efforts increasingly cloak themselves in the language of civil rights, placing young women of color at the forefront to oppose reproductive freedom. Gun manufacturers and Second Amendment groups like the NRA have also expanded their reach, deliberately targeting communities of color as Black gun ownership surges (HoSang).

Still, no amount of research could prepare you for the results of November 5th. You are left speechless once again: *How and why w*ould the children of immigrants vote against their communities, against themselves? Why would low-income people place their hopes in someone intent on dismantling the very safety nets they rely on to show their own worth? Even if met with indifference or abandonment, you know a collective struggle is coming, one against authoritarianism and an oligarchy rooted in malice. And once again, the question returns: belonging. How do you make sense of people who share your language, culture, and struggles, yet align themselves with those who would strip you and your family of the right to exist? How do you hold pride in your community when they helped enable this? Belonging was always fragile. Now it feels broken, and you're left wondering who truly sees you, who claims you, and what it will take to hold onto the vision of justice that first made you unafraid.

## “Unapologetic” -- Not Acknowledging or Expressing Regret

It’s been eight months now, but life for you hasn’t fundamentally changed; you're still undocumented, with no pathway to citizenship, no protection from deportation, and just as uncertain about your future in this country. This isn’t something new to you or your community, but it is new to those who were certain about their future in this country, those who had protection from deportation through a temporary status, those who came here “legally” (whatever that means) with a pathway to citizenship. For the first time in many people's lives, they too are a target; they have a small glimpse into what life is like for those whom the state denies basic rights and their humanity. However, while being undocumented makes you a target in many ways, you're one of the lucky ones. It sounds messed up, right? However, it's




PHOTO COURTESY OF AUTHOR. THIS PHOTO IS OF MY LITTLE BROTHER (IN BLUE) AND ME (IN WHITE) ON THE DAY OF MY KINDERGARTEN GRADUATION. I REMEMBER HEARING SOMETHING ABOUT COLLEGE THAT DAY, AND AFTER I HELD MY DIPLOMA IN MY HAND AND FELT PRIDE IN MY ACCOMPLISHMENT, I KNEW I WANTED TO CONTINUE MY EDUCATION. I DIDN’T KNOW WHAT COLLEGE WAS; I JUST KNEW THAT REGARDLESS OF THE CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS I WOULD FACE, I WANTED TO GO SO I COULD HOLD ANOTHER DIPLOMA AGAIN AND MAKE MY FAMILY PROUD, LIKE THEY WERE THAT DAY.

true; remember when you conducted research for a paper once and found that in 2024 there were 75,385 high school seniors across NYC, 62,454 graduated, and of those, fewer than 4,000 were undocumented students (NYC Public Schools; Higher Education Immigration Portal). And even among those who graduate, only a fraction make it to college.

At CUNY, undocumented students account for roughly two percent of all freshmen--just 2165 students across six years--despite consistently outperforming their citizen peers in high school GPA, college prep coursework, first year GPA, credit completion, and retention (City University of New York). The irony is impossible to ignore: undocumented immigrants are constantly told to “do things the right way,” to work harder, to prove they deserve to be here, yet the data shows they already do. They are among the most academically prepared students in the country, but face some of the steepest barriers to accessing the very education they excel in--barriers that make simply graduating high school, let alone enrolling in college, an act of privilege, luck, and resistance.

Despite all this, your future still lies in academia, and your family ensures that remains your focus, as day in and day out, they work off-the-book jobs to keep you all afloat, like hundreds of thousands of immigrant New Yorkers. Immigrants keep your city running, yet in that same city, your community faces terror unlike anything seen till now. High school students are kidnapped off the streets, unmarked vans patrol your communities, while masked officers with no identification grab whoever they deem as not belonging here (Kramer). 26 Federal Plaza, a place where people who “do it the right way” attend their immigration hearings or naturalization processes, has become a hunting ground for ICE agents seeking to meet their quotas by arresting as many immigrants as possible, immigrants who only ask for their right to due process, like everyone else (Hogan and Chu).

But as fears of attending immigration hearings grow, people begin to take action, accompanying immigrants who now need it more than ever. As the months have passed, more people have become infuriated, and mass protests ripple throughout the nation, as people take a stand against authoritarianism and their neighbors, friends, and loved ones being kidnapped and taken to an unknown fate. Even those who voted against their best interest begin to have the veil over their eyes forcibly removed as they realize the promise of a ‘Great America’ doesn’t include them. While some may only be taking a stand for their self-preservation, they now regret their vote and feel apologetic. Yet they’re still met by many exclaiming, “This is what you voted for,” even “What did you think was going to happen?” But you, like many others, acknowledge that this isn't the time to turn on one another. Rather, you must do what's most difficult: work to welcome people back and organize as one, to reunite people under a new collective struggle for their freedoms. Progress towards this may be slow, but you know, arguing over the differences within your communities is what got you all here in the first place. They may have easily divided you, but now the hard work begins to rebuild stronger than before.

However, before you can begin, you realize something has changed. As the students you once helped challenge the genocide in Gaza now stand in solidarity with you, taking up the fight as their own, they often do this at the cost of their freedom. With some having their visas revoked (Barnes), while others face being abducted in their homes (CUNYCLEAR), people take to the streets and march in protest of these injustices, and then they turn to you. You’ve

always been ready to take direct action for what you believed in, and now others are ready to join your fight for freedom, but you hesitate. Peaceful student demonstrators are brutalized and arrested (Cozzarelli); you can't afford these consequences, because you don't pay the same price as everyone else. An arrest was something you could never afford to happen, but now, more than ever, the consequences you'll face are growing in severity quickly; expedited removal could mean being taken from the only place that ever felt like home, to a cell where you're denied food, water, and any essential medical needs (National Immigration Project; Moses). The promise of your survival is not guaranteed, but more importantly, this could mean never seeing your family again or even worse, putting them in danger.

The tension only deepens in May as DHS begins enforcing REAL ID requirements; the right to move freely, something most people take for granted, has been taken from you. Friends can fly across the country to protest, organize, or simply breathe; you can't even board a domestic flight (Immigrants Rising). Their world expands while yours shrinks. The following year, waves of executive orders like 14406, "Restoring Integrity to America's Financial System," put people like you who opened bank accounts with an ITIN or foreign passport at risk, limiting access to basic financial tools like Zelle and Venmo (Sanchez-Adams). Even the ability to pay rent, send money to family, or receive payment for work becomes precarious.

Others get to act; you get to calculate risk. Others get to move; you get to stay still. Others get to speak; you get to wonder what speaking might cost. As all these thoughts plague your mind, those around you turn to you once more. But what do you say? How do you explain to those around you that the issue you've predicted your entire organizing career on, this fight for fundamental human rights that you've never backed down from, is something you can't fully take part in? You can't risk putting those you love in danger, so you step back and support from a distance, doing the best you can. But at your core, you know you could be doing so much more, something other organizers and activists in different spaces remind you of daily. You can feel it: sometimes confusion, other times judgment, as to why you're not the first person to speak out. Out of everyone they know, why aren't you leading the charge? And quickly, you find yourself feeling isolated, left behind by those who have the freedom to take direct action in this movement.

On one hand, you're grateful for people who are willing to take a stand and fight for what you both know is right, but on the other hand, there is a sense of envy and longing to be able to fight for your rights, free of the constraints that leave you feeling helpless. Maybe if you explained yourself to everyone, you wouldn't feel so alone, but it's not that easy, and you know it. You've spent most of your life hiding your status, not knowing who you could trust to keep your secret. Especially now, who can you trust with that knowledge?

While some are quick to cast you aside, others still reach out, hoping they can reignite that spark they think you've lost. It's an oddly comforting thing that they don't see you for your struggle; you aren't undocumented to them, you're just you. You remember what you learned so long ago; you don't have to prove yourself to anyone or justify why you chose to show up the way you do. It isn't your responsibility to make it clear your "undocumentedness" is the thing that holds you back. Your status won't define you; it may attempt to control you, but your resistance has never been contained by the borders they build. You alone shape the way you show up, even when the world tries to shrink your choices. More than ever, you refuse to apologize for your status, or for the decision your parents made out of love and desperation. And in that clarity, you remember why you began this work, not to prove yourself to anyone, but to fight for the people who live through the same constraints you do.

You could stay off the radar, blend into the crowd, fade into the background while the world moves around you, but you don't, not because you're special in some way; you do this work not for yourself but for every immigrant here and those to come.

It's for your parents, who did the best they could.

It's for the students, who dream of a better future.

It's for the workers, whose hands build a nation that refuses to claim them.

It's for the neighbors, who march beside you even when they don't share your story.

It's for the generations yet to come, who will inherit the freedom you fight for.

It's for the ancestors, who crossed oceans and deserts so you could stand here today.

And, yes, it's even for immigrants who voted against you.

To be undocumented is to carry the weight of erasure; to be unafraid is to speak anyway; to be unapologetic is to know that your very existence is resistance. And in that resistance, we all find our belonging. But belonging is not built by turning away from people, but by welcoming back those who once abandoned you, even those who could not see you then. Now is the time to extend the solidarity you once longed for, the solidarity that makes belonging possible. Because in the end, we do not belong in isolation; we belong only when we stand together.

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## Author's Note

Hi, my family calls me Junior, and I'm a fourth-year student double majoring in Sociology and History at Brooklyn College. I love photography, fashion, and advocating for my undocumented and immigrant community, but really I'm just a kid from Queens.

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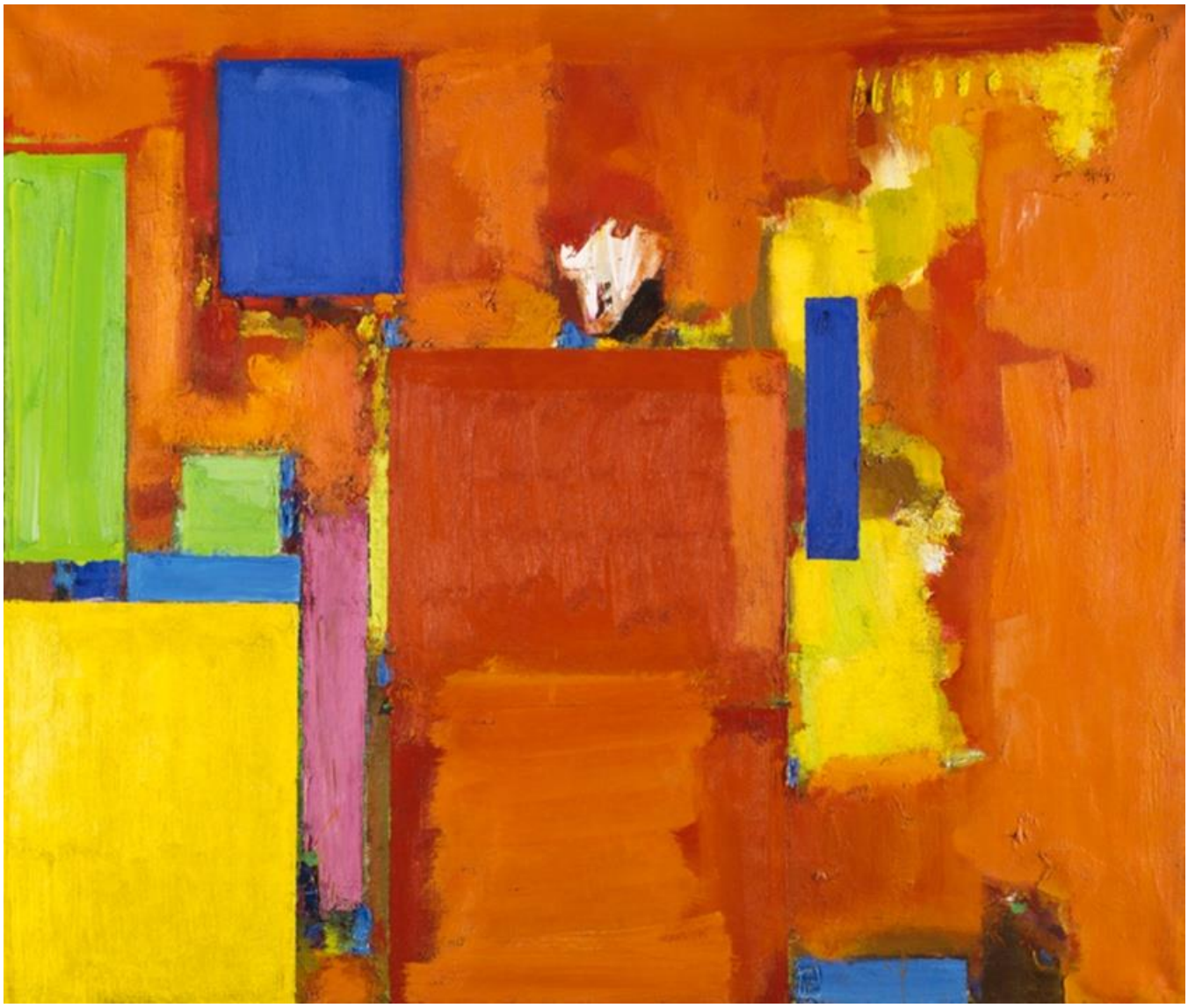
ISSN: 1941-0832

RADICAL TEACHER

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

# The American Dream: A Ticking Time Bomb

by Iris Pluie



THE GOLDEN WALLDATE. 1961, HANS HOFMANN. ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO OPEN ACCESS COLLECTION.

According to most people I know, that's what I'm living right now: the American Dream. My mother, my friends, every single one of my relatives--they all think that it's just so cool that I'm here, and to be honest, it is! I'm happy that I'm here. I'm happy to be in New York. I've been dreaming of getting out of my hometown since I was a kid. I truly love it here.

I grew up in a small town on the edge of one of the world's most populous cities. All my life, I lived in a gated community, where everyone seemed to know each other. All the kids in my kindergarten class were still with me when I graduated high school. The local shop owners, the gossip mongers, even the street dogs--they all knew me, if not by name then at the very least by my face. It was fun, for a while--to grow up with my best friends, to see them whenever I want, to have a girl I knew in the third grade at my 16th birthday party--but it was never my goal.

For as long as I can remember, I wanted more. I grew up with ambition that, while fueled by blind hope, was backed by an equal amount of passion. I knew I could make a good life for myself where I was. I was a good student. Personable, good writer, charming speaker. I could have stayed in my small town, close to my family and comfortable in the house I've lived in since I was five. I could've gotten a 9-5 job at a local business and pretended the backhanded compliments and judgmental stares from the middle-aged ladies in sport shoes didn't bother me. I could have been *comfortable*.

But that's not what I wanted.

It might sound egotistical, but I dreamed of *more*. More fun, more success, more than what my tiny town had to offer me.

That's why, the day I received my official acceptance from Brooklyn College, I knew my life would never be the same again. I was drowning in the excitement and anticipation of my future. It was like the universe had finally aligned with what I had been wanting all this time.

What I wasn't expecting, though, is how scary it feels.

Since the beginning of the process--which was the day I went in for my visa appointment--I've been nervous. From the intimidating security at the gate of the United States Embassy, sternly telling everyone to leave all items except their Visa documents outside, to the visa agents with their stern gazes colder than February in New York. They like to refer to it as "straightforward," or "simple." It's either a yes, or a no. You have to accept your fate and move on. There's nothing you can do to change their minds. Nothing you can argue. If it's a no, it's a no.

I had been cool the entire week leading up to my interview, but I was shaking, sweating, and close to tears right before my turn at the window. There were so many things running through my mind. What if they say no? What am I going to do? What's gonna happen to my deposit? Will I apply again? Can I afford that?

Thankfully--and I really am thankful--I didn't have to think about that. Against all odds, only four weeks before Trump's re-election, my visa was approved. I was officially going to be a student in the United States for the next four years.

My first few weeks in New York, everything was great. January was freezing and I was still on the hunt for an apartment, so I wasn't exactly comfortable, but I was happy. I was getting to do the things I had been dreaming of doing since I was a little girl. I was going to concerts, exploring all the beautiful sights in Brooklyn, going to museums, and doing everything else I could think of to distract myself from how homesick I was. There was talk starting up about how immigrants were being threatened, some people even having their green cards revoked, but I wasn't worried. Why should I have been? I'm a student, on a perfectly legal student visa. No one can kick me out.

Or so I thought.

On the 25th of March, 2025, I woke up to a video of Rümeysa Öztürk being kidnapped by ICE officials going viral. According to CUNY CLEAR, the Turkish student getting her PhD at Tufts University was targeted by the Trump administration due to an opinion piece she co-authored in her student newspaper last year (CUNY CLEAR).

I convinced myself that my situation was different. I told myself things like, "She's probably an immigrant, not on a student visa," or "her visa must have expired; she must have some invalid documents." However, as the days went by and more students were detained, I couldn't lie to myself anymore.

All Rümeysa Öztürk and Mahmood Khalil had done was speak up for what they believed in (Khalil). If I dared to take a stand, would I be punished like they were?

I had always thought that no matter what the political situation, it wouldn't affect me; but now, I had to admit it. It can affect me. I'm just as vulnerable, as at risk as all the people who were forcefully removed from the country.

> I wonder, if I could have had a glimpse into the future the day I was granted my visa, how I would feel then. Would it dim my excitement? Would I think the future is bleak?

Walking home to my East Flatbush apartment, working late at my on-campus job, or strolling through Manhattan at midday--every time I see a cop, my heart stops. It feels like an exaggeration, but I truly hold my breath until I've walked past them. It's terrifying to walk around the city you dream of belonging to, knowing that someone casually strolling the street might have the power to kick you out. It makes me wonder how immigrants, undocumented citizens, and international students must have felt during Trump's first few months in office. Were they scared? Angry? Disappointed?

In April of 2025, a Brooklyn College student came up to me at an event on campus and handed me a flyer for a protest that was happening the next day. It was in support of Palestine and Mahmood Khalil, the student who was detained and stripped of his degree from Columbia. It felt good attending the event. It felt good to voice out loud, how much we hate the politics in the country, how angry we are at the leaders who are supposed to represent our voices.

It felt good to yell, "NO MORE ICE!"

The protest was as peaceful as it could have been. Still, over 50 cops showed up. They almost outnumbered the students and faculty attending the protest. I noticed that most of the international students had masks or head-covers, to ensure their picture doesn't end up in *The New York Times*. I was concerned, because this isn't something I had thought to do. What if they already had a picture of me? What if a cop had profiled me? What if they followed me home?

With a million thoughts in my head, I tried my best to stay calm and not overthink the situation. I left with a friend, and I got home safe. Deep breath in, deep breath out.

The very next day, I was invited to a zoom meeting for students on an F-1 visa by Brooklyn College. I joined the meeting at about 10:09 A.M., still lying in bed, groggy from sleep. I rubbed my eyes and tried to pay attention to what the international student representative was saying. She was giving us safety tips, advice on how to avoid any conflict with our visa status, and more.

Then she said, "Strictly do not attend any protests. Stay as far away from them as you can." My ears perked up. My heart sank.

I had been at a protest less than 24 hours ago.

The representative was talking about students who were arrested after being identified through facial recognition that ICE was using to scope out students that were at pro-Palestine protests. Hell, there were even people simply walking past protests that were arrested.

What I thought would be a relaxing, restful Saturday had turned rather restless. I remember trying to go about business as usual. Get up, get dressed, head out, work on assignments, come back home, eat dinner, go to bed. I was actively distracting myself. I put on music, I tried to get my mind off it, but every time my phone buzzed with a notification, I wondered if they had found me. I wondered if by next week, I would be one of the people "self-deporting."

I've never been much for staying home. I like having a place outside my room that I feel comfortable enough to spend the entire day in. I find that I'm more productive that way. Prospect Park had become that place for me. It's a twenty-minute walk from my apartment. All these days, it had felt like the perfect getaway. That day, though, I wondered if I'd enjoy the walk I had been looking forward to all week. I wondered if I would be able to ignore the cop car that's always parked right inside the park. I wondered if I'd really get any work done through worrying.

I thought back to middle school, when I was still at the top of my class. It was a rarity for me to get anything less than an A on my report cards. I was doing well academically and keeping up with extra-curriculars. I felt like a well-rounded child, but my dreams were bigger than that. I didn't want to be well rounded, I wanted to be more. My incessant self-belief has kept me over optimistic about my life, but I like it that way.

As I got older that started to change. I don't even know how it happened, but I somehow went from being at the top of my class to failing most of my exams. I didn't get it. I was putting in the exact same amount of effort but every year my grades got worse. I wondered if my parents had made a mistake enrolling me into the most difficult board of education in the country. I wondered if it was because my dad didn't live in my house anymore. Mostly I wondered if I just wasn't smart enough anymore. Whether all these excuses just came down to it being my fault.

I was diagnosed with ADHD when I was in the 9th grade. I was scared, but I mostly felt relief. I had found an explanation to why my performance rapidly went down over the years. It doesn't matter now that I was never medicated for it, or that I never had an honest conversation about it with my parents. I knew then that to achieve my dreams I would have to work harder than the rest of my peers. It's fine. I got this. Now that I know what's happening, I can fix it.

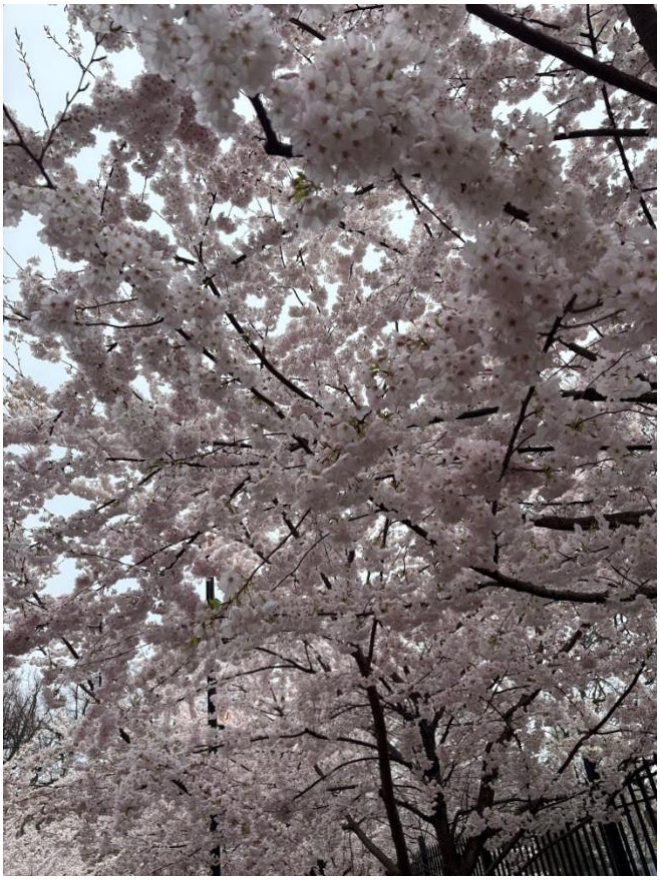
Regardless of my dwindling grades, I had decided in the 8th grade that I would pursue an education overseas. It was a year of reminding myself of my big dreams. Remember? More, better, and bigger? This meant that I had to start doing more than every one of my classmates. Participate in every activity, pull my grades up, prepare myself for applications. It was 4 years of daydreaming and worrying. Will I make it? God, I really hope I make it.

The average international student spends about four years preparing to just apply to colleges abroad (Bista). From participating in extracurriculars to stellar grades, you have to be on top of the game. According to *U.S. News and World Report*, the average acceptance rate for international students in U.S. universities is 29.1% (Cole). On the contrary, the average acceptance rate for local students is a whopping 73%. Against all odds, I was lucky enough to be one of the 29.1% who managed to pass standardised tests, write a convincing statement of purpose, and get recommendation letters good enough for my educational institution to deem me worthy of being a part of it.

According to the *Journal of International Students*, the effect of international students studying in the U.S. can be felt beyond campus boundaries. We contribute around $22 billion to the United States economy annually, making us a vital source of revenue (Bista). This is because most international students are paying double the tuition fee that our local counterparts pay, devoid of any government funding or aid. There are also fewer scholarship options for international students, meaning that most of us pay out of pocket. Our economic contribution to the country surpasses those of the gaming industry, the weight loss industry, and the domestic movie and music industries combined. Yet, this year it seems that we are being hunted like endangered animals with an expensive bounty on our heads.

Today, I stood inside Brooklyn College campus and stared at the clock tower from across the quad, a cherry blossom lending her shade to me. Her pink petals would be all gone in three days.

The way time blurred, I am unsure of how long I stood there, simply staring, with the same song looping over and over. What I saw in front of me was so many things all at once. It was my future. The place where I would get my



CHERRY BLOSSOM AT BROOKLYN COLLEGE, APRIL 2025. GRAPHIC COURTESY OF AUTHOR.

education and start my career. It was dreams actualized. A picture from my computer screen picked and dropped in front of me. It was a paradise of learning, filled with books and professors that would teach me everything I needed to know to excel in my field. But this dream was a ticking time bomb, because it could be snatched away from me at any given moment.

I stood there and thought, "Here I am, living the American dream. I wonder when it'll stop feeling like a nightmare."

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## Author's Note


Writing this piece was one of the most cathartic experiences I've ever had. I am immensely grateful to Professors Entin, Aja, Theoharis and the Mellon Foundation for giving me and my fellow writers a chance to take our darkest fears and turn them into community and art. I would also like to thank Professor H for referring me for this project, and lending her shoulder to me while I was going through the difficult transition to accepting this reality. My hope is that, when someone young dreams of leaving their hometown that they grew out of years ago, they feel encouraged to fight the cruelty rather than get disheartened by it. I hope this piece serves as an offering of truth and resilience. If you are reading this, thank you for being here. Dream big enough to crush any resisting force in your wake :)



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This journal is published by Pitt Open Library Publishing..

ISSN: 1941-0832

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# Instability, Uncertainty, and Responsibility

by Catarina



PHOTO COURTESY OF AUTHOR.


http://radicalteacher.library.pitt.edu No. 134 (Fall 2026) DOI 10.5195/rt.2026.1562

There are nights when nightmares haunt me. I tell myself it's just the summer heat, but deep down I know it's because Tom Homan and Kristi Noem have instigated fear in our communities. In the thick of summer, the only thing keeping my baby brother and me cool is a fan at night. We avoid using the AC. Our utilities are included in the rent, and we try to avoid extra electricity charges from our landlady, an elderly woman with medical problems. My mother says saving money helps protect both our families, both vulnerable in different ways. Still, I wake up drenched in cold sweat, my heart pounding. I feel trapped. I force myself to stay awake. If I fall asleep, they might come. They'll slip through the windows and catch us off guard. First, they'll take my brother. He's a U.S. citizen and a minor, so they'll send him to Administration for Children's Services. Then they'll come for me. I'm on their records. I applied for a visa. They know where I am. Your parents are next, the voice in my head whispers. You won't see your mother again. Your brother will grow up without you. If you're lucky, he'll be reunited with her. Maybe your stepdad will be sent directly to Mexico and won't be held long in detention. Pray they don't send him to El Salvador.

And you? You might get to appeal. You might be deported. If you're lucky, they'll send you back to Mexico and not some foreign country you've never set foot in. Wake up. Don't fall asleep. I think they're out there, preying. I think they're in the backyard. Careful. They'll come through the window. You left it unlocked, didn't you? Thoughts like that echo nonstop when fear takes over. Get up. Now. I jump out of bed, disoriented. I check the windows. The noise rumbles in my head. I feel dizzy, as if someone had hit my head with a bat. I rush to the front door, check that both locks are shut. Then I crawl back into bed and pull my brother close. I hold him tight. If they try to take him, they'll have to rip us apart.

I never understood my immigration status or how to navigate it and almost a decade after my arrival in the U.S., I still don't. During the past year, I had to attend college as a full-time student, work part time, contribute to the household with domestic labor as well as child care for my baby brother. My family depends on me, not just financially, but emotionally. That kind of responsibility is part of being an immigrant. So is the isolation that often comes with it.

From an early age I learned that I had to be a person that took care of my mother. It started after my parents separated. I had to be that wooden cane my mother could rely on, due to the lack of family support, economic instability, and no broader village that looked out for one another. Almost two decades later, things have not changed much; the difference now is that we live in a foreign country. This is also something that most immigrant children experience due to the distance and being isolated from families back home.

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But when we moved to the United States, it went from my mother relying on me emotionally to relying on me for a variety of simple tasks due to the language barrier--relying on me with watery eyes to translate with my broken English things that I still did not comprehend or helping her count because she couldn't differentiate nickels from dimes. I was always ashamed of my thick accent and people not understanding.

Experiences like these made me feel like my mother's needs were a burden. But my mother's needs were not the burden, it was the fear of being exposed that *I wasn't from here* that caused that burden. I was shamed for my tongue that was learning to trace two nations with my thick accent, when words in Spanish would slip out of my mouth mid-sentence. That was when the burden felt heavier.

It was our legal status that was a burden. In 2019, I applied for the Special Immigrant Juvenile Visa status; being neglected and abandoned by my father during my childhood, and because it was unsafe for me to return, I was eligible to obtain this visa. Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) was created by Congress to protect individuals younger than 21 years old who have been abused or neglected by one or both parents and cannot be reunified with them. An order from a state court is needed to prove they cannot be reunified with one or both of their parents because they have survived parental abuse, abandonment, or neglect, and that it would not be in their best interest to be returned to their country of origin or previous residence or that of their parents.

It has been seven years now and I am still in limbo. These visas are supposed to allow young people to regularize their status and obtain a green card. But it is now summer of 2025 and my status still is not adjusted. Plus, SIJS has a pathway to citizenship for young people, compared to DACA.

Some background on these two different pathways for undocumented children: On June 15, 2012, the Secretary of Homeland Security announced that certain migrants who came to the United States as children and meet several requirements may request consideration of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) for 2 years, and that status can be renewed. DACA recipients are eligible to request work authorization as well as Deferred Action. The Trump administration attempted to terminate the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program in September 2017. But in 2020, the United States Supreme Court issued a 5–4 ruling stating that the Trump administration's attempt to rescind the DACA program was subject to judicial review and had been carried out in an arbitrary and capricious manner, thereby violating the Administrative Procedure Act. According to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (n.d.), DACA provides temporary protection from deportation to eligible undocumented youth. But in order to apply to DACA you have to meet these requirements and gather the following documents: Proof of identity, proof you came to the United States before your 16th birthday, proof of immigration status, proof of presence in U.S. on June 15, 2012, proof you continuously resided in U.S. since June 15, 2007, and proof of your student status at the time of requesting DACA, or proof you are an honorably discharged veteran of the U.S. Coast Guard or armed forces of the United States.

DACA has always imposed rigorous documentation requirements, and while it offers important protections, its

limitations can be incredibly challenging, and many people are left out from ever applying. Its exclusivity sets an unrealistic standard for undocumented immigrant youth, requiring individuals to be nearly perfect in order to qualify. This definition overlooks the full humanity and diverse experiences of immigrants. Many undocumented individuals are forced to leave school and enter the workforce at a young age due to lack of family and financial support, left vulnerable to navigating life without the protections that come with formal education or legal status.

SIJS is another valuable pathway for undocumented youth, but it requires navigating a complex two-step process. First, applicants must go through family court to establish eligibility by demonstrating abuse, neglect, or abandonment. Only after this determination can they apply to USCIS for SIJS. Children with SIJS are eligible to apply for lawful permanent resident status under the fourth employment-based green card category. But even then, recipients have to compete for visas within the EB-4 category, which has an annual limit, which contributes to the backlog. The Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) limits the number of employment-based preference immigrant visas and the annual limit for EB-4 visas is 7.1 percent of the worldwide employment limit (U.S. Department of State, 2025). In 2022, I went from being 6 months away to submitting an application for an adjustment of status and obtaining a green card to waiting 3 more years. It is now July 2025 and there are currently no more visas available for this fiscal year. They ran out for the year in February.

During 2025, fear of ICE raids and aggressive immigration enforcement tactics have also discouraged many families including my own from attending immigration court hearings, creating yet another barrier for those who might qualify for this relief. ICE raids shape how my family conducts our everyday life; their constant presence reinforces the precarity of undocumented life, instilling fear and limiting access to basic rights as well as social services. Using newly released government data from ICE, analyzed by the Deportation Data Project, the Prison Policy Initiative determined that states cooperating with the Trump administration accounted for more than 1,000 ICE arrests per day.

While I was applying to SIJS, everything felt uncertain. I was afraid that they would end the program, just like DACA, and then I would face all these fears of having to self deport. Then in 2022, I was approved for Form I-765, Application for Employment Authorization. This is a work permit that allows you to legally work in the United States. I finally had some kind of relief, including a temporary SSN and Deferred Action–a protection from deportation in case I was detained by ICE, DHS, or any law enforcement. Research on undocumented immigrants has shown how the social environment of living without legal status can shape an individual's self-perception and worldview, ultimately contributing to psychological distress (Garcini et al., 2021). Thanks to a temporary work permit and SSN, I was able for apply to different opportunities and felt a sense of relief, security, and moderate stability. I received a paid internship in the mental health field, advocating for girls at the risk of suicide, and was able provide the proper documentation employers require. Having the opportunity to explore, learn, and contribute to society in my field of study gave me a sense of hope and belonging, and helped me overcome feelings of self-doubt, which contributed to my own better mental health. One of my concerns has been not being able to provide for my family in the long run.

## Not Perfect Enough

On June 6th, 2025, the Trump administration decided to end Deferred Action for SIJS. In my case, I won't be able to renew my work permit, and I am at risk of being deported if I encounter law enforcement and they decide I can't have due process. If detained under the current administration, my future will be in the hands of a federal law enforcement agent, rather than the immigration jurisdiction. If he wakes up in a good mood, my rights might be respected. If God has abandoned me, a US bounty hunter will kidnap me.

A few weeks ago, I could have been detained by law enforcement officers but not be deported until due process. Today, the reality is now totally different. Taking away SIJS Deferred Action and the possibility of legally working in the United States puts children with SIJS and potential SIJS applicants at a higher risk, making them vulnerable to labor exploitation.

Children that apply to this category are children who have been abused, neglected, and abandoned by one or both parents. Many children don't report the abuse they endure and in order to qualify, a report has to be made and they will have to first petition a state court (family court) judge for findings of parental abuse. If you are under 18 years old, you will need a legal guardian and have them be granted full custody. However, this process often excludes unaccompanied minors who arrive in the United States without an immediate family member to petition on their behalf.

I've lived through uncertainty and I know what it is like to navigate this country without safety, stability, or the protections that every child deserves. According to the Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (2023), Homeland Security Investigations identified or assisted 1,806 child exploitation victims and helped 731 human trafficking victims in fiscal year 2023. At the same time, as children grow up, they still need protection. Immigrant youth are often seen with compassion due to the fact that they are still minors, and that compassion and empathy fade when they turn 18 years old. Our support is often tied to the idea of innocence, reserved for children but not for young adults. Many who claim to support immigrants often turn away when the person is no longer a child, no longer "innocent." Unaccompanied children become young adults, young adults become parents, and parents eventually become grandparents, yet the need for safety, dignity, and stability never disappears. Still, the current administration deports immigrants that have spent more than half of their lives in the United States.

"I am not surprised if the current administration decides to give the minimum visas they can. This is pure evil and cruelty." That is what my lawyer said to me when I called him to ask what I can do to prepare and if I could renew my

work permit. Hearing I was not going to be able to renew my permit and Deferred Action felt like hot soup in 90 degree weather. People talk about shock feeling like buckets of cold water hitting their bodies but for me, it is the feeling of hot broth burning your tongue, your throat, and finally your chest, that kind of burning pain.

During the past year, my family and I have been facing instability due to current rhetoric against immigrants, encouraged by the current president Donald Trump. My brother was born last year, before Trump was elected. More than ever since he took office, I have been the one my mother and stepdad rely on, having to go to governmental agencies, being their full-time secretary and personal assistant. I have filled out multiple documents for them, having to explain what we need to do. But still I worry if I filled out the "Are You a U.S Citizen?" question wrong and will then have to face deportation over a mistake. This explains how we live in fear and the instability we face. According to the American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Immigration (2012), children and youth living in households with undocumented family members often live in fear of separation due to apprehension or deportation. This creates ongoing psychological and emotional stress that affects their mental health and overall well-being. Similarly, Rafieifar, Gallegos, and Praetorius (in press) highlight that the threat of removal profoundly shapes the lives of undocumented immigrants, restricting personal autonomy, undermining emotional well-being, and limiting future opportunities for entire families. Because most immigrant children grow up in mixed-status households, these circumstances often produce complex family dynamics and emotionally ambivalent relationships among relatives. I am expected to care for my brother if my parents are detained, positioning me not only as a sibling but as a stabilizing presence and potential parent figure. Our relationships are now guided by preparedness and the constant management of uncertainty.



PHOTO COURTESY OF AUTHOR.

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The recent ICE raids have made it even harder to build support networks or maintain meaningful connections. I take care of my 11-month-old brother who is still breast fed. It pains me to think that families similar to mine are being ripped apart, babies being separated from their mothers, fathers sent to prisons in El Salvador, siblings growing without each other and sent to countries they never visited or barely remember.

My mother and stepdad never leave the house without giving us a proper good-bye, praying that we will reunite before the sunset sets in. I see how much my family relies on me and how a deportation could deeply affect my family. My mother has taken care of me since I was born and being apart from her would deeply affect us both. Now that new individuals have joined our family of two, it hurts to think that all of us could be separated, ripped apart by dehumanizing rhetoric against immigrants, cruelty, and blatant xenophobia from this administration. I worry about putting my family at risk if I get detained or being separated if I am deported. But I worry most about my baby brother--about him being ripped away from our family.

I have nightmares of ICE coming into our home to detain us. I wake up in panic and quickly search for my brother so I know he has not been kidnapped by law enforcement officials, just in case it is not a nightmare but the beginning of my new reality. That's the type of instability you live with when you've taken all the right steps but are denied a path to legal status.

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## Contributor's note

**Catarina** graduated from Brooklyn College in spring of 2025 with a major in Psychology and a minor in Spanish Translation. Catarina enjoys writing poetry in English and finds writing poetry in Spanish quite silly. Catarina is pursuing a Master's Degree in social work and is committed to upholding human dignity throughout her career. Catarina obtained her nickname after her father saw her dancing to a song by a singer named Catarino.



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This journal is published by Pitt Open Library Publishing..

ISSN: 1941-0832

RADICAL TEACHER

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

# Assessing the Impact of a Course on Radical Manifestos on Students' Political Beliefs, Attitudes, and Activism

by Breanne Fahs and Eric Swank



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For most women's and gender studies faculty, enhancing the scholar/activist identity is central to their pedagogical goals (Hassel & Nelson, 2023). As part of doing radical work—that is, going to the root of a problem to better understand its shared roots with other forms of oppression--both faculty and students should engage with feminist praxis and with the meaningful analysis of systematic inequalities, shared oppressions, and, most importantly, individual and collective forms of resistance. The more radical iterations of the second wave of the feminist movement called upon women's studies to become the scholarly wing of an activist movement (Fahs, 2018b), not (as it has often become) a field invested in the priorities of the university (e.g., tenure, promotion, respectability, consolidating elite power, and so on). Women's studies was imagined to serve the feminist movement, to be an arm of something with a more vast and ambitious aim of dismantling dominance and hierarchy as manifested through patriarchy, racism, classism, capitalism, heterosexism, and many other "isms."

If women's studies is to serve an activist movement, it is also essential to consider what is needed to prioritize activism in the college curricula. As such, radical critique, exposing students to radical writings and historical documents, and fostering student/activist activities are key priorities for women's studies pedagogical practice. Frances Fox Piven (2010) argued that academic commitment to activism is crucial in order for the university to remain relevant to social justice causes. Faculty support was beneficial to the student social movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Van Dyke, 1998) and it remains crucial for moving forward the goals and visions of Black Lives Matter (Hope et al., 2016), anti-Trump activism (Meyer & Tarrow, 2018), and global movements for peace and justice (Swank & Fahs, 2011; Ustyuzhanin et al., 2023). These identities are inseparable, as community engagement, social justice-informed research, commitment to social change, public speaking, writing papers dedicated to feminist praxis, and leadership are all major parts of the critical university experience (Maxis et al., 2017), as is future-oriented thinking and investment in future generations (Suzuki & Mayorga, 2014). Scholar/activists are interested in pushing teachers and students to consider the intellectual and political merits of different academic projects and to invest in community and social movement collaborations (Derickson & Routledge, 2014, p. 4; Siplon, 2014). The push toward "academia without walls," critical thinking about institutional practices, and the importance of thinking about the conditions of work within universities have also constituted major goals of scholar/activist work (do Mar Pereira, 2016), as has integrating protest into the academic identity (Young, Battaglia, & Cloud, 2010). Still, understanding how people become scholar/activists is underdeveloped, and systematic research on how to teach students to value scholar/activist identities is still in its infancy. Understanding the pedagogical tools that facilitate a shift in students' perceptions of themselves--particularly as they move from "recipients" of education to activists and advocates for others--is a crucial element to furthering the project of radical pedagogy.

At its core, a college curriculum generally asks students to think critically, grapple with new concepts, and rely on evidence to make arguments. These processes can serve as a liberalizing force or, in some cases, a radicalizing process (Astin, 1993). Women's studies courses have a strong track record of seeking out transformative goals for students, as they overwhelmingly challenge essentialist ideas about gender and constantly show that women are disadvantaged in current power relations. The field of women's studies also prioritizes the practices and histories of activism, which itself has the potential to politicize students and help them to understand more of the radical forms of analysis that govern gender, class, and race relations in the U.S. and throughout the world. Studies have shown that enrolling in a women's studies course led to increased feminist consciousness, particularly by increasing awareness of male privilege (Case, 2007), intensifying students' anger about sexism (Henderson-King & Stewart, 1999), and leading to students more often self-identifying as feminists (Case, 2007). They were also more likely than other students to contest sexist comments, and attend feminist meetings outside of class (Stake, 2007). Moreover, students who took women's studies courses also developed more radical perspectives on romantic relationships, labeling marriage as a potentially oppressive force and better understanding how capitalism can destroy family well-being (Henley et al., 1998).

While these studies are informative, they also have some methodological shortcomings, particularly because they study women's studies in general (Case, 2007; Henderson-King & Stewart, 1999) rather than looking more specifically at *which* courses impact students most acutely. Women's studies courses vary significantly by course objectives, class content, teaching assignments, pedagogical styles and goals, and the demographics of students in the class. It is imperative, then, to better understand the consequences of specific classes across the women's studies curriculum. To this end, this study examined how the political attitudes and behaviors of students who are in any women's studies course as well students who are taking an upper-division class on radical writings and manifestos impacted students' activist behaviors and political beliefs, and what these results imply for the priorities and practices of women's studies as a field, particularly in these times when DEI work is imperiled and regressive and hyper-conservative discourses are dominating the landscape of academia.

## Contextualizing the Manifestos Course

As women's studies professors at Arizona State University, we can attest that feminist courses have a uniquely political intention. Most of our courses focus on social structure, robust critiques of inequalities, and the histories and contemporary practices of enacting social change. We are fortunate to have access to students from vastly diverse backgrounds, including a sizeable population of indigenous, Latinx, queer, trans, nonbinary, first-generation, and returning to college later in life students. The diversity in age, gender, race, class, size, ability, and educational history is significant, which also gives the work we do particular significance in its ability to reach wider

groups of students and their associated networks (e.g., many students live at home and talk about their school assignments with their families).

The first author, Breanne Fahs, designed an upper-division women's studies course called "Hate Speech, Manifestos, and Radical Writings" in which students spend a semester reading manifestos and then writing their own manifesto at the end of the term. Fahs has written quite extensively on the pedagogical framing and challenges of this manifesto assignment (Fahs, 2018a; Fahs, 2019; Fahs & Swank, 2021), though we have never before systematically studied the impacts of the manifesto course on students' political engagement and radical politics. The class has as its central framing a gender liberation approach that prioritizes challenging oppression and fostering empowerment (Hassel & Nelson, 2023). Students in the class read manifestos that span a huge range of topics, including identity groups (e.g., Black Power, indigenous rights, Brown Power, radical feminism, anti-assimilationist queer, and more), and clusters of topics (e.g., madness, violence, technologies of power, radical environmentalism, and performance art). In the class students read a sizeable number of original manifestos spanning the last hundred years, and they read articles that contextualize and talk *about* the manifestos. The class has as its primary goal to expose students to radical writings and historical documents, to better contextualize the histories of radical activism, and to encourage the toppling of hierarchies of knowledge production by instead valuing and reading those outside of the academy, what *SCUM Manifesto* author Valerie Solanas suggested was a form of writing "from the gutter" for "whores, dykes, criminals, and homicidal maniacs" (Solanas, 1996, p. 37).

Students are expected to learn about the genre of manifesto writing as well, including histories of manifestos, techniques of manifesto writing, and the political intentions of manifesto writing (Caws, 2001; Hanna, 2020). Manifestos are a unique genre, one that aims to deconstruct hierarchy, give voice to people who have typically been disenfranchised, and open up space for highly emotive and politically revolutionary thought and argumentation. As Fahs (2019) wrote of why manifestos matter in an academic context: "Too often, I think, academic writing strips students (and to a lesser degree, faculty as well) from their own sense of authority about the world" (p. 35). Manifestos, by contrast, are "hotblooded and full of passion, unreasonable and 'unprofessional' in tone, and revolutionary in intent" (Fahs, 2019, p. 34). While a few studies have addressed how to teach manifesto writing (Fahs, 2018a; Moore, 2016; Tack, 2022), one interview-based study found that students felt more empowered after writing a manifesto (Fields & Power-Carter, 2021). The manifesto writing process seems to lead to a better understanding of intersecting oppressions and legacies of earlier political activism (Fahs, 2019).

## Research Questions

This study builds on the existing literature by assessing the impacts of women's studies in general, and specifically a manifesto course, on students' political consciousness and radical politics. To do so, we distributed surveys to college students who were, and were not, enrolled in the manifesto course. We prioritized two primary research questions: First, are students in women's studies courses more engaged in progressive politics in terms of activist commitments and political attitudes compared to students not enrolled in women's studies courses? Second, compared to women's studies students not enrolled in the manifestos courses, are students in the manifestos course reporting more activist commitments and more left/radical leaning political attitudes and viewpoints?

## Method

### Participants and Design

Data for this cross-sectional study was collected during February and March of 2025, in the first two months of Trump's second term. That timing is notable in that it meant that all students who completed the survey lived through the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-present), the January 6 insurrection (2021), the Gaza protests (2023-2024), the first months of a second Trump presidency that was working to dismantle the federal government and punish dissenters (2025), and massive social movements that have been called The Resistance (e.g., Women's March of 2017; Black Lives Matter protests during the summer of 2020). The online survey was anonymous and received approval from the university's research compliance office and Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Survey participants came from a large university in the American Southwest. The university has several campuses and is situated in the fifth largest metropolitan city in the United States. The campus that was sampled has roughly 5,000 students and mostly serves undergraduates; it is considered a Hispanic-serving campus and has a sizeable number of first-generation and returning-to-school students who also work full-time jobs. The degrees at this campus mostly center on the liberal arts and sciences with the largest majors being Forensic Science, Biology, and Psychology. The degrees at this campus offer both in-person and online classes with most of the in-person students commuting to campus and living off-site.

Students from our sample came from classes in a diverse array of courses across majors on the campus. In order to target courses that are known for more liberal or conservative students (Astin, 1993), we solicited students from natural science, humanities, and social science courses (e.g., biology, communications, anthropology, and women's studies). With the consent of the instructor, students in the class received a link with an invitation to fill out a Qualtrics-based survey. No compensation for student participation was offered.

The sample for this study included 86 students who completed the survey. Of these students, 3 identified as multiracial, 57 identified as fully or partially white, and 19 identified as Latinx. Smaller numbers of students described themselves as Asian-American (n=7), Black (n=4), or Native American (n=4). For social class, the modal backgrounds were middle class (n=21) and lower middle-class (n=20), with working-class being the third most common class background (n=16). For sexual orientation,

the sample had a large number of sexual minorities (10 identified as lesbian or gay, 19 as bisexual, and 20 as queer). Most participants were cisgender women (n=50), never married (n=68), and juniors in college (n=29), and the mean age was 24.47 years (SD=8.3).

**Procedure, Materials, and Measures**

*Women's Studies class exposure*: We asked two questions about enrollment in different types of college courses. The first question was "Have you taken one of the following classes?" Students then checked close-ended boxes that included a choice for Women and Gender Studies (n=33). The second question asked about the specific Women and Gender studies class they had completed. In the end, twelve students had enrolled in the manifestos course and the other women's studies courses were mostly comprised of lower-division classes (9 students had taken "Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies" while 11 were in sophomore level classes on "Gender in the Media" or "U.S. Women's Movements").

We included 4 variables that measured the recognition of different forms of social hierarchies.

*Awareness of sexism*: We used two items from the Modern Sexism Scale (Swim & Cohen, 1997). This Likert-scale was designed to locate people who denied the existence of modern day discrimination against women. The first item claimed: "Women miss out on good jobs due to discrimination" while the second item posited that "Society has reached the point where women and men have equal opportunities for achievement" (strongly agree=1, strongly disagree=5, Cronbach α= .676).

*Awareness of heterosexism*: We used one item from the Heterosexual Privilege Awareness (HPA) scale that assesses student recognition of systematic advantages for heterosexuals in society (Case & Stewart, 2009). The item read: "Heterosexuals have certain privileges not given to homosexuals" (strongly agree=5, strongly disagree=1).

*Awareness of sizeism*: We traced an awareness of sizeism through the Fat Acceptance Scale (Kase, & Mohr, 2022). The recognition of systematic and pervasive sizeism came through three items such as: "It is unfair that some furniture in public spaces is too small for fat people to fit into" and "Fat people experience unfair discrimination when dating" (strongly agree=5, strongly disagree=1, Cronbach α= .887)

*Awareness of racism:* To address awareness of racism (Davis & Wilson, 2022), we used one survey item that assessed how students might justify white privilege and resist antiracist sentiments: "African Americans need to stop using racism and slavery as excuses" (disagree=3, not sure=2, agree=1).

We also included five measures that dealt with emotional reactions to groups of people. These groups were chosen because they are generally considered some of most stigmatized groups in the U.S.

*Hostility towards women:* To measure hostility towards women, we used the Hostility Towards Women Scale (Check, 1985). The two-item composite scale contained phrases such as: "Most women fail to appreciate fully all that men do for them" and "Most women interpret innocent remarks or acts as being sexist." (strongly agree=5, strongly disagree=1, Cronbach α=.727).

*Feeling thermometer:* Emotional connections to the targets of racism, sexism, and heteropatriarchy were measured through a "feeling thermometer." Respondents were asked to rank their feeling toward Black people, Hispanics/Latinx people, Women, and Gay/Lesbian people through a 10-point rating scale where 1 indicated very cold feelings and 10 denoted very warm and favorable feelings.

*Right-wing authoritarianism*: We used an item from a short version of the Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) scale (Zakrisson, 2005). To measure endorsement of authoritarian viewpoints, the item read: "The established authorities generally turn out to be right about things" (strongly disagree=5, strongly agree=1).

*Activist orientation:* An activist orientation was measured through the Activist Identity and Commitment Scale (AICS) (Klar, & Kasser, 2009). The AICS identifies acceptance and devotion to activism with the item: "I am truly committed to engaging in activism" (strongly agree=5, strongly disagree=1).

*Political participation*: We asked questions about electoral and protest actions to measure political participation. Electoral engagement, or the routine behaviors that individuals engage in to sway governmental policy, was measured by asking participants about their voting behaviors and whether they had contributed money to a political candidate. Protest engagement, or the street politics that try to collectively disrupt conventional power structures, was measured by asking participants about whether they had attended a protest and whether they had engaged in civil disobedience. These items traced electoral and protest participation, but they did not address the cause or goals behind the political participation. Answers for these measures were coded in a binary fashion (had done the action in last four years or distant past=1; had never done the action=0).

## Results

Table 1 presented the results of the one-way ANOVA that compared sociopolitical beliefs and feelings by the type of courses taken. Overall, students who had taken women's studies classes were more progressive than students who had not taken these classes. Moreover, students who had enrolled in the manifestos course were even more progressive than other women's studies students on a few measures.

The first set of comparisons examined students who been exposed to any type of women's studies courses (left side of the table). As expected, the students who had taken women's studies courses were generally more liberal than the students who had not taken women's studies courses. Significant differences between women's studies students and non-women's studies students were found in three of the six attitudinal measures: the ability to recognize sexism, racism, and heterosexism. All of the emotional feelings

measures were significant, with women's studies students demonstrating less hostility toward women, and greater warmth toward Black people, Latinx people, feminists, and gay and lesbian people. The gap in scores for recognizing sizeism was not big enough to reach statistical significance. Further, there was a minimal difference on the authoritarianism and commitment to activism measures between women's studies students and non-women's studies students.

The right side of table 1 compared the political sensibilities of the manifestos students to other students. The manifestos students were to the left of other students in *all cases*. These differences were statistically significant for the awareness of racial and gender biases and warmth toward women and people of color. The manifestos students also had significantly higher levels of activist orientations and lower levels of authoritarian tendencies (something most women's studies classes did not achieve). In a bit of surprise, the scores on recognizing heterosexual privilege and closeness to sexual minorities were not significantly higher for the manifestos students.

**Table 1: Women's Studies Courses and Political Beliefs**

| | | Any Women's Studies Course | | | | Manifestos Course | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Variable | Range | Yes | No | F | Sig | Yes | No | F | Sig |
| Recognize Discrimination | | | | | | | | | |
| Modern Sexism- Deny | | 3.50 | 4.24 | 5.58 | ***.020*** | 3.08 | 4.10 | 5.48 | ***.022*** |
| Recognize Heterosexism | 1-5 | 4.61 | 4.19 | 6.76 | ***.011*** | 4.55 | 4.31 | 1.37 | .281 |
| Recognize Sizeism | 1-5 | 3.88 | 3.49 | 2.66 | .107 | 4.25 | 3.54 | 4.82 | ***.035*** |
| Recognize Racism | 1-3 | 2.85 | 2.59 | 4.72 | ***.031*** | 3.00 | 2.64 | 4.59 | ***.031*** |
| Feelings toward Stigmatized Groups | | | | | | | | | |
| Hostility Toward Women | | 3.59 | 4.35 | 4.61 | ***.035*** | 3.08 | 4.22 | 5.56 | ***.020*** |
| Warmth for Black People | 1-10 | 8.36 | 7.43 | 8.45 | ***.005*** | 9.00 | 7.59 | 9.97 | ***.002*** |
| Warmth for Latinx People | 1-10 | 8.33 | 7.60 | 4.30 | ***.041*** | 9.16 | 7.67 | 9.74 | ***.002*** |
| Warmth for Feminists | 1-10 | 8.57 | 7.67 | 6.03 | ***.016*** | 9.08 | 7.85 | 5.76 | ***.019*** |
| Warmth for Gay and Lesbian People | 1-10 | 9.03 | 8.30 | 5.73 | ***.019*** | 9.08 | 8.50 | 1.78 | .185 |
| Other Political Beliefs | | | | | | | | | |
| Authoritarianism | 1-5 | 1.74 | 1.86 | .28 | .585 | 1.25 | 1.92 | 5.79 | ***.019*** |
| Activist Orientation | | 12.24 | 12.22 | .00 | .998 | 14.81 | 11.74 | 4.94 | ***.030*** |
| N | | 33 | 53 | | | 12 | 76 | | |

Table 2 reported on the political behaviors of students, revealing some notable patterns. Women's studies students voted more than non-women's studies students, but this difference was not a significantly higher rate (82% vs 70%). Moreover, women's studies students did not engage in more electoral or non-electoral activism compared to non-women's studies students (e.g., a 4% difference for protesting). Conversely, the manifestos students were *far more politically active* than their peers. A full 67% of manifestos students had protested, and 50% had engaged in civil disobedience, numbers far higher than for their peers.

**Table 2: Political Behaviors**

| Variable | Any Women's Studies Course | No Women's Studies Course | F-score | Sig | Manifestos Course | No Manifestos Course | F-score | Sig |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Vote in an Election | .82 | .70 | 1.53 | .219 | .92 | .72 | 2.18 | .143 |
| Political Contribution | .39 | .21 | 3.57 | .062 | .58 | .23 | 6.77 | ***.011*** |
| Protest | .36 | .32 | .16 | .687 | .67 | .28 | 7.18 | ***.009*** |
| Civil Disobedience | .27 | .21 | .47 | .492 | .50 | .19 | 5.83 | ***.018*** |
| N | 33 | 53 | | | 12 | 76 | | |

## Discussion

By critically analyzing power structures, women's studies courses have as one of their goals the incitement toward critical thinking about gender and social identities, and better understandings of the histories of political struggle. In this sense, women's studies courses can, and perhaps should, result in shifts in political consciousness among students. That said, even with these shared goals, the teaching style, content, and pedagogical choices made in women's studies courses may vary dramatically. Because women's studies is so interdisciplinary, courses can span a huge range of disciplines, methods, and readings, drawing from fields as diverse as literature, history, sociology, psychology, media studies, health, and more. Women's studies is certainly not standardized, and as such, women's studies courses may approach the course content from diverse viewpoints and perspectives.

The lead author, Breanne Fahs, developed the manifestos course with the intention to serve students who

were at the end of their college careers (400-level upper-division students), who had already explored many of the more introductory concepts about gender and power, but who perhaps had not had as much content about the *radical wings* of different social movements. She wanted students to engage with content that would push their thinking and explore the margins and edges of both feminism and other social movements like Black Power, the American Indian Movement, and the radical segments of the queer movement. The class is designed as both an exploration of radical writing more broadly, and as a class focused on the genre of manifestos. Because this genre democratizes who can speak/write, and encourages emotional and revolutionary forms of expression, the course also seeks to undermine typical ways that hierarchy and power operate *within the academy*. This study sought to see how students who took this course may differ from other women's studies students, and how women's studies students may collectively differ from their non-women's studies peers.

In this study we sampled students who took women's studies classes and students who did not take women's studies classes. We also looked specifically at differences between students who took the manifestos course and students who did not take this course. With 15 measures of political consciousness and activist tendencies, we found some revealing results. First, students in this sample were relatively liberal, which maps onto general patterns of liberalness for college student populations. Only 4% of the sample thought that "African Americans need to stop using racism and slavery as excuses," while 86% of the students warned that women "miss good jobs due to sexual discrimination." Students were generally quite left-leaning in this sample, suggesting that nuancing these findings (as our study did) is an essential component of understanding more about college students' political attitudes and activism. Second, women's studies courses seemed to augment and expand the liberal sentiments of college students, as students who took women's studies courses scored significantly higher in the ability to recognize sexism, heterosexism, and racism (Case, 2007; Henderson-King & Stewart, 1999; Stake, 2007). Students in women's studies courses also had greater emotional warmth toward women and racial and sexual minorities. This sense of developing empathy or concern for others is a key factor in political engagement more broadly (Santos, 2020), so this is an encouraging look at the impacts of feminist education on students. Third, women's studies courses did not impact authoritarian inclinations, nor did they increase student activism in the sample. We were surprised by both of these findings, as they suggested that introductory women's studies courses at this campus could impact political sentiments but did not necessarily translate into mobilizing student activism.

Looking at our results, we can confidently say that students in the manifestos course were far more politically active than other women's studies courses, particularly for engaging in protests and civil disobedience actions. Manifestos students showed a greater tendency to recognize sexism and racism, and they showed greater emotional connections to feminist, Black people, and Latinx people. They were also less hostile toward women and, notably, demonstrated significantly lower levels of authoritarianism (that is, they were far more suspicious of unconditional support for institutional leaders). This level of activism and far left-leaning political attitudes was not shared by other students. This suggests that, while lower-division women's studies students may display a solid critical consciousness, it is the exposure to more complicated and radical content that may correspond more clearly with political *actions* and activism.

These results collectively validate the importance of feminist coursework in the academy, suggesting that all women's studies coursework can have a profound impact on students' beliefs and attitudes about the political world. That said, the results are even more convincing that, if we take seriously the call that women's studies is to serve an activist movement, exposure to radical ideas and writings may very well correspond to greater political activist commitments. Students in the manifestos course were significantly more likely to turn their political sentiments in to translatable political activism. We argue that more feminist courses need to include radical content, and that writings that explore the margins of progressive social movements are an essential part of a women's studies (and, hopefully, a broader university) education. These results suggest that students may benefit from being exposed to more of the original documents and historical material about progressive social movements, and that women's studies professors should consider adding more of this content whenever possible. While there have been some trends toward women's studies courses that offer more superficial analyses of popular culture (our university offers courses on Barbie and Harry Potter, for example), we are encouraged by the results of this study to advocate for the inclusion of more serious historical and radical content about activism and social change whenever possible.

## Limitations and Conclusion

As with any quantitative study, there are some methodological limitations to our approach to studying students' political attitudes and activism. The campus targeted by this study offered primarily liberal arts degrees and lacked many of the degrees that attract more conservative students (e.g., business, engineering, criminal justice). More robust surveying of conservative-leaning students could have yielded different results. Also, the timing of the survey may have impacted results, as the survey was administered mid-semester and it is possible that more time in women's studies courses could have had stronger effects on students. Because enrollment in women's studies courses is voluntary and not required at our campus, there could have been some self-selection and sorting effects, as queer and feminist students may have been more drawn to women's studies courses, while conservative students may avoid such courses (Horwath & Diabl, 2020). Determining causal relationships is not necessarily possible in this sense. Finally, while we would like to know whether the manifestos course had the same or different results for students of different genders, racial backgrounds, and sexual orientations, the sample size was too small to measure these different subgroups based on

social statuses. A larger future study could perhaps measure these identities in more detail.

Ultimately, this study serves as a reminder that researchers should continue to study the impacts of pedagogical practices, designs, and assignments on students. What we teach, and how we teach it, matters not only in terms of learning outcomes, but in building different possibilities for our fields and in linking up the academy with the political world. If we take seriously that women's studies should serve an activist movement, courses should be designed with this ideology in mind, particularly as we work to expose students to content on the margins of our political movements and in the historical archives of political struggles. This study points to the political significance of teaching about manifestos as well, particularly because most students have not explored this genre as readers or as writers. There is much room for disagreement, feistiness, and differing views on revolutions in women's studies courses, and manifestos may be one key genre that seeks to preserve this complexity rather than flatten it. Regardless, women's studies professors should be reminded that the work they do matters, that it has a significant impact on students, and that there is value to struggling together through these regressive political times to offer students an engaging, critical, and radical education.

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This journal is published by Pitt Open Library Publishing..

ISSN: 1941-0832

RADICAL TEACHER

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

# The Alignment of Refugee Teacher Professional Development with National Education Policy Directives: A Study in Kebribeyah Refugee Camp, Kebribeyah, Ethiopia

By Adan Hussein, Befekadu Zeleke, Mesfin Molla



FIGURE 1: KEBRIBEYAH REFUGEE CAMP, ETHIOPIA. SOURCE: MATEWOS TSEGAYE (2022). PERMITTED AND RETRIEVED FROM LINKEDIN

## Introduction

Educational access and quality are fundamental to rebuilding and protecting the lives of communities affected by war, climate catastrophe, persecution, and forced displacement (Dryden-Peterson et al 2019). Yet, refugee-hosting countries experience inconsistencies when it comes to equitable service provision, such as education, especially in the context of fragile and under-resourced countries. A major, yet under-examined, barrier is the inaccessibility of accredited professional development (PD) for refugee educators, which undermines instructional quality and the long-term sustainability of education systems in displacement settings. Ethiopia is home to one of Africa's largest refugee populations, with approximately 926k refugees and asylum seekers as of June 2023 (Zepro et al. 2024). However, while Ethiopia has shown commitment to providing services to and protecting refugees (Tamrat & Habtemariam 2019), serious barriers remain to providing an inclusive education system for refugees, including poorly delivered schooling, overcrowded classrooms, and large numbers of unqualified teachers (Keddie 2012). These present significant barriers to refugee children receiving education in Kabribeyah Refugee Camp located in the Somali Region, where more than 60% are under 18 and depend on the very limited educational services available (UNHCR 2020). Refugee camp schools have very large class sizes (often exceeding a 1:120 ratio) and higher percentages of underqualified teachers working in classrooms, which contribute to poor-quality instruction, limited enrolments, and high dropout rates (UNHCR 2017). For decades, Ethiopia has been dedicated to enhancing teacher competence, but there has been no official process for refugee teachers to advance their professional skills. In fact, as of 2020, more than 59% of Ethiopia's camp teachers do not meet national policy requirements, yet still serve as teachers (UNHCR, 2020). As such, the lack of qualified educators in refugee camps reflects broader issues in sub-Saharan Africa regarding teacher training (Buckler & Gafar, 2013; Moon, 2007).

Aid efforts across Ethiopia continue to operate under considerable humanitarian challenges such as conflict, climate-induced disasters, and a dilapidated economy (Muhyie et al., 2025), which creates traumatic conditions for people who have been displaced from their homes (Bezabih et al., 2025; Weldegiargis et al., 2023). With few options available for further professional development and limited financial rewards or chances to advance their careers (Belay et al., 2022; Reynolds, 2024), consequently, camp teachers are poorly equipped to help meet the multifaceted educational needs of refugee students (Cruz & Awoke, 2023; Tamrat & Habtemariam, 2019), many of whom are in dire need of national accreditation, trauma-informed, and adaptive approaches to learning (Crea & Sparnon, 2017; Streitwieser et al., 2018). Therefore, it is vital to examine the alignment of the current camp teachers' PD practices with national policy directives, alongside the major bottlenecks to equitable PD.

## Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to explore the alignment of camp teachers' professional development with national education policy directives and the significant challenges they face in achieving a unified PD practice.

## Main Research Question

Teachers in refugee camps often do not have formal qualifications and have little opportunity for professional development. More specifically, as indicated by a recent study, a large numbers of camp educators in Kenya and Ethiopia lacks the basic accreditation requirements and opportunities for in-service PD (Dryden-Peterson, S., Adelman, E., Bellino, M. J., & Chopra, V., 2019; Carvalho, 2022; Reynolds, 2024). While the policy document articulates an inclusive PD model, implementation is constrained by structural and resource limitations (Tsegaye, 2023; Mendenhall & Falk, 2023). This has led to decreased motivation among teachers and to poorer quality of education received by refugee students (Antoniadou et al., 2022). Moreover, very little research has been done to explore the extent to which refugee teachers' PD is aligned with the national policy frameworks (Keddie, 2012). Thus, this study examines camp educators' PD alignment with national policy directives and major challenges that prevent a unified PD system.

## Literature review

Educational integration of refugees remains an ongoing issue within vulnerable contexts throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, including Ethiopia. Within this region, a primary challenge to integrating refugee education is the inclusion of teacher professional development (PD) programs into national policy frameworks. Structured PD that is nationally accredited provides necessary supports for enhancing teachers' professional competence and establishing inclusive educational environments (Braun, 2017; Kuzu & Jadaan, 2021).

Unfortunately, many refugee teachers do not qualify to participate in any formally recognized PD programs. In Ethiopia, there are major concerns regarding teacher quality, primarily due to ineffective recruitment systems, lack of access to PD opportunities, and inconsistencies in how teachers are hired (Teferra et al., 2018; UNHCR, 2018; ECTEP, 2024). Although there is increasing demand for qualified educators in refugee camps, there is little reliable information available regarding the extent to which PD opportunities exist for refugee teachers or how those teachers can be nationally accredited (Richardson, 2018; Kirk & Winthrop, 2007). The lack of access to information about these opportunities has excluded substantial numbers of qualified refugee teachers from receiving certification to work as teachers in Ethiopia (Dolan, Golden, Ndaruhutse, & Winthrop, 2012). Although the national education development roadmap for 2018-2030 emphasizes inclusive teacher training and qualification standards (Teferra, Asgedom, Oumer, Dalelo, & Assefa, 2018), refugee teachers are still outside of such formal qualification routes. Almost

all of the camp educators in Ethiopia receive humanitarian-led training, which is often not recognized within national policy frameworks (Richardson, 2018; Willott & Stevenson, 2007; Aydın et al., 2019). This is further evidenced by the fact that more than 59% of teachers in refugee camps are not qualified or their credentials are not being recognized (UNHCR, 2020). Indicating structural issues, including bureaucratic barriers, poor coordination, and political instability in the host country. (Cohen, 2023; Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Davey, R., 2013). Thus, the role of refugee teachers' professional development is still on the periphery of emergency education responses in Sub-Saharan Africa, including Ethiopia (Sesnan, Allemano, Ndugga, & Said, 2013). Therefore, there is a need for improved coordination between humanitarian actors and national education systems, in terms of accreditation and policy alignment, which is still limited in Ethiopia (Wolfgram, 2020; Schutte et al., 2022; Lagat, 2023).

**Ethiopian Education Policy on Teacher Preparation and Development Domain**

Recent education reforms in Ethiopia have emphasized improving teacher training and qualifications to enhance education standards and make teaching an attractive career. While the 1994 Education and Training Policy (ETP) encouraged the use of active learning and pedagogical skills (Wondem & Getahu, 2023), there was limited emphasis on structured training.

This led the Ministry of Education to develop the Education Development Roadmap (2018-2030), which aims to establish an inclusive and comprehensive teacher development system. This was motivated by challenges, including centralized education policies and inconsistent recruitment practices, and the hiring of unqualified applicants as teachers, which have contributed to the run-down of teacher quality and student achievement (Teferra, Asgedom, Oumer, Dalelo, & Assefa, 2018).

**Engagement of Critical Pedagogy & Theoretical Frameworks**

Critical pedagogy is one of the key concepts for understanding the marginalization of refugee teachers in fragile and displacement-affected countries. Freire (1970), in his concept of 'banking education,' argues against centralized structures where teachers are considered passive recipients rather than active participants in PD, especially when they are not considered based on their qualifications and experiences.

This intersectionality, in turn, emphasizes the role of refugee status, ethnicity, and racial factors that limit the process of accessing PD (Ladson-Billings, 1995), with gender issues possibly acting to compound the challenges faced by female refugee teachers (hooks, 1994). There has, however, been evidence that refugee teachers have formed their own support networks and resilience to facilitate the maintenance of an inclusive learning environment (O'Neal, Gosnell, Ng, & Ong, 2018; Adelman, 2019). The importance of recognizing refugee identity and knowledge within the context of education has been emphasized by the framework of Culturally Sustained Pedagogy (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019), with tensions between integration and isolation remaining an issue in some refugee settings (Magee & Pherali, 2019). Thus, the importance of enabling the marginalized teacher using an inclusive pedagogy has been emphasized (Zeichner & Bier, 2015), but issues such as political instability, centralized government, and the absence of resources have continued to act as barriers to this process in the context of Ethiopia (Mendenhall, 2023; Gemeda et al., 2014).

## Methods

To investigate how national policy standards influence the professional development of refugee teachers, the study employed a phenomenological qualitative methodological framework combining document analysis and semi-structured interviews. (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 2014), whereby the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with six purposively selected camp teachers who participated in professional development activities, whilst reviewing four key policy documents, such as Ethiopia's Education Development Roadmap (2018–2030); the Education and Training Policy (1994); UNHCR's Refugee Education Strategy in Ethiopia (2020-2025); and NGO teachers' training reports and manuals. Five national policy guidelines for teachers' professional development (PD) were identified, including teachers' qualifications, professional development, teachers' training equity and inclusion, teachers' appraisal and career advancement, and in-service training involvement.

**Method of data analysis**

An in-depth, qualitative analytical method was employed, focusing on understanding teachers' lived experiences on PD alignment with national policy directives. NVivo software analysis supported an iterative multi-stage coding analytical method, including "open coding" to identify initial concepts based on teacher interview responses and national policy documents, followed by "axial coding" to group related codes based on prior reference points, and "selective coding" was lastly undertaken to develop the final themes that indicated the teacher's level of experience. Moreover, codes that were recurrent and/or overlapping were eliminated to ensure thematic clarity. These identified themes were then validated with respect to document analysis, which allowed comparison between teachers' experiences and national policy frameworks.

**Table 1: Demographic and professional background of the key informants**

| Respondents | Gender | Country of Origin | Experience | Qualifications | Employment Status | Current Teaching Level |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| T1 | Male | Somalia | 7 years | Diploma | Incentive teacher | Upper Primary |
| T2 | Female | Somalia | 5 years | diploma | Incentive teacher | Lower Primary |
| T3 | Male | Somalia | 12 years | Diploma | Incentive teacher | Upper primary |
| T4 | Male | Somalia | 8 years | TTI | Incentive teacher | Lower Primary |
| T5 | Female | Somalia | 4 years | TTI | Incentive teacher | Lower Primary |
| T6 | Male | Somalia | 6 years | Diploma | Incentive teacher | Upper Primary |
| **Note:** TTI is a nine-month teachers' training program completed after Grade 10 and delivered by the Teacher Training Colleges (TTC) in Ethiopia | | | | | | |

## Major Findings

### Policy Alignments

Interview transcripts and policy documents were analyzed simultaneously to understand the trends of PD alignment and divergence between camp educators' PD practice and national policy premises. Policy documents were coded to the standards, goals, and provisions for integrated PD and were systematically compared to interview themes to evaluate consistency between policy assumptions and actual practice. The findings indicated a significant gap between policy directives and the current experiences of camp teachers' PD. As a result, the current PD of camp teachers remains incongruent with national policy premises, leading to PD marginalization. Six analytical themes were used to evaluate this incongruity, including teacher quality, continuous PD, qualification standards, in-service training and mentorship, equity and inclusion, and appraisal and career development.

**Table 2: Analytical Framework: Consolidated National TPD Policy Domains**

| No. | Consolidated Policy Domains (Themes) | Codes (Sub-components / Benchmarks) |
|---|---|---|
| 2. | Professional Growth: Continuous PD, In-Service Training, and Mentorship | a. Continuous professional development opportunities<br>b. Long-term PD planning for teachers' growth<br>c. Regular evaluation and feedback mechanisms<br>d. Structured mentorship and induction programs<br>e. Regular in-service training and recognized certification<br>f. Ongoing job-embedded support through mentorship/coaching |
| 1 | Teacher Quality and Qualification Standards | a. Improving teaching practices and pedagogical competence<br>b. Alignment with national teaching standards<br>c. Accreditation programs for refugee teachers<br>d. Meeting national qualification benchmarks<br>e. Structured TPD programs supporting formal qualification upgrading |
| 3 | Equity, Inclusion, Appraisal, and Career Progression | a. Inclusive and accessible PD for marginalized groups<br>b. Gender-responsive teacher recruitment and training<br>c. Continuous performance appraisal systems<br>d. Nationally recognized career pathways<br>e. Promotion opportunities and structured career ladders |

### A. **Improving Teachers' Quality**

Education policy seeks to improve the quality of teaching through a better-trained teaching workforce. However, there is still no clear and comprehensive refugee teacher development policy pathway that can effectively address the PD needs of camp educators. Instead, Camp teachers were subjected to infrequent and NGOs-Led training that do not have any formal measure of their teaching abilities. In spite of an emphasis upon developing pedagogical skills, classroom management, teaching techniques, and learner-centered assessment, the skills developed through such training initiatives cannot be recognized by national ministries of education, because such training has not been validated with the national accreditation body. While in Ethiopia, the focus is on pedagogical skills, qualifications, and techniques necessary to raise the outcomes of students as the core national priority (Kebede et al., 2019), there exists a large number of underqualified teachers, resulting in declining instructional quality, whilst the refugee educators' PD needs were overlooked. In addition, the current Education Roadmap acknowledges a deteriorating education quality due to poor qualifications which made the profession less attractive (Berhanu, 2024; Ethiopian College of Teacher Education Program, 2024; Education Roadmap 2018 - 2030).

### B. **Continuous Professional Growth**

Camp teachers express an urgent need for nationally accredited PD as they currently receive only informal and occasional training offered by the humanitarian organization. One teacher states that,*"We do not get nationally recognized professional upgrade; hence there is no plan that emphasizes in-service professional upgrade across camp schools."*

Camp educators are therefore not included in the national PD and accreditation system, leaving them unqualified and marginalized in daily teaching practices, which further undermines the said PD integration by national policy, international conventions, UN global Refugee education strategy, and the current UNHCR refugee education strategy in Ethiopia (2020-2025). However, the Ethiopian reforms emphasize the qualifications of teachers, where the MoE (2017) connects PD with incompetence and underqualification, underscoring that unqualified teachers and poor instructional leadership are barriers to quality education (Berhanu, 2024). Similarly, PD, including ICT, is deemed vital to enhance qualification and teaching quality (Tessema, 2023); while PD for qualifications and pedagogical skills is part of the current national education roadmap (Irwandi & Albert, 2018; Morales, 2023).

While refugee teachers lack accredited and formal PD Opportunities, mainly due to structural barriers, the Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap (2018–2030) prioritizes teachers' professional development to strengthen knowledge, skills, and qualifications. Likewise, teachers' PD is widely recognized as essential for quality education, supported by continuous cooperation, communication, and institutional support (Irwandi & Albert, 2018; Morales, 2023).

### C. **Qualification Standards**

Despite the fact that the camp educators' previous qualification is not being recognized, they value the importance of nationally accredited and recognized PD. One of the KII participants stated this as follows:

> *Obtaining an accredited diploma is not easy here in Ethiopia. Even if we do, we remain "incentive teachers" due to our status, earning less than locals.*
>
> *Having an accredited qualification does not guarantee promotion, improved pay, or any other credit or reward; however, it's still difficult to get accredited even if one wants to do so. We are refugee who cares!*

Access to nationally recognized certification is a significant challenge that has been identified as an obstacle in the profession of camp teachers in Ethiopia. While humanitarian organizations and NGOs offer in-service training in professional development, it is not recognized by the Ministry of Education. This has left many refugee teachers unqualified or even uncertified, with little hope of ever being certified at the national level (UNHCR, 2020). However, teachers' PD is highly emphasized in Ethiopia and recognized as critical in enhancing teacher competence in the country, in addition to addressing deficiencies in teacher preparation (Alemayehu, 2020). Studies have shown that teachers with high qualifications exhibit high self-efficacy, pedagogical skills, subject knowledge, and consequently lead to improved learning outcomes among students, especially in fragile contexts (Basnet, 2023; Mahmud et al., 2020; Koirala, 2021; Iyer et al., 2020; Moosa, 2019, Patrick, 2022; Hoddinott et al., 2025; Hamidah, 2023) Thus, camp educators in the country are in dire need of accredited PD opportunities. One participant claimed that:

> *If we get certified, it will be useful for my day-to-day instructional engagement and future endeavors of either going back to our country of origin or a third country for resettlement. A credential is always important; unfortunately, it's not easy here in Ethiopia to be admitted into the local tertiary institutions, both in terms of a legal perspective and the unavailability of a structured PD pathway for refugee teachers.*

Therefore, despite the systematic exclusion faced by camp educators, a standardized qualification is imperative for students to access high-quality education, which is a fundamental objective of Ethiopia's education reform (Iyer et al., 2020).

### D. **In-Service Training And Mentorship**

Camp teachers indicated there was no formal school-based mentoring, and none was planned so far. Moreover, Current support is informal, unstructured, and unregulated; it neither follows the national PD guideline nor the pedagogical framework.

> *"We have never seen an organized mentorship program by the national education authorities; only NGOs and other refugee partners support us periodically, but this does not add value to our professional upgrade, because of its disconnectedness from national education policy standards and unrecognized certification for incentive pay and/or professional growth.*

The mentorship offered by the NGOs in the camp schools receives some periodic support but remains informal and unrecognized by the Ministry of Education. Therefore, it has not led to certification, incentives, or further opportunities for professional development. The in-service training and mentorship have been at the heart of Ethiopia's teacher certification process, which is aimed at addressing the deteriorating quality of education. However, this effort has been limited by infrastructural shortages, inadequate facilities, and a lack of qualified teachers (Semela et al., 2014). The motivation of Ethiopian teachers has been hampered by low salaries, a lack of recognition, and inadequate reward schemes (Belay & Melesse, 2024). Although mentorship has been found to enhance the competence of teachers and their professional growth, it is the least exercised program in the national education arena, and access to school-based mentoring is limited for camp educators (Tessema & Belihu, 2023; Abrar, 2023; Gemeda & Tynjälä, 2015; Geletu, 2024). Therefore, the mentorship of Ethiopia's camp teachers must be nationally standardized

to ensure inclusivity in formal teacher training programs (Ahmed, 2023).

### E. Equity and Inclusivity

Despite a joint effort and policy codes for inclusive educational practice between the Ethiopian government and the global humanitarian community, these efforts have not been successful in addressing joint professional development between camp and national teachers, as prescribed by the federal Ministry of Education and the UNHCR refugee education agenda in the country. Another KII participant also stated that:

> *Our pre-refugee educational qualification is not recognized due to our refugee status, and we are forced to fulfill national policy requirements to qualify as a teacher. Most of us are secondary school graduates and treated as an incentive teacher with less pay; the university is hardly accessible to us here in Ethiopia due to our status in the country, inclusivity is hearsay to us, let alone gender inclusion into the teaching profession at camp schools, there is no comprehensive professional development pathway for all refugee teachers in the country.*

The national PD policy framework for teachers in Ethiopia and the humanitarian policy emphasize inclusive and fair approaches to teachers' professional development. However, the majority of the current PD does not accommodate inclusivity, particularly by those with refugee status (Posti Ahokas, Janhonen Abroquah, 2021). As a result, an inclusive PD practice through collaborative spirit between actors is essential for achieving fair and high-quality teacher PD (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Niemi, 2021).

### F. Teachers Appraisal & Career Development

Throughout the camp school, there is no formal and structured career appraisal, which hinders the career progression of refugee teachers. One of the KII participants also made a similar statement.

> *No career improvement for us leads to promotion, increased academic rank, incentive, or credit associated with years of service, the local education authorities are not recognizing the limited on-job training that we rarely engage in, nor does it reflect a career progression, nor do they have an appraisal mechanism that aligns with the national career appraisal.*

Thus, refugee teachers' PD is informal, poorly structured, and disconnected from national policy, with no apparent framework for teachers' career progression in refugee camps, despite the policy commitment to harmonized PD practice. In Ethiopia, teacher appraisal and career advancement are critical to enhancing teacher quality and student learning outcomes (Guyassa, 2021; Abrar, 2023). Site-based self-directed, self-paced, and collegial PD practices have also been emphasized in the literature as more effective in enhancing teaching practices, teachers' career progression, and lifelong learning compared to the conventional top-down approach (Tessema & Belihu, 2023; Tessema, 2023; Bayram & Bıkmaz, 2021; Latchanna, 2021). In fact, access to teachers' PD practices is a critical component that is strongly emphasized in the national policy as well. However, refugee teachers do not seem to benefit from such a training framework.

## Classroom Implications

In camp-based schools, instruction is still primarily delivered traditionally, reflecting the structural implications of refugee teachers' lack of access to formal pedagogical training. Furthermore, due to underqualification and exclusion from the formalized, recognized professional development opportunities, many refugee camp teachers use outdated, teacher-centered strategies that limit refugee students' ability to learn actively and, therefore, negatively impact academic success (Farrell & Ives, 2015; Turan, 2021). The inability of teachers to meet national standards due to insufficient training and qualifications has been a major topic of discussion in global and state education policies. Consequently, many refugee teachers lack professional confidence and are less committed to the teaching profession (Sağlam & Kanbur, 2017). While Ethiopia continues to advocate student-centered approaches to teaching, instructional practice within the camp environment remains as one of passive knowledge transmission (Wiseman & Galegher, 2019). As a result of such discrepancies, refugee students who transition to schools in the host country often experience a very high



**FIGURE 2**. KABRIBEYAH CAMP SCHOOL, MATEWOS TSEGAYE (2022). PERMITTED AND RETRIEVED FROM LINKEDIN

dropout rate and poor learning outcomes. Thus, to close the gap, stakeholders should exert a joint effort for PD inclusion aimed at ensuring teachers' competence and student learning outcomes, particularly in a camp setting.



**FIGURE 3**: FIGURE 3: STUDENTS IN A CLASSROOM HAVING TEA THROUGH THE SCHOOL FEEDING PROGRAM IN KABRIBEYAH REFUGEE CAMP. AUTHOR-GENERATED IMAGE, 2025.

## Major Challenges to Integrated Professional Development Practice

Many asylum seekers are coming into Ethiopia due to regional instability induced by conflict and climate adversity. Many of these individuals are educators with qualifications, experience, and teaching backgrounds; however, such credentials are not recognized within the national education system. As such, refugee educators must begin their careers again as 'incentive teachers' who earn very low salaries. One participant shared,

> *What we know and have known previously is not acknowledged; so we are forced to start from scratch and treated differently because of our status.*

In addition to this lack of recognition, there are few resources available for refugees, and there is very little institutional support, all of which contribute to a significant gap between policy provision and actual practices and ultimately diminish the quality of education in camp-based schools.

### Structural Barriers

#### LACK OF OFFICIAL RECOGNITION

Ethiopia's rigid credentialing system overlooks refugee teachers' qualifications due to their legal status in the country, as emphasized by a key informant interview.

> *As an incentive teacher in Ethiopia, I am currently employed based on my grade twelve certificate; nevertheless, I am actually better qualified and have more years of experience in teaching than what can be established with my grade twelve certificate.*
>
> *My teaching qualifications and experience from my country do not count in Ethiopia, and I do not see how I would ever have an opportunity to upgrade my qualifications and experience through a college or university in Ethiopia.*

The lack of recognition of teaching credentials prevents inclusive PD opportunities and deepens marginalization (Alkayed, Al-Ali, and Al-Masa'Deh, 2024). Furthermore, Multifaceted rigid entry requirements for admission worsen the barriers (Miller, 2019), which ultimately affects the professional identity, equity, and inclusivity as outlined in the policy documents.

#### POLICY DISCONNECT

Deviation from the policy principles with actual practice is another major hindrance to the harmonization of TPD for refugee teachers. Most of the refugee-hosting countries have inclusive education policies, but almost all of these policies remain on paper and are not implemented (Crawford et al., 2021). Ethiopia has ratified almost all global documents addressing the rights and dignity of refugees, including the right to education, but such policies are not implemented. This is due to the bureaucratic system, legal barriers, and a lack of cooperation between support actors and the national education authorities, which hinder the harmonization of TPD (Miller, 2019). This further led to the marginalization of refugee teachers' PD inclusion. Thus, a unified PD in Ethiopia faces challenges such as poor facilities, budget constraints, legal actions, a lack of a structured training pathway, and less motivation (Diale & Sewagegn, 2021).

Thus, camp teachers could not access national PD programs, mainly due to the extreme oversight and bureaucratic governance system toward refugee communities. Consequently, there are no professional development opportunities available to camp teachers in Ethiopia, nor are they permitted to secure formal employment in the national education sector. According to Badawi (2021), refugee teachers are often confined to camp schools and community centers rather than governmental schools, which could deny educational opportunities for refugee children. These teachers need PD training

opportunities that address the camp context; however, most of the refugee-hosting Sub-Saharan states overlook challenges faced by refugee educators (Lagat, 2023). One KII

> *We cannot proceed with professional development with our pre-refuge documents, nor do they consider our cases, but we have to fulfill all the admission criteria, which we cannot afford, instead, leading us to opt not to engage in any professional upgrade.*

Dryden-Peterson (2016) highlighted the importance of professional integration; however, he also affirmed that many host state policies do not support this integration in practice, which may also impact the educational opportunities of both refugee children and their teachers. In Ethiopia, refugee teachers often remain ill-equipped, which prevents them from adequately accommodating the diverse needs of their students, and also, teachers are often detached from national policy practices. This gap not only affects the provision of quality education to camp schools but also narrows down the professional development opportunities of teachers and the feasibility of an integrated teaching workforce. In this respect, without appropriate training, refugee teachers struggle to navigate the ambiguity of context-driven teaching, which may lead to increased stress and professional burnout (Reinke & Göller, 2022).

INTERSECTIONALITY

Structural exclusions and policy disconnections are two issues that create significant barriers to the professional growth of refugee teachers, often referred to as intersectionality. The complex and often discriminated-against identities of many refugee educators, including refugee status, gender, ethnicity, and lower socioeconomic status, have created a cumulative PD disadvantage that severely limits their access to formal training and certification opportunities as compared to their national counterparts. Thus, refugee teachers are experiencing differential PD treatment as a result of their legal status, gender, and socio-economic status, limiting their access to opportunities for structured and nationally recognized professional development. Interviews revealed that despite their qualifications, their refugee status overshadowed their professional identity, affecting their legal status, recognition, salaries, and career progression.

> *The opportunity for professional advancement is minimal due to my social identity. However, even if I pursue a nationally accredited qualification, I will remain an "incentive teacher" due to my refugee status. As a result, neither my pay nor the associated benefits will change, as I am a refugee.*

> *I have prior teaching experience and qualifications, but I was treated as an "intensive teacher" rather than a full-fledged teacher, like my national colleagues, with extremely less pay.*

> *Refugees are outsiders here; we face discrimination on identity, legal status, and socio-economic background due to our legal status in the country.*

> *We women are culturally and legally challenged by the social expectation, particularly of gendered role differences. Let alone PD, we face challenges while working as teachers, being women is to stay hopeful.*

The intersection of refugee status and the professional development of teachers who work in refugee camps creates barriers to advancing their careers. Most of the research done on refugee education focuses on outcomes and availability for students, while teacher professional development is largely overlooked (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Villegas et al., 2007). Research has shown that intersecting identities such as being a refugee, having a particular gender or being a migrant and/or having a low socioeconomic status create barriers to employment, education, and recognition of previous qualifications (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008; Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015).

Thus, camp teachers in Ethiopia experience many structural barriers as a result of the combination of these factors. Many of these teachers have previous qualifications that are not valid in Ethiopia, resulting in them working as "incentive teachers" or volunteer teachers at lower pay. Furthermore, legal and labor regulations limit their access to formal employment and professional growth opportunities. In addition, Female refugee teachers also face additional constraints due to gender-related restrictions, such as caregiving duties and gendered discrimination, which further exacerbate the disparity between these two groups in terms of training and career progression.

RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS

In Ethiopia, limited resources have been a major barrier to creating a unified approach to Teacher Professional Development (TPD). Given limited funding, a lack of supportive government structures, and insufficient opportunities for teacher training and accreditation, teachers with refugee status face multiple challenges, including PD fees and the associated cost of living (UNHCR, 2021). Furthermore, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate facilities, and a lack of qualified professional staff had exacerbated the already insufficient educational service delivery in public schools. (Baker, 2020).

**Table 3. Challenges Faced by Refugee TPD**

| | Q-2. Nodes | Q-2. Codes |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | Policy disconnect | a. Gaps in policy practices |
| | | b. Bureaucratic hurdles in applying policy standards |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | c. | Lack of policy reinforcement |
| 2. | Lack of official recognition | a. | Unrecognized pre-refugee qualifications |
| | | b. | Not meeting the national teaching admission criterion. |
| | | c. | Skills and experience not considered for career progression |
| 3. | Resources constraints | a. | Inadequate teaching facilities and materials for training |
| | | b. | Financial constraints for professional upgrade |
| | | c. | Lack of local support and technological devices for remote training engagement |

**Table 4.** ***Comparative analysis of the National Education Policy with the current professional development practice by refugee teachers***

| Policy Directives | **National standards** | **Current PD practice by the camp teachers** | **Identified gaps** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Continuous Professional Development | Structured, formal, and regular professional development that aligns with the technological dynamism and the curriculum | Unstructured, less formal, infrequent, and not aligned with the national curriculum and teaching policy domain. | Inconsistent and not relevant to the national teaching standards. |
| Equity and inclusivity | All-inclusive and accessible training that addresses the diverse and equitable needs of students. | Negligible and more theoretically based inclusivity focus, no special provision for refugees, nor for gender, nor for disability | Camp teachers lack access to comprehensive and structured professional development. |
| Resource allocation | Adequate funds and facilities for TPD are designed to ensure quality instruction. | Severe resource constraints, large class size, and extremely low facilities | Inadequate resource governance and administrative bureaucracy had obstructed the camp TPD. |
| In-service training and mentorship program | Regular mentorship training by certified mentors | Informal, irregular, and nationally not recognized mentoring programs by uncertified mentors, mostly by NGOs and other humanitarian officers | Absence of a recognized and certified mentorship program alongside limited skills for upgrade |
| Teachers quality improvement | Accredited and recognized CPD for teachers at all levels | Nationally, short-term training by NGOs and other humanitarian endeavors | Unrecognized and informal accreditation, which resulted in under-qualification, poor refugee education quality, and a lack of professional progression |
| Teachers' Appraisal and Career Development | Continuous performance and professional development appraisal. | Lack of regular and formal appraisal, and the remaining incentive for refugee teachers | Lack of career advancement opportunities and being unmotivated to teach as a profession |

## PD Policy Practice Gaps and Integration Challenges

There are many professional development challenges that Ethiopian refugee teachers face, including the lack of a structured and accredited career path in the country, the lack of recognition of their pre-refugee qualifications, and the use of rarely endorsed NGO-led professional development that does not align with national standards. This is a general trend in fragile states where PD policies are often symbolic in nature, and refugee educators are marginalized in the process (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019). For instance, evidence from Jordan shows that exclusion from the national accreditation is the primary PD integration challenge and the teaching quality (Alkhawaldeh, 2018).

A specific case of Ethiopia can be cited as a clear example, where camp educators are constantly faced with resource scarcity and training provision dominated by NGOs (Badawi, 2021). Unlike Kenya and Jordan, which provide government-supported structured PD opportunities, in Ethiopia, PD opportunities are dominated by NGOs with little government oversight (Lagat, 2023). This NGO training over-reliance by the Ethiopian government has, therefore, created an integration gap. Highlighting PD inaccessibility and marginalization, which affect teachers' efficacy. In addition, Ethiopian education policy underestimates refugee teachers' PD integration as evidenced by strict legal measures and structural barriers to the formal accreditation system. (Schutte, 2022; Lambrechts, 2020). Moreover, funding constraints continue to intensify PD exclusion, highlighting the need to recognize pre-refugee qualifications and establish accredited upgrading pathways (Alkhawaldeh, 2018; Marcu, 2021).

## Global education trend and advocacy

The article explores the global commitments to equitable and inclusive education in a crisis context. For instance, the challenges faced by Ethiopian camp educators, such as the lack of formal credentials, non-recognition of prior qualifications, and resource constraints, are all issues that hinder quality education globally and humanitarian education in particular, as emphasized by Sustainable Development Goal 4 (UNESCO, 2021). These issues underscore the need for localized reforms towards a harmonized PD approach, which is compliant with the Global Compact for Refugees, UN Global Humanitarian Education Strategy, and Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (UNHCR, 2018). This further affirms the need for equitable training in crises context (Crenshaw, 1989; Freire, 1970). In addition, the marginalization of the refugee educators mirrors global trends, which require nationally recognized PD approaches (INEE, 2022; Kagawa & Selby, 2020; UNESCO, 2023).

## Embedding Teacher Agency for Integrated Policy Implementation

Despite the systematic barriers faced by camp educators, yet they strive to make a difference. For example, in fragile contexts, refugee educators show their 'everyday agency' by making use of local strategies that help them adapt the top-down policies (Dryden-Peterson & Horst, 2023). One example of this is how teachers in Nakivale Camp, Uganda, created peer-led professional learning communities that incorporate trauma-informed care and mother tongue practices (Naylor &McGuinn, 2024), while other PLCs are filling gaps in policy implementation ( Tzovla & Kedraka, 2023). In Kakuma Camp, Kenya, teachers advocate for equal access to professional development (Mendenhall et al., 2021), which demonstrates a "praxis of solidarity" (Pherali, 2023). In Jordan, refugee teachers collaborate with national governments to co-design contextually relevant pedagogies (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2017; UNICEF, 2019; Culbertson & Constant, 2015). Similarly, Ethiopia has programs called the Accelerated Education program; furthermore, Rwanda has developed T4T micro-credentialing programs to help teachers get access to a state-supported accreditation (UNHCR, 2022), and also Colombia has reformed inclusive teacher PD to support camp educators' accreditation system (Sayed et al., 2019)

## Conclusion

The study shows a continued marginalization of the camp educators from any recognized PD opportunities. The current PD programs are offered by NGOs and humanitarian partners, but they are informal, irregular, and not aligned with the national standards. As a result, the camp educators do not have access to accredited PD opportunities. Moreover, they frequently face systematic barriers to PD integration into the national education system, mainly due to resource constraints, structural and institutional barriers with limited government oversight, which calls for an urgent need for structured, equitable, and nationally recognized PD.

## Implication

The findings imply severe PD challenges faced by camp educators and the importance of a harmonized PD model. Therefore, the study recommends a collaborative partnership platform coordination (CPPC) between UN agencies, particularly UNHCR, the Ethiopian government, NGOs, and higher education institutions to ensure camp teachers' accreditation and their PD inclusion into the national education policy framework.

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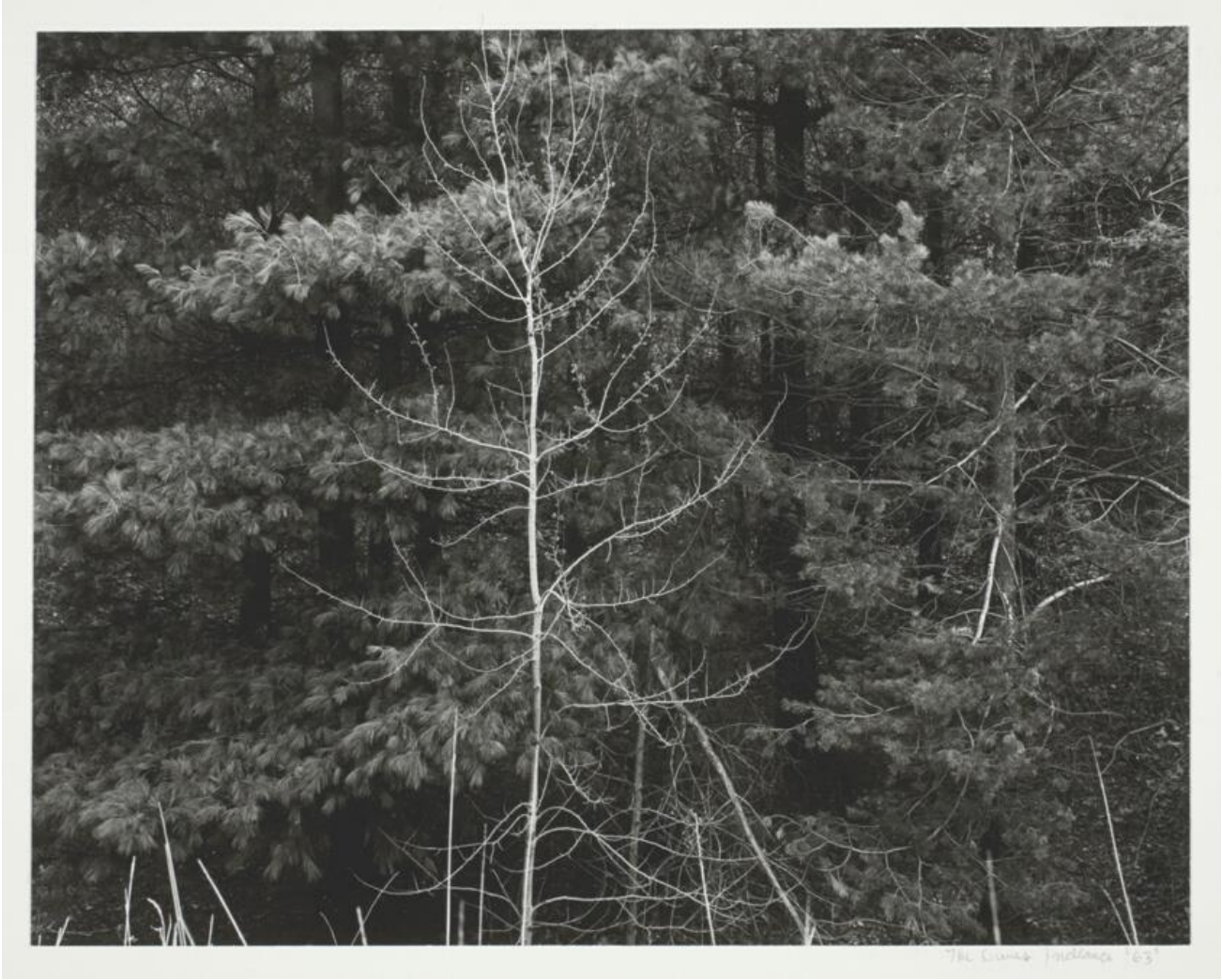
ISSN: 1941-0832

RADICAL TEACHER

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

# A Call for Speculative Syllabus Writing

by Nicole Weinberg



THE DUNES, INDIANADATE- 1963 ARTIST- ROBERT EARL WILSON

## Introduction

Universities in settler colonial contexts such as the United States are institutions characterized by land-grabbing, accumulation, and the overarching expansion of settler colonialism (la paperson, 2017). Consequently, in such contexts, the university's syllabus must also be understood as a colonial technology. Far from a neutral institutional document, the syllabus is a means in which the politics of teaching are made explicit through a series of inflexible rules such as due dates, attendance requirements, and grading policies (Ohmann, 2004/2022). In my own experiences in higher education in Texas, I've noticed a growing and concerning pattern of universities implementing increasingly standardized templates for instructors' syllabi. And yet—I still wholeheartedly believe that the syllabus genre holds generative possibilities for instructors to exercise their narrative agency and build otherwise worlds in and beyond education.

Over the past decade, *Radical Teacher* has continued to give the syllabus genre frequent and intentional space through publishing full syllabi related to innovative courses (Branner and Page, 2013; Hentges, 2013), as well as featuring articles with teachers' critical reflections on their syllabus writing (Avery, 2020; Nolan, 2021; Rodriguez, 2018). My current purpose in writing is to add a selection of imaginative ponderings for what a syllabus might look like in a more just future world to this already fruitful conversation. As such, this work lives somewhere on the boundary between what is currently imaginable and possible for our syllabi and what *might* be possible through engaging radical imagination(s). I hope the reader—perhaps a syllabus-writer themselves—will find this article evokes a response, whether that be inspiration for what they might consider, do, or dream of for their syllabus writing in their own teaching context(s).

This article will not direct the reader on how to write a syllabus better, nor how to craft a more critical syllabus—not directly. This is, in part, because writing a critical syllabus requires proceeding in a way that honors the multitude of relationships in university settings, including (but not limited to) the relationship between instructor and student, instructor and community, and instructor and Land. Those of us who call ourselves critical pedagogues write syllabi in a wide variety of institutional, relational, geographical, and political contexts; as such, the process of improving these relationships will look different across syllabus-writers. (Re)claiming your own narrative agency in syllabus writing is deeply dependent upon those factors, and as I write this, I am sure that the most liberatory syllabus that *you* can write in *your* context is more liberatory than I, as I am writing this, can even imagine. I hope that after reading this article, you will begin/continue to imagine what that might be, have discussions with others, and take action.

## Framework

I begin by positioning myself to this work as a white, female co-conspirator, a term which I use in reference to Ekpe and Toutant's (2022) intersectional, anti-racist co-conspirator framework (I-ARC). Per I-ARC, a co-conspirator is committed to dismantling racism, coloniality, and intersecting dimensions of oppression in all forms. Being a co-conspirator includes a fundamental commitment to dismantling settler colonialism in all forms, which I am situating as the root form of oppression in this analysis. To describe my specific stance to opposing settler colonialism, I'd like to borrow the term *anti-coloniality* from Sabzalian (2019), rather than appropriating the term *decolonize.* My reasoning for this choice is twofold: first, that I am not collaborating on this writing project directly with Indigenous communities nor I am Indigenous myself; and, second, that this project does not include *direct* and *tangible* advocacy toward the redistribution of Land toward Indigenous nations. To me, an *anti-colonial* stance seeks to stop the harm of coloniality in higher education, making space for and moving in solidarity with those who are working toward decolonization. Taking an anti-colonial stance as a co-conspirator requires action beyond writing and theorizing. I must fulfill my role through solidarity and tangible action in everyday life. For me, the syllabus is one tool I use to pursue fulfillment of this responsibility, and perhaps syllabi might come to serve this purpose for readers as well.

Writing from the far-right political context of Texas, I am increasingly aware and concerned about rhetoric and policies directed at dismantling diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) offices and initiatives in higher education. The prevalence and pace at which harmful narratives about social justice work in schools are proliferating in the media can leave us, who pursue more just futures, sometimes feeling alone in this work. I know that I—and perhaps my colleagues as well—often feel tempted with hopelessness for a better future world. The I-RAC framework is a reminder that an essential part of my role as a co-conspirator is to refuse the temptation of jadedness with/in advocacy work. As Ekpe and Toutant (2022) illustrated, a co-conspirator must firmly believe that a more liberatory future world is possible and work confidently and in community as such. In this way, I believe a co-conspirator is also responsible for engaging radical imagination(s).

Radical imagination(s) are fundamental (re)imagining into what the most liberatory vision of a future world might look like. I use the term similarly to how Benjamin (2024) defines "collective imagination," describing "when we imagine different worlds together, writing shared stories and plotting futures in which we can all flourish" (p. x). I use the plural "imagination(s)" to honor the notion that more than one vision of a liberatory future exists, and that what is liberatory to one person or group might be oppressive to another. The term itself has roots in Black abolitionist freedom dreaming (Davis, 2003; Kelley, 2022; Ladson-Billings, 1994/2022), Afrofuturism (Toliver, 2023) as well as Indigenous (Halle-Erby, 2024; Hickey, 2019) and queer (Bannon, 2021; Helmsing, 2022) futurities. As such, radical imagination(s) requires collective and diverse dreaming into the otherwise, and shared inspiration to make this constellation of emancipatory dreaming possible. I am writing to invite radical imagination(s) into our syllabus writing, and conversations about syllabus reforms.

## Stories of the Syllabus Genre

Syllabi are more than institutional documents; each syllabus is a narrative, and syllabi together constitute a genre. The syllabus genre utilizes a specific set of rhetorical and aesthetic tools to tell a particular story, and through naming these we can identify strategies to subvert them. In other words, it is time that we—broadly meaning instructors committed to liberatory teaching practices—approach syllabus writing as a genre-bending project.

Syllabi often present a narrative featuring a specific set of relationships between the students and instructor(s). For example, syllabi may utilize rubrics and grading policies, which can feature such terms as *unsatisfactory performance* or *academic probation.* Such rhetorical maneuvers serve to story students as in a deficient, or even carceral, relationship to the instructor as well as the institution. This framing of deficiency also gestures towards the embedded ableism in colonial ideals. Syllabi also often include strict attendance policies that penalize students for missing a certain number of classes, without much room for exception. Such policies story certain students, for example those with chronic dis/abilities or caregiving commitments, as either unfit for the college classroom or as needing to sacrifice their personal or family well-being to complete the course. In both examples, the instructor is storied as a sort of warden, the one who surveils compliance with these policies and enacts punishments if they are not followed.

Additionally, syllabi often story the relationship between the student(s) and the institution—including the Land the institution occupies. Syllabi often include mission statements of the university, or the specific unit in which the course is hosted. Such mission statements often include vague references to the university as ultimately working—and having always worked—in service of the *greater good*, or even *democracy*. The assumption that all universities inherently have a positive impact on society is demonstrably false, since the construction of many universities required the occupation of stolen Land and exploitation of labor from enslaved people. Furthermore, the majority of institutions of higher education were designed to exclude any aspirant student who was not a white male. While it is increasingly common for universities in North America to make statements of Land acknowledgement, Stewart and Yang (2021) reminded us that such statements of recognition are only first steps, rather than inherent acts of decolonization. As such, a syllabus should not just *include* a Land acknowledgement but *engage* with what that acknowledgement means in the context of the specific university, surrounding Indigenous communities, and course of study. This engagement should go beyond the syllabus itself, but extend into class discussions, and gesture toward contemporary contexts of political struggle and action.

Many syllabus-writers, if they are to engage intentionally with syllabus writing for the purposes of equity at all, have paid attention to the story told by their course readings. This story is the relationship between the instructor, the course, and the field. Through the particular assigned course readings, a syllabus tells a story about what knowledge is of most worth. Too often, this story is told as one that centers the intellectual contributions of white, English-speaking males from affluent backgrounds. It is this aspect of the syllabus—the reading list—in which instructors committed to liberatory pedagogies have most often held themselves responsible for telling another story. This is an invitation to continue and expand that intentional effort, as well as to apply such dedication to equity to the rest of our syllabus writing.

The ways that syllabi tell stories are through both rhetorical and aesthetic elements. Rhetorical elements include language—especially used to describe students, instructor(s), the institution—and Land. Aesthetic elements may include the traditional tables and charts, or even the lack of visual depictions of the local community or scholars whose ideas are central to the course. In many ways, syllabi exemplify what jagodzinski (2010) terms designer capitalism, an "aestheticaization of life" by corporations which dominate aesthetic representations so that it is "increasingly more difficult to hear and see alternative views and representations" (p. 33). In a similar thread, the rhetorical and aesthetic elements of syllabi have been so purported by land-grabbing universities that it is nearly (un)imaginable to consider higher education without them in the specific conventions in which they exist.

While I've described some of the stories that the syllabi often tell, and touched on the ways they accomplish this, syllabus-writers must not submit to determinism. In other words, there is an element of narrative agency yet untapped to its full potential that can use syllabi to tell other, world-changing stories, and that is *you,* the syllabus-writer. As the syllabus-writer, you can—and *must*—use your syllabus to tell another story. Whichever story you tell, know that it cannot be neutral; while there are many ways to take an anti-oppressive stance in your syllabus writing, the refusal to engage intentionally at all with syllabus writing is complicity to ideological bases of the colonial machine of higher education.

If syllabi are a genre, then critical pedagogues must approach syllabus writing as a genre-bending project. We must (re)claim our narrative agency, both within and beyond the limitations of academic institutions. If the syllabus is already an active agent in building and sustaining colonial worlds, then the worldbuilding can be *shaped.* Just as Lauren in Octavia Butler's (1993/2020) *Parable of the Sower* wrote, "all that you touch you change," so is each instructor already shaping what the syllabus genre is to become in the future (p. 3). Of course, the future of the syllabus genre can certainly be shaped to work for or against the aims of social justice work. And yet, the challenge I pose for the reader is to consider ways to (re)center their own narrative agency in the syllabi that they have written or are currently writing.

## Speculative Syllabus Studies

It is important that I make distinction in the way that I am advocating for instructors to engage with narrative agency in syllabus writing. Several past syllabus reform efforts aimed at more equitable experiences in education have existed in the form of narrative reflections upon one's own syllabus (Avery, 2020; Fyfe, 2023; Zidani, 2021),

discourse/content analyses of syllabi (Cole, 2023; Gallo et al., 2022; Luh et al., 2023), or syllabus-review protocols (American Psychological Association, 2021; California Community Colleges, 2022; University of Southern California, 2020). In the current work, I am honoring those efforts as well as naming them as largely based in the *practical* rather than the *imaginative*. Both are necessary. For now, I am inviting instructors to engage with what I have previously termed "speculative syllabus studies," that being "a call to action for scholars and syllabus-writers to think about the syllabus as a genre-bending project" (Weinberg, 2025, p. 24).

In my previous work, I identified three core shifts from the way syllabi have been previously discussed to speculative syllabus studies. The first of these is a shift from reactionary to imaginative. By this, I mean that speculative syllabus studies is an invitation for syllabus-writers to think beyond minor changes to their reading list or language in their syllabus. In this way, I stated that speculative syllabus studies is "a shift from 'how to' to 'what if,' an experimental space of the imagination" (Weinberg, 2025, p. 24). Rather than identifying aspects of syllabus writing that are marginalizing to students and working backwards to reduce the harm that these have caused, speculative syllabus studies is future-oriented, beginning with the radical liberatory potential of education to transform lives.

The second aspect of speculative syllabus studies is a shift from the incremental to the radical. By *radical,* I mean a fundamental uprooting of current systems of oppression toward the emancipation and liberation of all people. While past syllabus reform efforts have often taken tangible, small steps toward a less harmful syllabus (e.g., adding at least one scholar of color in the reading list), speculative syllabus studies is a call for a fundamental reworking of what syllabi are and can become. Finally, and most importantly, the third shift is from the decontextual to the relational. This shift is away from a one-size-fits-all approach to syllabus reform regardless of geographic, political, and community contexts, and towards a re-imagining of syllabi that is deeply rooted in the context(s) of the students, the instructor(s), the institution, Land, and current events.

Speculative syllabus studies does not give easy answers, but rather presents challenging thought work for activists and teachers to consider. And as such, the remainder of this paper considers exemplars of syllabus-writing efforts taken from movement work that point toward greater possibilities in what a syllabus might become in a more just future world. As exemplars are defined as things serving as typical examples or models, I want to emphasize that these exemplars are not perfect, nor the end goal. They do not inherently represent *best practices* in education, or syllabus writing. Rather, they represent inspirations for us to experiment with. Together, they might push thinking forward in considering how they might go even further to fundamentally uproot our ideas of what syllabi are.

## Learning from Syllabus Subversion

While speculative syllabus studies demands creativity and engagement with radical imagination(s), it does not require that we start from scratch. As long as there have been syllabi, their micropolitics have been protested, subverted, and co-opted by students and instructors alike for more just purposes. As such, I've chosen three exemplars for syllabi that push the boundaries of the university classroom and invite us to consider syllabi in the broader scope of our critical pedagogical aims. I use the term *exemplar* to describe these efforts, neither because they are representative of the end goal of liberatory syllabus writing nor because they are perfect in their conception or implementation. Rather, I see each of these *exemplars* as ideas based in our current reality for critical pedagogues to chew on, play with, and (re)shape to meet their own pedagogical goals for syllabus writing. As such, I invite the reader to notice their responses to each of the exemplars and consider what aspects of each might be useful for their classroom contexts.

### Exemplar #1: Dr. Sandra Styres's Literacies of Land Course

Dr. Sandra Styres (2018) describes the Literacies of Land: Narratives, Storying, and Literature course she has taught at the University of Toronto. In this experiential and discussion-based course, Styres engages "First Voices in culturally aligned and place-conscious texts, stories, and oral traditions" in order to engage students in developing critical consciousness around their own relationship to Land and place (p. 25). As such, the course integrates "literary texts, media, and oral studies" featuring the diverse voices of Indigenous peoples from past and present (p. 34). Importantly, Styres sees herself as decentered as the teacher of this course, since "land is the primary teacher" (p. 34). All of the readings and discussions in the course Styres teaches are oriented on the specific Land in which the course is held; subsequently, Styres often asks her students: "Now that you know what you know, how will you use it to inform your personal and professional practices?" (p. 34).

While the course Styres (2018) described does indeed have a print-text syllabus in which she is the syllabus-writer, I'd argue that truly Land *is* the syllabus for her course. In this way, her course syllabus is a replication of Land-as-syllabus, and the syllabus-writer is not only Styres, but also Land-in-relation-to-Indigenous-people-and-Nations.
Viewing Land-as-syllabus, the *students* are not limited to the ones enrolled in Styres' course; rather, they also include anyone interested in developing their critical consciousness around Land, place, and decolonization. The story that Land-as-syllabus tells is one of relationality, that being the interconnectedness between ourselves—as students—and other human and non-human forms of lives, and non-living things.

Additionally, in considering Land-as-syllabus, one must not be so quick as to parrot the institution's Land Acknowledgement in the syllabus as a printed or virtual document. This, too, has become in some disciplinary or institutional contexts a routine and mundane act of passivity and often lacks the critical engagement or authenticity needed to enact what Styres (2018) calls "an unsettling process of shifting and unraveling the tangled colonial relations of power and privilege" (p. 30). Bringing attention

to the specific Land in which education takes place, down to the building, or walking to the Land acknowledgment on a university's grounds and having critical and reflexive discussions about the history of the Land is one way to start to enact what Styres (2018) terms as "placefulness," but also is susceptible to becoming a mundane, passive, or performative way to engage with anti-coloniality.

Land has little in common with the syllabus genre; at first thought, Land might not appear as a syllabus at all. Land-as-syllabus is a concept that pushes our thinking radically forward, as Land—being first teacher—refuses compartmentalization into specific topics; the knowledge of Land—its history and relationality to all forms of life—is untamed. There is no beginning and end to Land-as-syllabus, only an iterative and emergent process of awareness, listening, understanding, and action; by action, I mean actions that are congruent with a respect for the relationality of all of life, especially of the relationality of the self to the Land in which one occupies, and the active commitment to dismantling settler colonialism. In terms of *whose* imagination Land engages, Land is an inherently intersectional teacher, demanding we listen to diverse voices telling their stories—especially in relation to violent histories and dispossession. Land-as-syllabus demands that those developing a critical and reflexive relationship between themselves and Land be willing to sacrifice their own benefits from settler colonialism in order to create more life-affirming relations between living beings. In other words, Land-as-syllabus demands action in our daily lives.

Land-as-syllabus is radical, as it uproots the purpose of education to one of becoming in better relation to all of life, starting with considering what that might look like. Land-as-syllabus is imaginative, as it aims to build future worlds in which we are in the right relationship with Land, Indigenous peoples, and all forms of life. And, still, Land-as-syllabus directly engages Indigenous Voices and their imagination. Through telling stories of violence and Indigenous dispossession, Land-as-syllabus inherently problematizes settler colonialism and refuses Indigenous erasure. Since Land-as-syllabus requires the centering of Indigenous voices that tell the story of Land, it creates opportunities to craft alliances that address differences and recognize Indigenous ways of knowing. Land-as-syllabus imagines a world in which relationships between peoples, Nations, life, and Land are reciprocal and respectful.

While land acknowledgements are often reactionary to the violence of settler colonialism, Land-as-syllabus is imaginative because it centers the source of all life and relations, Land, as the first teacher, as well as Indigenous voices. Land-as-syllabus is radical, rather than incremental, because it is a fundamental move away from institutionalization of knowledge and toward Indigenous ways of knowing. Land-as-syllabus is relational, rather than decontextual, because it centers place, positionality, and relationality. The prospect for Land-as-syllabus interferes with the placeless-ness and landless-ness of the syllabus. The location of knowledge production is no longer themselves, but in the Land. And this knowledge, especially for those such as myself who are not Native and not highly literate in reading Land, is rendered as always-already important, urgent, and sacred. In practice, Land-as-syllabus requires students to have difficult conversations with/in their university settings.

**Exemplar #2: Dr. Roberts and The Black Lives Matter Syllabus Project**

In 2014, Dr. Frank Leon Roberts was a professor of African American Studies at New York University (NYU); it was during this time that he—like many others around the nation—joined the community in protesting the police murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. In a May 2020 video, Roberts described how his role in the protest led to his—along with many other activists'—temporary incarceration; during this time, he and other activists began exchanging the names of books, authors, and activists whose writing inspired their philosophy on the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Roberts (2020) recounted that, upon describing the courses he taught at NYU to one young activist, the young activist remarked he would love to take Roberts's course but could never afford it. Roberts stated that this interaction ignited his desire to create "non-traditional learning spaces for the circulation of radical ideas" (2020, 2:28).

Roberts gained public recognition in 2015 for his African American Studies courses at NYU (Whack, 2015), which increasingly engaged directly with the growing #BlackLivesMatter movement. In the following years, Roberts not only continued to teach courses focused on protesting police brutality—and making the syllabi available publicly—but also embarked on #TheBlackLivesMatterSyllabus Tour, which ran from 2017 until approximately 2019. During this tour, he spoke at various universities in the United States about how Black radical thought could push the #BlackLivesMatter movement forward, and he facilitated community dialogue on the movement. Through a combination of these speaker events, community dialogues, and teaching in university settings, Roberts aimed to bring his pedagogy more public-facing, facilitating the flow of conversation outside of institutionalized academia and toward community members already engaged with emancipatory work.

By engaging the term *syllabus* with the growing #BlackLivesMatter movement in the years leading up to 2020—at which time the movement gained global prominence—Roberts shifted the audience of his syllabus writing from students at his university to the community. Specifically, he aimed to engage community members—especially current activists for the #BlackLivesMatter movement—in critical conversations relating Black radical thought to current events regarding police brutality against Black people and subsequent violent responses to demonstrations against this violence. The story being told by this *syllabus* is that, through re-engaging Black radical thought work, the #BlackLivesMatter movement can be further energized to enact tangible social change.

Borrowing from the syllabus genre, Roberts's project focused on the discussion of ideas, including key readings of the Black radical intellectual tradition. Other ways Roberts's project conformed with the syllabus genre include: 1) centralizing the *course* around a single *teacher* and 2) having specific dates and times for meetings—although these were in different places and with different community

members. Subverting the syllabus genre, Roberts's *syllabus* is not a document, but a movement to complement a movement. Rather than centralizing his teaching around a decontextualized topic, the foci of the *syllabus* was a pressing political concern, the #BlackLivesMatter movement. The project also subverts the syllabus genre in its aim; that is, rather than being designed for students to complete a singular course and receive a grade, the collective goal is liberation—specifically from police brutality.

The aesthetic elements of The Black Lives Matter Syllabus Project included imagery of protests and organized resistance to police violence (Black Lives Matter Syllabus, n.d.). In photographs of the tour, he is often wearing casual clothing rather than a suit and tie. Rather than lecture halls, the photographs on his website depict open-forum and roundtable discussions, as well as crowds. The rhetorical language used to describe the *students*—that being the community audience—of The Black Lives Matter Syllabus Project—stories community members as already knowing and involved with activist work. This entails Roberts's purpose of connecting activists to additional thought work from the Black radical tradition as well as bringing them into relation with each other. The community-facing rhetoric is displayed by terms in the marketing for these events such as "freedom tour" and "together we will win" (Black Lives Matter Syllabus, n.d.). In this way, Roberts engaged the classroom as a site of protest but also engaged in protest spaces as a classroom, to further fuel the movement.

In terms of *whose* imagination is engaged with Roberts's project, it is clear that his teachings centralized Black voices but unclear the degree to which his teachings were intersectional. Any discussion of the #BlackLivesMatter movement surely engaged Angela Davis' work on incarceration in the United States; however, I don't see a clear centering of queer and/or female voices from the information available online. This troubles me because the #BlackLivesMatter movement was founded by three Black women, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi (Green, 2019). two of whom describe themselves as queer: From the information that I have, I don't see them reflected directly in his project. Nevertheless, I was not there and, for the purposes of this specific article, am focused particularly on what Roberts's work might inspire, rather than explore possible critiques.

From the information available to me about Roberts's work, I am unable to discern whether systems of coloniality were directly opposed as part of the speaking events, discussions, or materials. For example, this work could relate to anti-coloniality if anti-Black police violence were related to violence against Indigenous peoples by police, historically and in current events, Indigenous abolitionist thought and Indigenous peoples were included meaningfully, and there were a clear opposition to the dispossession of Indigenous Lands, especially at each of the universities in which an event took place. I would say *whose* imagination is engaged is that of Roberts, as well as the Black radical intellectual tradition—loosely defined. It is important that we see prominent activists within a lens of the community in which they work; in this way, Roberts does not represent the destination of syllabus writing, but rather one example of how syllabus writing might move differently.

This work is radical in that the #BlackLivesMatterSyllabus reorients the purpose of education to directly and collectively opposing power, specifically in directly opposing police brutality toward Black people. This work is imaginative because the rhetoric frames racial justice as possible and inevitable, including an end to police violence. Roberts's #BlackLivesMatterSyllabus project advocated for a future in which Black people are not subjected to police violence—either via institutionalization, anti-Black policies, or direct racism.

In terms of how this work pushes forward our imaginations of syllabi, I see ways in which it pushes syllabi to be more imaginative, radical, and relational. While the project is reactive to current events, it is proactive and imaginative in that it responds to these events of police brutality with protest, intellectual transformation, and community organizing. It is radical as it changes the audience of the syllabus from students enrolled at a university to community members—specifically those involved in activist spaces. It is relational as Black intellectual thought is taught in relation to specific current events, especially specific instances of police brutality, and in the contexts of community organizers.

**Exemplar #3: Intelligent Mischief's Black Utopian Media**

One of the most visible ways in which radical imagination(s) are engaged in movement work is through the arts, including the visual arts, music, poetry, and multi-media art forms. One organization that is actively involved in cultivating Black radical imagination(s) through creating digital and online communities is Intelligent Mischief. Intelligent Mischief is a creative multimedia studio that comprises a website, social media pages (including Instagram), and various art immersive and visual art exhibits across the United States. Intelligent Mischief (n.d.-b) describes their own work as for "a global archipelago of Black utopians" who are an "interdependent network of sovereign places cultivated by people motivated by the power of Black love" (para. 3).

I came across Intelligent Mischief through friend in my doctoral program, who sent me their Instagram page as inspiration while we were collaborating on a professional development session for in-service teachers on Afrofuturism. The Intelligent Mischief Instagram page (n.d.-c) primarily utilizes digital collages, which often blend historic photographs representing the Black diaspora with Afrocentric and futuristic artistic elements. This juxtaposition of photographs from the past—often depicting Pan-African political organizing in Africa, the Caribbean Islands, and North America—with the spectacular—such as space, psychedelic coloring, futuristic technology, or nature—portrays the resilience of the African diaspora as well as a sense of optimism regarding the future of historically marginalized communities. The centrality of Pan-African symbolism, through architecture, patterns, clothing, and Black people, portrays a sense of the fantastical, inspiring pride and awe in the history and future of Pan-African cultures and communities. In each of their Instagram posts, a thoughtful and imaginative question is artistically spread across the creative imagery, some of which include:

- What if we restored our connection to our ancestors, the land and our intuition?
- What if we treasured accountability and repair as a means of navigating conflict in our relationships?
- What if we created more beautiful worlds at the meeting place of many movements of resistance? (Intelligent Mischief, n.d.-b)

Other aesthetic elements of Intelligent Mischief's work include representations of Black women and Black queer, or gender non-conforming people. The primarily rhetorical element in their work is questions, which utilize such collective language as "we" and "our," suggesting community and peoplehood. Many of the questions and representations posed by Intelligent Mischief are anti-colonial, as they pose direct contestations to colonization. For example, one specific Intelligent Mischief (2025) Instagram post asks: "What if dreaming wild together could prevent colonization of the future?" Such artful provocations may foster alliances through an intersectional approach, although the visual nature of the art often takes both aesthetic representations and rhetorical questions in more of a global or national, rather than local, context.

Intelligent Mischief has a highlighted reel on their Instagram account at the time of this writing entitled, "Syllabus". This seems to have been created during the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and is subtitled, "what to read during quarantine: a Black radical imagination syllabus" (@intelligentmischief, n.d.-b), listing several books relating to Black and queer futures. It isn't just the highlighted reel calling itself the syllabus which subverts the very nature of what a syllabus is and can be, but also the entirety of the interconnected social media work, art, movement work, and community-building that the organization does.

In the case of Intelligent Mischief, the organization functions itself as a university, in which the *syllabi* are the works of media and art. The *syllabus-writers* are the artists/activists, and the students are the Black diaspora, as well as perhaps allied groups seeking new futures beyond oppression. The artists—as syllabus-writers—seek to inspire students—being the Black diaspora and allied groups—to imagine different ways of being in relation to themselves, each other, African cultures, and the Earth. These are situated within a context of a history of struggle and resilience. Borrowing from the syllabus genre, Intelligent Mischief utilizes reading lists and even the word *syllabus* in their highlighted reels. Subverting the syllabus genre, Intelligent Mischief teaches through artistic and inspirational imagery and poetic questions, inviting thought and reflection. The questions asked are without assessment, without one answer, but capable of producing many answers—and more questions. This is a syllabus that seems to exist *through* time, as images of the past are interwoven with futuristic ideas and elements, fostering a present of hope and imagination.

Intelligent Mischief is radical in that it questions the possibilities of what art and education might be and do. It is imaginative in that it engages Afrocentric imagination(s) and Afrofuturistic imagery with collages paired with questions. Intelligent Mischief in many ways cultivates the imagination of the African diaspora. In relation to anti-coloniality, Intelligent Mischief directly suggests alternatives to coloniality. The more just future being built by Intelligent Mischief is one centering intentionality, relationality, community, care, and love. This work is more imaginative than reactionary in that it does not seek directly to 'fix' the world we currently live in—or the way we approach education or syllabi. Rather, it seeks to envision a more just future world using art and rhetorical questions. This work is radical rather than incremental as it seeks total emancipation—and encourages us to push our thoughts forward on what that might involve. This work is relational—rather than decontextual—to an extent; that being, it draws upon historic images and cultural representations of the African diaspora. Yet, it still does not have a clear relationality to one specific place and time, or community. A syllabus-writer can take inspiration from this exemplar in terms of the public-facing nature of the syllabus, the decentralization of movement work and idea production, the centrality of art to the radical imagination, and the centering of questions that open up new, more beautiful world(s).

## Final Thoughts

In his song, "Syllabus," rapper Starlito (2009) stated, "Look here, this how's it going to go… this the syllabus." As long as there have been syllabi that perpetuate narratives in service of racism and settler colonialism, artists, advocates, and students have been talking back. Whether you, as a syllabus-writer seeking otherwise futures, look toward Starlito, Roberts, Styres, or Intelligent Mischief for inspiration, remember that, especially for those of us who have the privilege to teach, we must write syllabi that work in tandem with our critical pedagogies.

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This journal is published by Pitt Open Library Publishing..

ISSN: 1941-0832

RADICAL TEACHER

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

Teaching Note

# I *Critically* Think, Therefore I Am: A Note on My Bittersweet Teaching Experience

by Mehdi Davari-Torshizi



CONFRONTATION AT THE BRIDGE, 1975, JACOB LAWRENCE. ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO OPEN ACCESS COLLECTION.

From September 2022, many Iranian school and university teachers who supported the Women-Life-Freedom movement were fired. Others, including myself, chose to quit universities in solidarity with these teachers. In response, universities were filled with conservative teachers, some of whom even lacked expertise in their employed fields. After more than three years of severe economic, political, racial, and sexual oppression, although the movement remains alive, it has lost some of its initial strength, and the fight for freedom has taken new forms.

Before the start of the 2025 academic year, the head of the English translation department called me and asked if I wished to come back to the university and teach a new course titled "Familiarity with the Translation Market," recently added to the curriculum. As an adjunct university teacher, when I heard the word 'market' in the title, my anti-neoliberal perspective compelled me to accept the invitation, especially since the course was only one-term old. What motivated me further was the freedom to choose the course materials. This gave me the opportunity to practice what I have theorized in my research on neoliberalism in (higher) education, which treats knowledge as a saleable commodity (Levidow, 2001) and focuses on "the provision of marketable skills and research outputs to the 'knowledge economy'" (Radice, 2013, p. 408).

Excited and enthusiastic, I planned the first session mainly to decide together with my students what we would focus on in the course. I aimed to base the course on Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy (CP), which emphasizes a radical educational politics aimed at winning "the battle for a democracy that could stand up to the power and virulence of the Right" (Freire, 1994, p. 44). CP is strongly critical of neoliberalism because it depoliticizes education by promoting a mechanistic approach to it that largely denies students' critical agency in learning.

Since even a Persian equivalent of the word 'neoliberalism' is not commonly used in academia, I had to tailor the class to suit students' needs. Also, I knew the students would use artificial intelligence (AI) even if I asked them not to do so! For the beginning, thus, we decided to give AI prompts about what neoliberalism is and ask it to explain it in accessible language. Instead of working on how to make money through English translation, we decided to find and discuss the economic issues that have given rise to the current situation where English translators have trouble making ends meet. This was the result of our first discussion: one main reason for including this new course is our ailing economy and the increasing difficulty of making a living through education in general and English translation in particular.

In the next three sessions, we explored concepts such as *socialism*, *Freire's banking model of education*, *scientism*, and similar topics for classroom discussion. Our aim was to understand how these concepts relate to the life and work of an English translator. I continued these conversations enthusiastically in our Telegram channel, where I sent voice messages and asked students to gather more detailed information about the topics. I was so encouraged by their responses that I even shared some of them on my Instagram account to proudly show my friends and followers that we were doing meaningful, alternative work amid the current oppressive circumstances.

## When Oppression Reared Its Ugly Head

In one session, I asked my students to give feedback on the teaching approach and the topic. All my enthusiasm and pride quickly evaporated when, after a moment of silence, one student finally broke the ice and said, "The topic is rather philosophical!" The others smiled, relieved that someone had voiced what they were all thinking. Some others voiced the same complaint in more implicit ways. It was already near the end of the class, and I felt so frustrated that I couldn't bring myself to go home right away. Instead, I took the nearly thirty-minute walk back, reflecting on what had happened.

First, psychologically speaking, I realized that my students had been influenced by my own excitement. I admit that this was partly my fault; people often tend to agree with what an authority figure proposes, especially when that proposal is delivered with excessive enthusiasm. I had assumed that by sitting next to my students, giving them the freedom to choose materials, and consistently inviting them to participate in decision-making, they would gradually free themselves from the herd mentality that has shaped public life in my country for more than a century. But this moment showed me that the influence of authority can persist even in spaces designed to be democratic.

Second, I asked myself why that student had described the topic as "philosophical," despite the simple explanations provided by AI and my own elaborations. In the next session, when we revisited the material, I asked her to clarify what she meant. She admitted that she was simply uninterested in socio-political issues related to education, and she did not see how such issues were connected to English translation. I explored this further by asking the whole class to describe their envisioned future as English translators. Unsurprisingly, none of their descriptions included any reference to the social, political, or cultural responsibilities of a translator.

At that moment, after more than three years absence in academia, I realized that I had held unrealistic expectations—expecting depoliticized students to immediately embrace the critical teaching approach I had introduced. My teaching experience and academic observations in Iran indicate a sharp contrast between previous generations of students, with whom I am still in touch on social media, and the new generation who, although immersed in an environment where information is always available at their fingertips, often rely on micro-content shared on social platforms as their primary source of knowledge. Given this context, it is not surprising that the topics we chose sounded "philosophical" and difficult for them to decipher.

We all agreed to return to the material the students had worked on in the previous term— a market-oriented booklet on the publication process and the criteria publishing companies use to select translators. However, my socialist perspective does not allow me to remain docile or accept the

status quo. I frequently ask my students to relate what the book describes to their lived realities. I also question the taken-for-granted Western assumptions embedded in the text about publication and translator selection. In particular, I draw attention to the neoliberal fantasy depicted in the booklet, where equal opportunities supposedly exist for translators to secure contracts. As Freire (1994) encourages radical, socialist, and progressive educators, I openly share my own vision of a world in which political consciousness is an integral part of everyday life.

In our contemporary society, I believe in a revised version of Descartes' statement: *"I critically think, therefore I am."* Students' thinking is shaped, in part, by the historical conditions of their context—a context in which tradition and modernity are deeply intertwined. As mentioned earlier, many Iranian students have internalized the "sheep-shepherd," or in Freire's terms, "paternalistic," mentality embedded in Iran's history, including its family structures, education system, literature, and marriage norms. Consequently, many of them cannot easily imagine what a democratic classroom looks like and tend to revert to herd-like patterns of behavior. To my dismay, I realized that some even felt uncomfortable when I invited them to participate in educational decision-making and become active contributors to both teaching and learning.

How beneficial it would be if teachers shared their experiences in contexts where oppression manifests itself in ways visible only to critical eyes. By doing so, we could better understand how teaching in democratic societies differs from teaching in oppressive ones and, in turn, avoid making sweeping generalizations about teaching approaches and strategies. In other words, we always need to consider the cultural and socio-political peculiarities of every educational context when discussing research findings and offering suggestions for critical, democratic teaching activities.

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ISSN: 1941-0832

RADICAL TEACHER

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Teaching Note

# "A Modern Lear": Shakespeare as Labor and Urban History

by Raphael Magarik



IT WAS YELLOW AND PINK III, 1960, GEORGIA O'KEEFFE (AMERICAN, 1887–1986). ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO OPEN ACCESS COLLECTION



http://radicalteacher.library.pitt.edu No. 134 (Fall 2026) DOI 10.5195/rt.2026.1529

Several years ago, I was introduced to the social reformer Jane Addams's speech, "A Modern Lear," in which she compared the famous, disastrous Pullman strike of 1894 to Shakespeare's *King Lear*. I teach Renaissance literature at the University of Illinois Chicago, which is located on the site of Hull House, Addams's pioneering settlement house. Much of this complex, along with neighboring tenement buildings, was demolished during the mid-century process of urban renewal. But the original Jane Addams Hull House, because of its historic status, was subsumed into the university and became a museum. When I encountered the essay, I immediately imagined reading it with UIC undergraduates and thus connecting my area of academic specialization both to Chicago's traditions of labor militancy and to the university's fraught history in "its" neighborhood. Last summer, the Hull-House Museum hosted a weeklong seminar for UIC faculty to develop courses using the museum and its collections. While the details below are unique to my situation, its logic is replicable elsewhere, since it consists in asking how the work of a canonical, long-dead, British author like Shakespeare influenced the place in which we are studying—and how social struggles from that place (like those of unions, immigrants, and feminists) might reciprocally illuminate a play like *King Lear*.

To begin, I showed my students an advertisement placed by a downtown department store in the *Chicago Daily News* in 1965, congratulating UIC on its new "Circle" campus. The ad quotes Addams's description, in a memoir, of the "Shakespeare club" that the settlement house offered for neighborhood residents: in the 1890s, these were mostly poor, white-ethnic immigrants like Jews, Italians, and Poles. Why, I asked, would a department store place such an ad? I explained that Mayor Richard Daley conceived of this campus as a barrier, insulating downtown businesses from the poor, Black West Side. With prompting, the students saw that the odd placelessness one sometimes experiences on the UIC campus—it is hard to find a spot for lunch, or, honestly, to walk anywhere—is not accidental, but a result of the role the campus was supposed to play in Chicago: a buffer. Then we discussed how the advertisement imagines reading Shakespeare: ennobling, enlightening, implicitly a cultural ticket to the middle class. I gave them the continuation of Addams's memoirs, in which she recounts her discovery that such "great books" offerings were inadequate, realizing that Hull House must engage immigrants' cultures of origin—a development the department story leaves out. I asked the students whether *we* are, or want to be, the continuation of the Hull House Shakespeare Club. Some recoiled at this suggestion, but others felt we could create a different, more expansive "Shakespeare Club."

As we slowly read *King Lear*, we interspersed three types of supplemental material. First, I taught the history of the Pullman strike, using readable narrative histories and primary sources, like the union leader Eugene V. Debs's 1894 account and photographs of the strike. The students were struck by images of the national guard intervening, which they found eerily familiar: during much of this semester (Fall 2025), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was occupying and terrorizing Chicago. We devoted special attention to Addams's speech. For Addams, the train-car industrialist and self-styled philanthropist George Pullman, who built a model town for his employees, parallels Shakespeare's Lear, because both misunderstand their subordinates' strivings for autonomy as ingratitude. In Lear's case, his daughter Cordelia refuses to expansively declare her love for him; in Pullman's, the striking workers reject his paternalism. "A Modern Lear" has obvious psychoanalytic resonances. Given Addams's vexed relationship with her own father, a United States senator, it is hard not to think she saw herself in Cordelia. Moreover, Pullman's attempt to create a model community for Chicago's industrial underclass uncannily resembles Addams's own, making the essay in part an exercise in self-critique. Addams also dissatisfies many contemporary readers. Although the speech was too sympathetic to the workers to be published until a decade later, it concludes by expressing her hopes for inter-class harmony and seems blithely liberal about class struggle. Regardless, Addams is a sharp, close reader of Shakespeare, and the essay usefully models how to connect Shakespeare's play to an apparently remote time and place.

A second set of materials showed that Shakespearean drama had a rich afterlife at Hull House. Performance was central to Hull House, which had its own theater, and at which the foundations for modern improvisational theater were laid. Acting instantiated Addams's ideal of fusing culture with lived experience, a goal drawn from both the British Arts and Crafts movement and American Pragmatism. Immigrants practicing English and acculturating to the United States were learning to play parts, at once conforming to and transforming their new society. Thus, the Hull House Theater produced Shakespeare and classical tragedy (though the latter, remarkably, in Greek, performed by Greek immigrants), but it also featured evenings of traditional, folk dances. We analyzed a photograph of a 1929 Hull House production of *Midsummer's Night Dream*, in which the fairy-queen Titania embraces the lower-class "mechanical" Bottom, who has been transformed into an ass. My students were entertained by the sexualized, comic image; they knew about and enjoy Shakespeare's bawdiness. They have, however, less of a context for reading *class* in a Shakespeare play. I suggested that the incongruous pairing might symbolize Hull House's contradictory assemblages of high and low, as immigrant workers perform Shakespeare, and as an educational theater uneasily negotiates the frank, open sexuality of twenties urban culture.

Finally, I argued that the questions of class, migration, and gender we have been exploring also illuminate *King Lear* itself. I used readable early-modern historiography like Christopher Hill's chapter (from *The World Turned Upside Down*) on "masterless men," which discusses how the sixteenth-century agricultural crisis unsettled English agricultural workers and produced masses of poor people, detached from traditional, local hierarchies—a Renaissance parallel to the newly urbanized workers at Pullman and immigrants in the sweatshops of the Near West Side. Readings from Sylvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch*, as well as period images of exorcism and witchcraft, helped students connect economic shifts like enclosure to

transformations of women's social roles and a disciplining of reproduction. The intense, disturbing misogyny pervading *Lear* thus connects complexly with contemporary elite fears about a social world in turmoil. We discussed frequent invocations in *King Lear* of the "commons" and powerful moments of servants revolting against their masters. We also watched a remarkable clip from the Soviet director Grigori Kozintsev's wonderful 1971 film adaptation of *King Lear*, which imagines the play's final battle as a medieval siege of Leningrad. The students split as to how "faithful" Kozintsev is to his source: some imagined the play's battle as aristocratic dueling, whereas others thought the play is thinking about mass warfare. Careful reading of the play shows that *both* groups of students are right—that Act 5 has two, incompatible models of social contest, one personal and elite, one collective and demotic. Shakespeare's play anticipates a mass, collective horizon for political struggle, which it struggles to stage, given the political and technical limits of Jacobean theater. Because *King Lear* pushes impatiently against its own representational capacity, you can paradoxically understand it "in its moment" best by attending to moments in its afterlife.

In concluding this unit, we read portions of Lilian Fernandez's *Brown in the Windy City*, which narrates the destruction of the Near West Side and construction of the new campus, and I asked the students to update Shakespeare once more, to our own moment. UIC students are majority-minority, overwhelmingly from the Chicago area, and modally working class: more than half the undergraduates are Pell-grant eligible. Some resonated with the stories of class struggle and bifurcated migratory identities we encountered. Some felt ambivalent about a university that offers a pathway into the middle class but (or perhaps *and*) that is built on the ruins of a working-class neighborhood. While we critiqued the Hull House and our university itself in the course, I suggested that both institutions are (or were) sites of social contradiction, in which working-class people are disciplined *but also* forge their own consciousness—and we need not be sentimental about these places to see that in a bleakly neoliberal, increasingly fascist America, both are valuable repositories of alternate possibilities. I think some students recognized in the course's constellation of materials a theory of reading Shakespeare that contrasts with that of the cheery, moralizing department-store advertisement: one that emphasizes stubborn contradiction rather than ennoblement and material, social reality rather than abstract spiritual ideals. In other words, I hope our study of *King Lear* offered them a model of how great literature is written amid and remade by ordinary people's struggles against oppression.

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This journal is published by Pitt Open Library Publishing..

ISSN: 1941-0832

RADICAL TEACHER

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

Teaching Note

# Toni Morrison, Vincent Harding, and Pedagogy by Bartleby

by Robin Hackett




INVITATION, 1963, ARTHUR THRALL. ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO OPEN ACCESS COLLECTION.

In the fall of 2024, I was a new chair of the department of Women and Gender Studies at the University of New Hampshire, where I have also been a professor in the English department for more than 20 years. The university is predominantly white and liberal with a small minority of conservative students, who have been increasingly activist since the 2016 presidential elections. As a new chair, and continuing until now, I have good rapport with the dean. Nevertheless, in the month after the 2024 presidential election, I was the recipient of three summonses to her office over complaints lodged against faculty by undergraduate students who felt persecuted for their political conservatism. One of the faculty whose course generated a complaint is a graduate teaching assistant, Abby, who announced on the morning after Trump's victory that her class was "cancelled on account of fascism." This bit of comedy mixed with despair was the last straw for the undergraduate who had been annoyed earlier in the semester when Abby used honesty about her own politics as a prompt to class discussion. The complaint led to a lot of emails and conversations, but ultimately it did not have a chilling effect on Abby or her cohort as such attacks often do. Instead, Abby was able to go forward with her class, including the complaining student, without abandoning her principles. At the same, Abby reduced her risk of being the target of further complaints. I was pleased with this outcome. Below, I discuss the materials I used in conversations with Abby to orient her to teaching in these times, and to bring about this rapprochement.

That Abby is an African Americanist writing a Toni Morrison dissertation shaped my choice of materials that would be productive for her. But Morrison's story "Recitatif" and Vincent Harding's essay "The Vocation of the Black Scholar and the Struggles of the Black Community" can speak to all of us working to develop a pedagogy for these troubled times. Harding wrote and circulated "The Vocation of the Black Scholar and the Struggles of the Black Community" in the 1970s as black studies was growing from the streets into the academy. In it, he develops an idea that has long been important to all the so-called "area studies"—the idea that scholarship of value is done in relation to the needs of a community. Since black people in the United States exist in an internal colony, Harding argues, the vocation of the black scholar must be framed against this condition. The practices and principles that follow are these:

1) Know our common ancestors and common contestations for justice without abdicating responsibility to outside "experts."
2) Speak the truth, including sympathetic and hard analyses of local and global affairs.
3) Identify the enemy. Colonized people cannot be understood except in relation to their colonizers—white America and its systems of domination (in education, law, economics, health care, military) that are interlocking regarding black people. The enemy includes white individuals who hold up those institutions as models for life, and black people whose moral failings harm us.
4) Be future orientated in our assessments. Speculate. Face possibilities.
5) Be truthful about black life even at the expense of respectability and universalism. Be "possessed" by pan African black experience to break away from the false boundaries of western colonialism, which also means to break away from academic disciplinary boundaries, and at the same time be personally disciplined to hard work *with* and *in relation to* black community.
6) Refuse despair. (Harding)

For Abby, grounded in African American literature, talking through Harding's ideas was affirming. It reinforced her commitment to social justice pedagogies. It suggested she is doing well in speaking explicitly about the political circumstances in which she and her students are studying. In being outspoken about her own politics, Abby breaks away from false claims to academic objectivity and universality. Notwithstanding her momentary despair (and acknowledging that canceling class probably wasn't her best idea), Abby does brave, honest, relational work in the classroom in Vincent Hardings's terms. Moreover, as a scholar, she generally follows my Harding-inspired advice to graduate students: 1) ask of texts "to whom is this work in relation?" and 2) be skeptical when the answer comes back "the discipline," or "the academy," or "the author's own career." This is the kind of work required of all of us in the context of current assaults on DEI and higher education generally.

However, three summonses to the dean's office in one month also suggest that in these times, as in others, more self-censorship than we like may be advisable. Having been targeted by Turning Point USA myself after the 2016 election, I am cautious in what I say to undergraduates, and I advise self-censorship to the graduate students with whom I work on queer and feminist research projects. I would be a callous mentor indeed if I did not warn these students that right-wing organizations are looking for opportunities to publish hit pieces on our field and individuals in it. Moreover, because my experiences make for an effective cautionary tale, I am often asked to lead workshops in my university about how to avoid getting into the crosshairs of the likes of TPUSA. I do this work with a lot of inner conflict. Self-censoring, avoiding controversial subjects, is neither my wont nor my training. It is not consistent with Harding's directive, also embraced by scholars in WGS and other area studies, that good scholarship is done in relation to community needs. Nor is it even a reliable strategy for staying out of trouble. Right wing attacks on educators have at least as much to do with who you are as they do with what you say. Current targets, as we know, are anyone perceived to be queer or trans, Muslim, Jewish, feminist, immigrant, or black or brown. Moreover, even if the university lawyers step in to defend us, as they did in my case, and as they may continue to do for now, their best advice is to remind us to "represent both sides of every question."

This admonition is distinctly unhelpful. There are not "two sides to every question" and especially not to questions

about anyone's full humanity. Classrooms are not courtrooms. Our job is to enable students to reveal and explore complexities, causes, implications, and multiple voices and standpoints. But university lawyers do not necessarily foreground this aspect of our work in doing theirs. Their jobs are to defend the university against existential threats. Assuming they want to help us, we have to help them do so by being explicit about the advocacy components of our disciplines, and of higher education writ large. And we have to teach them what this actually looks like in pedagogical terms.

Toni Morrison's story "Recitatif" provides a useful model here; it suggests a way to manage all these priorities, including leaning into Harding's time-tested advice that good scholarship is done in relation to community needs. Morison's story illustrates that to refrain from politically committed speech is not a cop out, or a concession to fear in the face of Harding's call for honesty and bravery, but rather, can be effective pedagogy. Moreover, as a bonus, following Morrison's tutelage may also have a slight protective effect for faculty who would prefer to avoid having to work with university lawyers in the first place.

As you may know, "Recitatif" is set in an orphanage. Two pre-teen girls, Roberta and Twyla, arrive in the care home at the same time, share a dorm room, and have in common flawed mothers rather than beautiful dead parents in the sky. The two are also involved, from the beginning, in explicitly racialized conflict. We learn that one of the girls is white, and that one of them is black: "we look like salt and pepper," Twyla the narrator comments (Morrison 423). Also in the story's first paragraphs, Twyla reports that the minute she and Roberta were introduced "I got sick to my stomach. It was one thing to be taken out of your own bed early in the morning--it was something else to be stuck in a strange place with a girl from a whole other race" (422). Twyla agrees with her mother that "they smelled funny" (422). More conflicts written in terms of racial hostility proceed from this beginning.

Morrison, however, does not divulge which character is white, and which black. The process of reading the story for many people with whom I have discussed it is something like this: from page one, readers encounter suggestive but inconclusive cues based on stereotypes about the racial identities of both central characters. Twyla might be a more black name than Roberta. On the other hand, Twyla's comments about "their" hair might mean she is white. Later, Roberta's mother's refusal to shake hands with Twyla's mother seems to mean Roberta and her mother are white. Conversely, Roberta's mother's religiosity may hint that she and Roberta are black. Still later, when the two protagonists meet as adults in a Howard Johnsons, Roberta, on her way to "the coast" for an appointment with Jimi Hendrix, snubs Twyla for not knowing who he is. Is this a hint that Roberta is black? Perhaps. But given Hendrix's largely white fan base, maybe it's a hint that she is white. Readers tend to focus first on sorting through this inconclusive data to discover racial assignments as a mechanism for understanding – understanding the character's views, understanding the meaning of the story. In classes assigned "Recitatif," discussion often begins with one student giving evidence that Twyla is black, and another that Roberta is. At some point, after the failure of multiple cues to determine racial identification, readers and classes full of readers give up trying to pin down the question of racial identity, and read instead to make sense of the story in other terms -- in terms of the painful mothering over which the girls bond; in terms of their common fears; in terms of their shared cruelty toward Maggie, a mute, bowlegged kitchen helper universally bullied by residents of the orphanage.

Thus does Morrison teach her readers to mistrust racial identification -- historically over-used, including with devastating consequences--as a route to understanding, and instead to read openly not only for evidence and data but also for terms of analysis that are not racial identification.

It would be a grave and perverse misunderstanding of Morrison to suggest that because her story turns on not revealing racial identification, and Harding's essay advocates direct honest speech in terms of racial identification, that the two works reflect opposing visions about the vocation of the black scholar. Morrison's story is an exquisite affirmation of Harding's principles. It is honest, and it is brave in identifying racial conflict as the subject of American life. Morrison works in relation to the needs of black community. It's not a stretch to imagine that Morrison learned from Harding directly.

Morrison's pedagogy, however, is strikingly divergent from Harding's insistence on honest direct speech. The pedagogy of Morrison's story reinforces what we likely already believe about teaching and learning: when teachers supply answers, student exploration is limited. To translate the lesson of the story to Abby's work as a teacher of composition is to see that announcing one's views -- her support for Harris over Trump in this case -- might be brave speech. It follows longstanding and time-tested principles about rejecting false notions of academic objectivity in favor of transparency and positionality. But it also tempts students to deliver answers they think you are looking for based on what you divulge about your politics. Under Morrison's tutelage, what might be understood as brave speech in telling students that you supported Harris over Trump looks like a way to encourage not critical thinking but rather a short cut to that right answer highly sought after by good students everywhere, and, as well, as a short cut to that wrong answer handy for use as a weapon by those students with an ax to grind. Most importantly, it denies students the prompt of mystery to turn to data, to attend to evidence, to explore even the terms of analysis.

Moreover, as a bonus, Morrison's pedagogy seems to follow the advice that lawyers and administrators are offering to faculty in these times of trouble: refrain from exposing your politics. Morrison's story speaks and does a great deal, of course. It is brave and honest. It exposes the technology and effects of racial identification in the USA. But its pedagogy is a refusal to divulge. Morrison refuses to divulge racial identity, and in doing so illuminates how commonly and devastatingly readers mistakenly understand racial identity as a route to knowing. Morrison's work is not animated by caution or concession to fear. Nor should ours be. But when we can describe our pedagogy as refraining, as a refusal to divulge, in the name of turning students back

to evidence and independent analysis in the search for deepened understanding, we can keep the lawyers and administrators working with us in defense against the assaults that come our way when we are invited to the dean's office or find ourselves featured in *Breitbart News.*

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This journal is published by Pitt Open Library Publishing..

ISSN: 1941-0832

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Teaching Note

# Who Hauled the Rocks? Teaching Brecht's "Questions from a Worker Who Reads" in a Non-Humanities Classroom

by Kevin George



UNTITLED, 1983, DAVID WOJNAROWICZ. ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO OPEN ACCESS COLLECTION.

Bertolt Brecht's "Questions from a Worker Who Reads" ("Fragen eines lesenden Arbeiters," 1935) did not arrive in my classroom through the prescribed syllabus. I came across it while wandering through the Brecht archives on Marxists.org — one of those productive digressions that teaching occasionally permits. The poem that was on the syllabus, compact and demanding in its own right, had left my undergraduate students visibly uneasy. I took their discomfort as an opening rather than an obstacle.

I teach in Kerala, where the student wings of the Indian National Congress and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) share campus space and rarely agree on anything. Political argument is a reflex here, sometimes productive, sometimes merely loud. Before turning to "Questions from a Worker Who Reads," I briefly introduced Brecht's "Burning of the Books" — a poem that had, in an earlier iteration of the syllabus, been part of the general English curriculum. A student from the commerce stream, precocious and clearly restless in the wrong programme, raised his hand: "Why would he want his own books burned? Shouldn't he have smuggled them out of Nazi Germany instead?" He had missed the irony entirely — not because he was inattentive, but because the irony was operating at a frequency his training hadn't yet tuned him to. I told him he was right about the impulse, and that Brecht had simply chosen to say the same thing in a more sardonic register. The student nodded, not entirely satisfied. Good.

Then I introduced the poem that wasn't on the syllabus. Written in free verse — deliberately, pointedly so — "Questions from a Worker Who Reads" adopts the voice of a learned worker, almost certainly an autodidact, reading history against the grain. The worker is Brecht's persona — a Marxist who identified with the proletariat not as a romanticised abstraction but as a material and historical fact. The poem's formal plainness is itself an argument: no rhyme scheme, no decorative metre, nothing to soften the questions being asked. Brecht's Verfremdungseffekt — the alienation effect he developed for the stage — migrates here to the page. The reader is kept at a critical distance, forced to think rather than merely feel.

When I read the poem aloud in class, the room changed. The students who were habitually silent — the laconic library-goers who held themselves apart from the louder political debates — began to speak. The allusions drew them in: Thebes of the seven gates (already a battleground in Aeschylus), Babylon destroyed and rebuilt repeatedly, the gold-glittering Lima of the conquistadors, the Great Wall of China, the triumphal arches of Rome, the Byzantine empire, and finally the mythical Atlantis. Each reference is a world, and Brecht moves through them with the economy of someone who has done the reading and is now asking why the reading left out so much.

I gave a brief lecture on Francisco Pizarro and the conquest of the Inca empire — the coerced labour that built the "gold-glittering Lima" Brecht names — and touched on the fall of Tenochtitlan and Moctezuma II in passing, as a parallel case of indigenous civilisation dismantled by European conquest. One student, an avid reader of the Bible, noted unprompted that the Babylon reference carried a double weight: not only the great city of antiquity, but the biblical emblem of imperial hubris, rebuilt each time at the expense of those whose names history did not record. Another observed that the masons of the Great Wall were not merely forgotten but literally buried — entombed within the monument whose scale is still invoked to celebrate Chinese civilisation. The exploitation, in other words, was built into the structure.

The section on Alexander produced the most animated exchange. Most students already knew the Battle of the Hydaspes — 326 BCE, on the banks of the river the Greeks called the Hydaspes and we now call the Jhelum, in present-day Punjab, Pakistan. They knew Alexander's horse Bucephalus died there, and that Alexander's subsequent grief, combined with the exhaustion and near-mutiny of his troops, marked the eastern limit of his campaign. What they had not been asked to consider was the transaction that followed: Alexander's celebrated magnanimity in restoring Porus of Paurava as satrap of his own kingdom. A student known for her incisive wit cut to the centre of it: "Alexander gets the credit for making Porus his satrap. But who fought the war? Who got trampled by the elephants? Who crossed the Hydaspes/Jhelum on makeshift rafts in monsoon conditions?" The poem had produced, in a single afternoon, the question that a semester of conventional history instruction might never have reached.

Caesar's defeat of the Gauls and Philip II's grief over the destruction of the Spanish Armada in 1588 followed in quick succession. Brecht's choice of three rulers from three different [eras? ] — ancient, medieval, early modern — is deliberate: the pattern is not a local aberration but a structural feature of how history has been written. Who wept alongside the Spanish king? The poem does not say. The silence is the argument.

Brecht saves his darkest move for last. Atlantis — the one purely mythical entry in an otherwise historical catalogue — appears in the poem's most devastating couplet:

> "Even in fabled Atlantis, the night that the ocean engulfed it,
> The drowning still cried out for their slaves."

Even in a civilisation that never existed, even at the moment of total annihilation, the reflex of domination persists. The masters are drowning and still demanding service. What the slaves did in that moment, Brecht does not say. The poem has no interest in consoling us with their resistance or their escape. The silence where they should be is precisely the point.

The poem ends with a couplet of almost bureaucratic flatness:

> "So many reports.
> So many questions."

One student called it "a final nail in the coffin." The phrase is apt. But what strikes me, having taught this poem


http://radicalteacher.library.pitt.edu No. 134 (Fall 2026) DOI 10.5195/rt.2026.1552

across several semesters now, is that the coffin in question is not history itself — it is the pretension that history, as conventionally written, is sufficient. Brecht does not offer an alternative history; he simply refuses to accept the one we have been given. The questions accumulate. The reports multiply. And the gap between the two is where critical thought begins.

I have not taught a semester in which this poem has not found its way into the classroom, with or without institutional sanction. It is trenchant enough to cut through the assumptions of students trained in commerce and science who arrive expecting literature to be decorative, and leave having been asked — by a poem written in 1935 — to account for who paid for everything they have been taught to admire. That is not a small thing for a supplementary poem to accomplish. It may be the most important thing a poem can do.

## Reference

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## Notes

1. The version of "Questions from a Worker Who Reads" available on the Marxists Internet Archive does not identify a translator. The wording of the poem, however, closely resembles Michael Hamburger's widely circulated translation, particularly in lines such as "Who built Thebes of the seven gates?" and "Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?" While this suggests that the archive may be reproducing Hamburger's translation, the page itself provides no explicit attribution. Consequently, any reference to Hamburger as the translator should be treated as an informed inference rather than a confirmed fact unless corroborated by another source.

**Kevin George** holds a Master's degree in English from the University of Hyderabad, an Institution of Eminence in India, and a Bachelor's degree from Loyola College, affiliated with the University of Madras. His academic interests were shaped during his postgraduate studies through an engagement with Richard Ohmann's English in America, which sparked a sustained interest in pedagogy and American literature. His research interests include American literature, pedagogy, cultural studies, semantics, and continental philosophy.

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This journal is published by Pitt Open Library Publishing..

ISSN: 1941-0832

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Teaching Note

# NEP 2020: Manufacturing Consent and Mediocrity in Indian Higher Education

by Kevin George



BRILLIANT GLOOM, 2004, MICHAEL RAEDECKER. ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO OPEN ACCESS COLLECTION.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 arrived as a Trojan horse in Indian higher education—a document cloaked in promises of inclusivity and modernization but fundamentally designed to dismantle critical education, especially in the humanities and social sciences. For those of us in the trenches of academia, it is not just a policy; it is a manifesto of authoritarian control, corporate alignment, and ideological homogenization.

As a postgraduate alumnus of the University of Hyderabad, an institution once synonymous with intellectual rigor and critical engagement, I had imagined teaching as a meaningful vocation—a space to foster inquiry, dissent, and transformation. Instead, the NEP has reduced teaching to the delivery of prepackaged content, where students are encouraged to consume rather than question. It is clear: this policy is not about empowering students or educators but about manufacturing consent for the ruling establishment's vision of India.

The NEP's emphasis on Outcome-Based Education (OBE) and standardized frameworks like Bloom's Taxonomy is a glaring example of its reductive approach. These models, borrowed wholesale from corporate training paradigms, reduce knowledge to discrete, measurable outcomes. How does one "evaluate" the legacy of the Magna Carta or the cultural significance of the Bhakti Movement in these terms? Humanities disciplines thrive on ambiguity, interpretation, and critical debate—qualities that OBE neither acknowledges nor accommodates. This is no accident; the goal is to strip education of its transformative potential, replacing it with mechanized compliance.

The policy's ideological underpinnings are even more insidious. In northern states, the curriculum has been purged of Mughal history to align with the Hindu nationalist agenda of the ruling BJP. Figures like Akbar—popularly known as Akbar the Great or Shahenshah (King of Kings), was a contemporary of Queen Elizabeth I of England and ruled over the Mughal Empire in India from 1556 to 1605—known for fostering secular governance, have been erased, while Muslim rulers are vilified. This is not education; it is indoctrination, designed to cultivate a monolithic national identity at the expense of India's pluralistic heritage.

The NEP's embrace of corporate values is equally troubling. Its push for privatization and market-driven education threatens to marginalize students from underprivileged backgrounds while incentivizing mediocrity. Textbooks arrive months into the semester, riddled with irrelevant or incoherent content. Teachers, forced to rely on open-access platforms like Project Gutenberg, find themselves battling systemic inefficiencies just to provide students with basic resources. This is not progress; it is the deliberate erosion of public education to pave the way for privatized alternatives that cater to the elite.

As educators, we are left with existential questions: What does it mean to teach in a system designed to suppress critical thought? How do we resist a policy that seeks to transform our classrooms into factories for conformity? The answer lies in collective action and reclaiming our roles as agents of resistance. Our classrooms must become sites of struggle—spaces where students learn not only to understand the world but to challenge it.

Fredric Jameson's juxtaposition of Van Gogh's Peasant Shoes and Warhol's Diamond Dust Shoes in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* offers a useful metaphor. Van Gogh's work evokes authenticity and labor, while Warhol's commodifies the everyday into hollow spectacle. The NEP represents a similar shift, replacing the rigor and complexity of higher education with a glossy façade of outcomes and metrics. But unlike Warhol's shoes, the stakes here are not aesthetic—they are political, cultural, and existential.

The NEP 2020 is not merely a policy; it is a declaration of war on critical education. As educators, we must respond with urgency and solidarity. This means building networks to share resources, amplifying marginalized voices, and actively resisting the ideological agendas embedded in the curriculum. It means refusing to treat students as consumers and reclaiming education as a public good—a site for building a more just and equitable society.

Teaching under the NEP is an act of resistance, and we must treat it as such. To remain silent or compliant is to abdicate our responsibility as educators. If we want our students to imagine a better world, we must first help them see the forces conspiring against it—and equip them to fight back.

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ISSN: 1941-0832

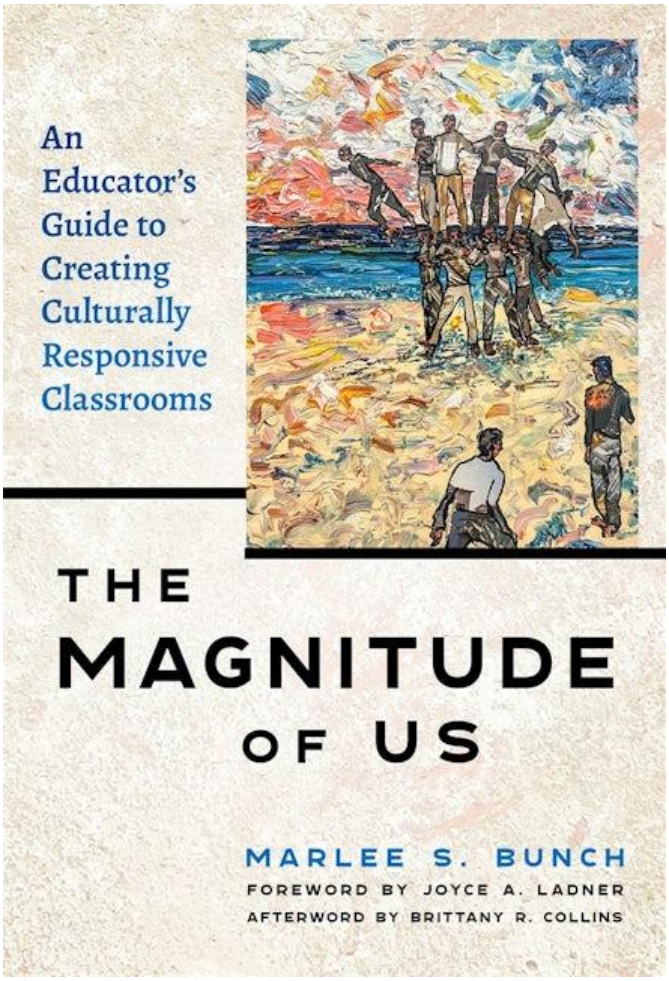
RADICAL TEACHER

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Teaching Note

# The Magnitude of Us: An Educator's Guide to Creating Culturally Responsive Classrooms

by Katie Gehrt




BUNCH, MARLEE S. *THE MAGNITUDE OF US: AN EDUCATOR'S GUIDE TO CREATING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE CLASSROOMS.* NEW YORK: TEACHERS COLLEGE PRESS, 2024.

**Bunch, Marlee S. *The Magnitude of Us: An Educator's Guide to Creating Culturally Responsive Classrooms.* New York: Teachers College Press, 2024.**

Throughout *The Magnitude of Us*, Marlee S. Bunch offers a new approach and framework for implementing culturally responsive teaching at a critical time for educational spaces. Legislation targeting any acknowledgment of diversity and equity is increasingly prevalent across the county and pushback from stakeholders, including parents and school boards, is at an all-time high. Despite the current challenges facing educators, this critical toolkit provides manageable and meaningful strategies to engage students, enhance learning outcomes, and better equip our students to be future stewards of society.

Dr. Bunch's masterfully developed un/HUSH framework centers around our positionality as educators, incorporating untold stories and histories, "unlearning" through writing and discussion, and fostering healing and awareness of students' needs. Not only is this framework applicable to any subject, grade-level, and lesson plan, but it also incorporates the untold stories of Black women educators and their experiences pre- and post-*Brown v. Board* as a way of connecting lessons from history to the lived experiences teachers and students collectively bring to the classroom, such as challenges of representation within curriculum and within K-12 school settings. By empowering traditionally marginalized stories and voices in our classrooms, educators can enhance self-reflection and thus strengthen the ability to build context and connections with and for our students. The resources throughout *The Magnitude of Us* make culturally responsive teaching accessible to any educator -- from those unsure where to begin and/or balancing the time constraints that come with curricula development and reflections to those simply looking for new materials and strategies.

Dr. Bunch offers several practical and helpful implementation strategies to create more culturally responsive classrooms and curricula, such as 1) utilizing arts to enhance learning; and 2) listening to students to center storytelling, remain responsive to students' needs, and strengthen engagement. For example, while poetry can often feel daunting to many undergraduates, Dr. Bunch reaffirms its significance because "the diversity of poetry allows students to build empathy and better understand their identity, and it helps build a multicultural and global perspective" (Bunch 63). To directly acknowledge the challenge for educators incorporating poetry, she also offers several poems and corresponding activities as well as writing exercises that can be utilized in the classroom across subject areas. In line with the theme of collaboration throughout *The Magnitude of Us,* Dr. Bunch also incorporates input from local poets on strategies for teaching poetry and combating the misconception that poems contain puzzles or hidden messages.

*The Magnitude of Us* also reinforces the fact that collaboration is key to education, and this is reflected through ample insights emerging from students, artists, teachers, and poets. She emphasizes the importance of structured classroom discussion and the value of soliciting feedback from students. One key aspect of this toolkit that I found particularly powerful was the testimony from some of her former students: Despite their diverse lived experiences, they all affirmed a similar theme in their reflections on their time in Dr. Bunch's classroom -- they felt seen, engaged, and valued as their whole selves. The reflection from her former students is a stark reminder that our teaching practices and the spaces we cultivate have lifelong impacts on our students. This is just one of many ways *The Magnitude of Us* calls on teachers to continue the work of "improving education so that we can foster a world that leans on learning and love rather than hatred and false beliefs" (Bunch14). Despite the many daunting challenges facing education today, this book empowers educators to consider a vision for a more just and equitable society while also offering a timely reminder on the importance of learning from our past through untold stories.

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This journal is published by Pitt Open Library Publishing..

ISSN: 1941-0832

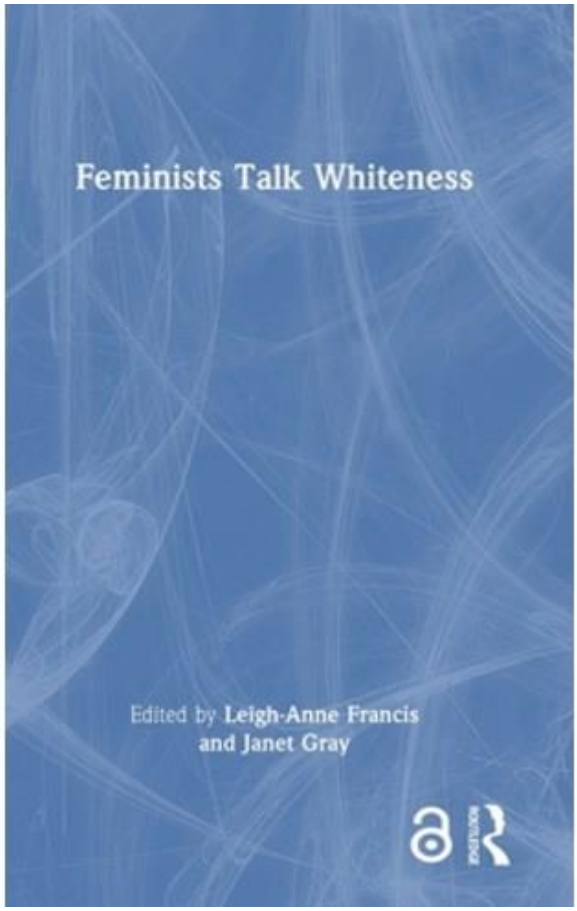
RADICAL TEACHER

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

Review

# Feminists Talk Whiteness

by Kathryn Medill




FEMINISTS TALK WHITENESS. EDITED BY LEIGH-ANNE FRANCIS AND JANET GRAY. ROUTLEDGE, 2024.

***Feminists Talk Whiteness. edited by Leigh-Anne Francis and Janet Gray. Routledge, 2024.***

Feminist pedagogy has long grappled with the complexities of race and its intersection with gender. *Feminists Talk Whiteness* (2024) offers a timely and thought-provoking resource for navigating these complexities and would serve as a helpful resource for undergraduate classrooms. The essay collection offers instructors a multifaceted lens for understanding whiteness as a social construct as well as its ongoing impact on feminist movements and scholarship through historical analyses, theoretical frameworks, personal narratives, poetry, and practical strategies.

The book's strength lies in its multidimensional approach. The first of three sections, "Histories and Counterstories," lays the groundwork by exploring the historical construction of whiteness and its relationship to colonialism, slavery, and gender by examining how white women have often centered their own experiences and perspectives, thereby marginalizing the voices and concerns of women of color. Part 2, "Theory and Self-reflection," delves into the complexities of whiteness and its impact on feminist thought and action, offering a range of perspectives and analyses. And part 3, "Feminist Antiracism Praxis," shifts the focus from theory to action.

Several chapters are discussed in greater depth below, but all could be useful in class depending on the needs of the instructor. For example, in chapter 1, "Strategic White Womanhood: Challenging White Feminist Perceptions of 'Karen'," Ruby Hamad explores the concept of a "Karen" as a white woman who weaponizes her privilege and fragility in order to silence and oppress people of color. Hamad argues that the term is not merely a joke or insult but a reflection of real-world power dynamics and historical patterns of white women's complicity in systemic racism. She challenges white feminists to move beyond defensiveness and recognize how their own actions may perpetuate harm, calling for a shift towards strategic white womanhood that actively dismantles systems of oppression.

In the following chapter, "White Women's Participation in the Attempted Genocide of Native American Peoples," Karla J. Strand argues that white women were not simply passive bystanders but active participants in settler colonialism, motivated by white supremacist ideologies and a desire to protect their own privileged position. The chapter focuses on the role of white women in Indigenous boarding schools, where they enforced assimilation policies and contributed to the erasure of Native cultures. Strand highlights examples of Native resistance to these systems and emphasizes the ongoing impact of this historical trauma, holding white women accountable for their complicity in the attempted genocide of Native Americans while disrupting the narratives that ignore their role in perpetuating systemic violence.

In chapter 3, "White Women as White Supremacist Political Actors: From the suffragists to the Karens," Christina Cavener examines the ways in which white women have historically participated in and perpetuated white supremacy. Cavener traces this history from the suffrage movement to the present day, highlighting how white women have used their perceived innocence, goodness, and maternalism to uphold white supremacist structures. Some of the examples Cavener uses include the suffrage movement, where white women suffragists often excluded and marginalized Black women, prioritizing their own access to power over racial equality. Then she discusses school segregation, during which many white women actively participated in campaigns against school integration, driven by racist beliefs about protecting white children. Cavener next takes on the "Karen" trope, exploring how this stereotype reflects white women's tendency to weaponize their tears and claims of victimhood to maintain their privileged position and reinforce racial hierarchies. And, finally, she engages social media and white nationalism, examining how white women use social media platforms to spread white nationalist ideology and build online communities that promote white supremacist agendas. Ultimately, Cavener's chapter demonstrates how white women's participation in white supremacy is not an aberration but a consistent pattern throughout history. By understanding these historical and contemporary examples, we can better address the complex ways in which white women contribute to and benefit from white supremacist systems

Later in the collection, Alison Bailey's "On White Privilege and Anesthesia: Why Does Peggy McIntosh's Knapsack Feel Weightless?" delves into the concept of white privilege, specifically addressing common criticisms and misunderstandings of Peggy McIntosh's "Invisible Knapsack" metaphor by arguing that the very act of questioning the weight of the knapsack, or feeling it as "weightless," is itself a demonstration of white privilege. The chapter explores how white privilege operates not just through overt acts of discrimination, but also through the subtle, often unconscious advantages that white people accrue in a white-dominated society. Bailey suggests that the feeling of "weightlessness" arises from the fact that these advantages are normalized and therefore often go unnoticed by those who benefit from them. In other words, white people don't have to think about or navigate the world in the same way that people of color do, and this lack of necessity is a key component of white privilege. In short, Bailey dismantles arguments that claim McIntosh's list is outdated or irrelevant, emphasizing that while the form of some privileges might change, the underlying system of white supremacy persists. She also challenges the idea that focusing on white privilege detracts from discussions of racism. Instead, she shows that understanding white privilege is essential for dismantling racism, as it reveals the systemic nature of racial inequality and the ways in which white people are complicit in its perpetuation, even when unintentionally. The chapter ultimately calls for white people to move beyond simply acknowledging white privilege and toward actively working to dismantle it.

Chapter 12, "Beyond Choice: A Dialogue on the Whiteness of Liberal Feminism and Reimagining Freedom

beyond Individual Choice," features a conversation between Houda Ali, an Arab Muslim woman, and Britt Munro, a white woman. They discuss how their different backgrounds and experiences have shaped their understanding of feminism and whiteness. The chapter's dialogue format allows for a nuanced exploration of these complex issues, highlighting the different perspectives and experiences of the authors. This approach emphasizes the importance of listening to and learning from diverse voices within feminism, which is evidenced through several key takeaways, such as their critique of the limitations of liberal feminism, which often centers individual choice and autonomy while neglecting the systemic inequalities that limit choices for many other women, particularly those of color. The dialogue also offers a focus on how the concept of "choice" is often framed through a white, Western lens, which fails to acknowledge how race, class, and other social factors can constrain choices for marginalized women. They show as well how liberal feminist discourse has been used to justify Islamophobic policies and stereotypes, often portraying Muslim women as oppressed and lacking agency. And finally, Ali and Munro advocate for a broader understanding of freedom that goes beyond individual choice and considers collective liberation and social justice. They emphasize the importance of intersectionality and challenging systemic oppression to achieve true freedom for all women.

In chapter 14, "The Ally's Tools: Racialized Power and Privilege within Antiracist Praxis," Samantha L. Vandermeade argues that, while well-intentioned, white allies can unintentionally perpetuate harm and reinforce existing power structures if they don't critically examine their own racialized privilege and how it operates within these movements. The chapter uses a case study of activism for immigrants' rights during the 2018-2019 border crisis to show how white women activists, despite their genuine desire to help, sometimes undermined Latino/a-led organizing efforts and inadvertently reinforced white savior narratives. Vandermeade then emphasizes the importance of intersectionality in antiracist praxis, urging white allies to consider how their actions might impact marginalized groups differently based on intersecting identities like race, gender, and class—ultimately calling for a shift from performative allyship to a deeper understanding of how power and privilege function in social justice movements. Overall, the chapter provides a framework for white allies to engage in antiracist work more effectively and ethically by encouraging self-reflection, critical analysis of power dynamics, and a commitment to centering the voices and leadership of marginalized communities.

Wisely, though, not every chapter focuses solely on women. Chapter 17, "Shame Work: Reducing Supremacy and the Violence of White Men" by Cameron Rasmussen, explores the complex relationship between shame and violence, particularly within the context of white supremacy and patriarchy. Rasmussen argues that shame is a driving force behind violence, particularly for white men who are socialized to uphold dominant power structures. He proposes "shame work" as a framework for addressing this issue, which involves first understanding the systemic causes of shame. This includes recognizing how white supremacy and patriarchy create and perpetuate shame in individuals and communities. After this recognition, the next stage is to develop healthier relationships with shame, which involve challenging the negative messages associated with shame and promoting self-compassion and acceptance. Then Rasmussen moves to advocate for the creation of spaces for vulnerability and connection, which allows individuals to share their experiences with shame and receive support from others. And, finally, he calls on us to promote restorative and transformative justice with a focus on repairing harm and addressing the root causes of violence rather than simply punishing individuals. In other words, Rasmussen suggests that shame work can help reduce violence by addressing the underlying emotional and psychological factors that contribute to it by emphasizing the importance of challenging the systems of oppression that create and perpetuate shame in the first place. Overall, Chapter 17 offers a unique perspective on the issue of violence, highlighting the role of shame and offering practical strategies for addressing it through individual and collective action.

As evidenced above, *Feminists Talk Whiteness* offers a rich resource for instructors seeking to facilitate transformative discussions around race and gender in their classrooms. The book's diverse perspectives and accessible writing style make it suitable for a range of undergraduate courses, from introductory Women's and Gender Studies courses to courses on race and ethnicity, and art history, to advanced feminist theory seminars. Personally, I am adding chapters from the book to my asynchronous Art History course that explores the theories and methods of that field. I use "Making Mistakes: A Conversation" by Peggy Diggs and Lucy R. Lippard to facilitate discussions on the role of identity and social justice in artistic practice. The chapter’s unique blend of personal reflection, academic discourse, and artistic practice provides students with a rich and nuanced exploration of the complexities of whiteness and its role in art and society.

To engage them in the material, I ask students in my Art History: Theories and Methods course to create their own “Making Mistakes” response. After they read the chapter, they choose an artist or movement and write a short essay (500-750 words) that mirrors the chapter’s format of blending personal reflection on their own positionality with an academic analysis of art. The goal is for them to critically examine how whiteness and/or other aspects of identity may influence the creation, reception, and interpretation of artworks. This assignment encourages a deeper exploration, critique, and application of the feminist theory by having students reflect on their own identity and how it intersects with whiteness. (I have also included a series of related assignments in the appendices below. For examples of how to engage these particular topics, see Appendix A.)

I have also asked students in my Theories and Methods course to apply theoretical concepts from the chapter "Making Mistakes." The core of the assignment is to challenge students to critically examine "whiteness" and

its role in art. Students must select an artwork by a white artist and write a 1,000–1,200-word essay analyzing how the piece engages with the concept of whiteness, whether it succeeds or fails according to the assigned theoretical framework, and how the artist navigates the "psychologically risky proposition" of the topic. The assignment concludes with a 250–300-word curatorial statement, in which students must propose how they would present the artwork in a hypothetical exhibition to challenge viewers to confront their own relationships with race. This project effectively merges scholarly analysis with practical, public-facing curatorial skills, providing students with a nuanced and deeply reflective learning experience (Appendix B).

Instructors could utilize the book in a number of ways to promote critical engagement with whiteness. Essay excerpts could be assigned as readings to frame discussions that explore historical constructions of race, the role of whiteness in feminist movements, and strategies for dismantling white supremacy. Additionally, engaging with personal narratives can encourage self-reflection and empathy, prompting students to examine their own racial biases and privilege. Chapters on praxis could also be used to develop action-oriented projects, allowing students to translate their newfound knowledge into meaningful interventions within their communities.

To make this more concrete, a course could use the chapter on historical constructions of race to develop a project where students research and present on how whiteness has been constructed in a specific time period (Appendix C). The chapter on feminist movements could be used to have students analyze a historical feminist movement and identity in which whiteness was centered (Appendix D). The chapters on praxis could be used for an assignment where students design an action-oriented project that dismantles white supremacy in their community (Appendix E).

However, while *Feminists Talk Whiteness* offers a valuable resource, it is essential to acknowledge potential challenges when facilitating discussions about race in the classroom. For example, students may come with varying levels of understanding and comfort regarding race, and instructors should be prepared to create a safe space for open dialogue and respectful debate. Additionally, the question of who holds the right to speak on issues of race is a complex one so instructors should be mindful of centering the voices of scholars of color while also creating opportunities for white students to engage in self-reflection and critique.

To address these challenges, instructors might use a few specific strategies. For example, to ensure the scholars of color are centered, an instructor could assign readings from women of color and then dedicate the majority of the class time discussing those works. To create opportunities for white students to engage in self-reflection without dominating the conversation, an instructor could use writing assignments, such as reflective journal entries, before opening up the floor for a full class discussion. This encourages all students to work through their initial thoughts privately, while a public discussion can be more focused on analyzing the text's core arguments and centering the voices and experiences of women of color (Appendix F).

That said, *Feminists Talk Whiteness* is a valuable resource for instructors committed to fostering critical conversations about race and gender within the undergraduate classroom. By providing a nuanced and multifaceted analysis of whiteness—especially through its many entangled linkages with gender—the book empowers students to become more aware of the racialized power dynamics that shape our world while equipping them with the tools to challenge them.

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## Appendix A

**Assignment: "Making Mistakes" - A Curatorial Response**

**Objective:** To critically examine how identity, particularly whiteness, influences the creation, reception, and interpretation of art by blending personal reflection with academic analysis. This assignment encourages a deeper understanding of theoretical concepts by having you apply them to your own research and self-reflection.

**Task:** After reading "Making Mistakes: A Conversation" by Peggy Diggs and Lucy R. Lippard, you will create your own "Making Mistakes" response in the form of a short essay (500-750 words). Your essay should mirror the chapter's format, blending a personal reflection on your own positionality with a formal academic analysis of an artwork.

**Guidelines:**

1. **Choose an Artwork:** Select a single artwork, artist, or art movement to be the subject of your analysis.
2. **Personal Reflection:** Begin by reflecting on your own positionality and how it shapes your perspective as a viewer and/or a student of art history. Consider how your identity—including race, gender, class, or other factors—influences your initial understanding and interpretation of the chosen artwork.
3. **Academic Analysis:** Integrate a formal academic analysis of the artwork. Discuss its context, formal elements, and historical significance, using at least two credible scholarly sources to support your claims.
4. **Critical Examination:** The core of your essay should critically examine how identity (of the artist, the viewer, and/or society) has influenced the creation, reception, and interpretation of the artwork.
5. **Essay Format:** Your essay should be 500-750 words, double-spaced, and in CMS-NB. The blend of personal voice and academic writing should be seamless, as demonstrated in the assigned reading.

# Appendix B

**Assignment: Critical Analysis and Curatorial Statement**

**Objective:** This assignment requires you to engage with the theoretical concepts presented in the chapter "Making Mistakes" by Peggy Diggs and Lucy R. Lippard, which we have been discussing in class. The authors argue for a critical shift in how we, as students and practitioners of art history and artmaking, approach the study of race. They advocate for a direct examination of **whiteness**—its history, privilege, and role in systemic oppression—rather than simply focusing on how race affects non-white communities.

For this assignment, you will do the following:

1. **Select an Artwork:** Choose one artwork made by a white artist that you believe either succeeds or fails to critically engage with the concept of whiteness as defined by Diggs and Lippard.
2. **Research and Analysis:** Conduct research on your chosen artwork and artist. In a 1,000–1,200-word essay, provide a close formal and contextual analysis of the work. Your analysis should answer the following questions:
    - How does the artwork engage with the concept of whiteness? Is it a successful or unsuccessful engagement according to the framework of "Making Mistakes"?
    - What theoretical and methodological approaches does the artist use? For example, is it a performance, a public intervention, a photographic series, or a video installation? How do these choices either aid or hinder the work's ability to critically examine Whiteness?
    - How does your chosen artist navigate the "psychologically risky proposition" of talking about whiteness? Does the work risk making mistakes, or does it retreat into a position of comfort or "guilty whiteness"?
3. **Curatorial Statement:** Based on your analysis, write a 250–300-word curatorial statement for a hypothetical exhibition. In this statement, propose how you would situate the artwork within a larger curatorial narrative that challenges viewers to confront their own relationship with race and Whiteness. The statement should be clear, concise, and compelling, explaining the significance of the artwork and its role in a broader conversation.

**Learning Objectives:**

This assignment is designed to help you:

- Apply theoretical frameworks to the analysis of artworks.
- Develop a nuanced understanding of race, identity, and power in art history.
- Practice critical thinking and persuasive writing skills.
- Learn how to articulate a curatorial vision and contextualize an artwork for a public audience.

## Appendix C

**Assignment: Historical Constructions of Whiteness**

**Objective:** To research and analyze how the concept of "whiteness" has been historically constructed and to present your findings to the class. This assignment will deepen your understanding of whiteness as a social construct and its role in shaping race and power dynamics.

**Task:** Drawing on the themes from the book *Feminists Talk Whiteness*, particularly the chapters on historical constructions of race, you will conduct a research project on how whiteness has been constructed in a specific time period. You will then present your findings to the class.

**Guidelines:**

1. **Choose a Time Period & Context:**
    - Select a specific historical period (e.g., the 19th-century United States, post-WWII Europe, the Civil Rights era).
    - Choose a specific context within that period (e.g., immigration policies, scientific discourse, legal rulings, media representations).
2. **Research:**
    - Research how the concept of "whiteness" was defined, understood, and reinforced during your chosen time and context.
    - Explore how whiteness was used to grant privilege or exclude certain groups of people.
    - Use at least three scholarly sources (e.g., academic journal articles, books from university presses) to support your research.
3. **Presentation:**
    - Prepare a 5-7 minute presentation for the class.
    - Your presentation should clearly define your chosen time period and context.
    - Explain how whiteness was constructed during that time.
    - Use visual aids (e.g., images, quotes, data) to illustrate your points.
    - Be prepared to answer questions from your classmates and instructor.

**Deliverables:**

- **Presentation:** 5-7 minute presentation to the class.
- **Source List:** A one-page list of your scholarly sources, formatted in a standard citation style (e.g., MLA, Chicago).

# Appendix D

**Assignment: Centering Whiteness in Historical Feminist Movements**

**Objective:** To critically analyze a historical feminist movement by applying the theoretical framework from *Feminists Talk Whiteness* to identify and evaluate how whiteness was centered in its goals, practices, and leadership.

**Task:** Choose a specific historical feminist movement (e.g., the Suffrage Movement, Second-Wave Feminism, etc.). Write a 750-1000 word essay that analyzes this movement through the lens of the assigned chapter from *Feminists Talk Whiteness*. Your goal is to demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of how whiteness functioned as a dominant force within the movement and to discuss the consequences of that centering.

**Assignment Requirements:**

1. **Movement Overview:** Briefly introduce the historical feminist movement you have chosen, including its key figures, primary goals, and historical context.
2. **Analytical Application:** Using the concepts and terminology from the assigned chapter in *Feminists Talk Whiteness*, analyze how whiteness was centered within your chosen movement.
3. **Evidence and Examples:** Provide specific examples to support your analysis. These could include:
    - The exclusion of women of color from leadership or key discussions.
    - Rhetoric or strategies that prioritized the needs and experiences of white women.
    - The movement's failure to address issues of systemic racism or intersectional oppression.
4. **Consequences:** Discuss the impact of centering whiteness. How did this narrow the movement's scope? What were the negative consequences for women of color and for the movement's overall success?
5. **Citations:** Your essay must be properly cited using a standard academic format (e.g., MLA, Chicago, APA) and should include a clear reference to the assigned chapter.

## Appendix E

**Assignment: Praxical Projects - A Community Intervention**

**Objective:** To translate the theoretical knowledge from *Feminists Talk Whiteness* into a meaningful, action-oriented project that addresses and intervenes in issues of whiteness within your community.

**Task:** Drawing on the chapters on praxis in *Feminists Talk Whiteness*, design a detailed proposal for a community-based intervention. This project should be a practical application of the book's core concepts, aiming to disrupt the centering of whiteness or promote anti-racist feminist practices in a specific, local context.

**Proposal Requirements:**

1. **Project Title and Summary:** Give your project a clear, concise title. Write a 100-150 word summary of your project's goals, methods, and expected outcomes.
2. **Community Context:** Define the community you are focusing on (e.g., your neighborhood, a campus group, a local non-profit). Explain why this community is a relevant site for this intervention and what specific issue related to whiteness you intend to address.
3. **Connection to Praxis:** Explicitly connect your project's design to the concepts of praxis discussed in the assigned chapters. How does your project embody the idea of critical self-reflection combined with transformative action?
4. **Methodology:** Outline the specific steps you would take to implement the project. Be concrete and practical. What would you do? What resources would you need? Who would you collaborate with?
5. **Desired Outcomes:** What do you hope to achieve with this intervention? What specific changes, big or small, do you hope to see in your community as a result of your project?
6. **Justification:** Write a 250-300 word justification for your project. Explain how it is an ethical and effective way to apply your academic learning to a real-world problem.

**Submission:** Your proposal should be a 3-5 page document (double-spaced), properly formatted with clear headings for each section. Include a bibliography of any sources consulted, including the relevant chapters from *Feminists Talk Whiteness*.

# Appendix F

**Assignment: Centering Voices, Fostering Reflection**

**Objective:** To practice critical self-reflection on one's own positionality in discussions of race, and to engage in a scholarly analysis that centers the voices and experiences of women of color, in line with the pedagogical strategies from *Feminists Talk Whiteness*.

**Task:** This assignment is composed of two parts: a private, low-stakes reflective journal entry and a public-facing discussion board post. The goal is to first process your personal reactions to the assigned readings on your own, and then to contribute to a class discussion that focuses on the core arguments of the text.

**Part 1: Private Reflective Journal Entry (300-400 words)**

1. **Read the assigned chapter(s)** from a woman of color scholar in *Feminists Talk Whiteness*.
2. **Write a private journal entry** reflecting on your personal reactions to the reading. Consider the following questions:
    - What emotions or thoughts did the reading provoke in you?
    - Did you encounter any concepts or experiences that were new or challenging?
    - How does your own racial positionality (white, a person of color, etc.) influence your reading of the text?
    - What questions do you have for the author or for the class that stem from your personal reflections?
3. **Submission:** This journal entry will be submitted directly to the instructor and will not be shared with the class. It is a space for you to process your thoughts without the pressure of a public audience.

**Part 2: Public Discussion Board Post (250-350 words)**

1. **Return to the text** after completing your journal entry.
2. **Craft a public-facing discussion post** that is focused on the text's core scholarly arguments. Your post should:
    - **Analyze** a key argument or concept from the reading.
    - **Engage directly** with the author's voice and experience as presented in the chapter.
    - **Center the author's perspective**, making their voice the foundation of your analysis.
    - **Pose a question** that encourages a deeper, text-based discussion among your peers, moving beyond personal feelings to intellectual engagement.

**Submission:** This post will be submitted to the class discussion board by the assigned deadline. The two-part structure of this assignment is designed to allow for both private self-reflection and a public scholarly conversation that centers the voices of women of color.

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This journal is published by Pitt Open Library Publishing..

ISSN: 1941-0832

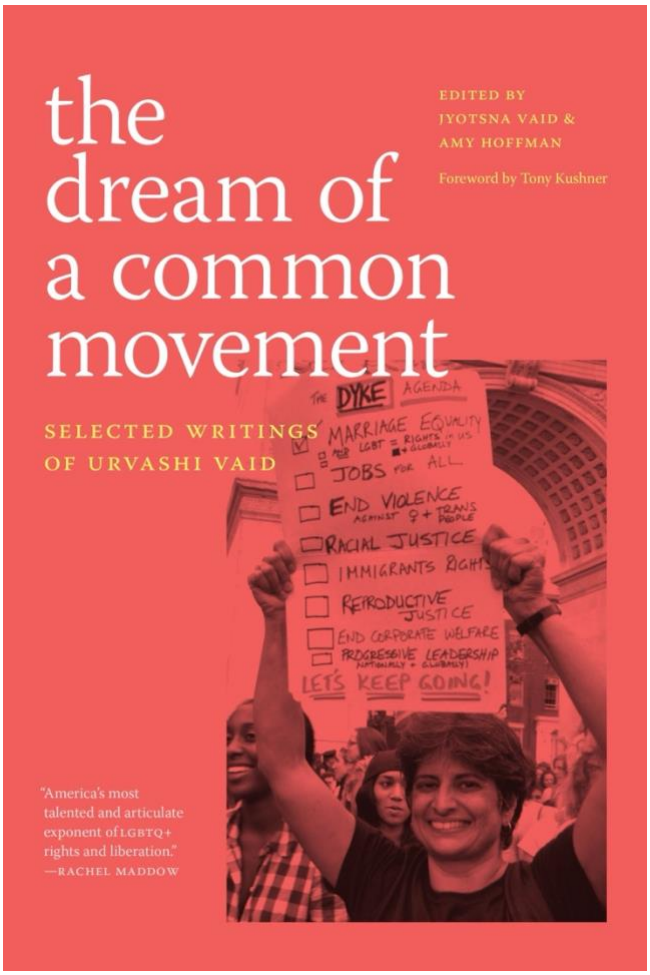
RADICAL TEACHER

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Review

# The Dream of a Common Movement: Selected Writings of Urvashi Vaid

by Michael Bennett




*THE DREAM OF A COMMON MOVEMENT: SELECTED WRITINGS OF URVASHI VAID.* EDITED BY JYOSTNA VAID AND AMY HOFFMAN. DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2025.

***The Dream of a Common Movement: Selected Writings of Urvashi Vaid.*** **Edited by Jyostna Vaid and Amy Hoffman. Duke University Press, 2025.**

The first words of Tony Kushner's foreword to *The Dream of a Common Movement: Selected Writings of Urvashi Vaid* are "Some people shouldn't die" (xi). I read these words and burst into tears. This should be your first clue that you are not reading an unbiased and dispassionate review of this collection of mostly uncollected essays, speeches, and letters by the late great Urvashi Vaid, who passed away in 2022 at the age of 63. Urv was a friend of mine, I miss her terribly, and the world is a diminished place without her in it. I am not just sad but unspeakably angry that Urvashi, who worked as hard as anyone I know to make the world a better place, is not here, but Donald Trump (the anti-Urv) lives on doing his best to destroy the planet. In a just and righteous world, Urvashi Vaid would be president and Trump would be a forgotten former reality show host.

Fortunately, the words and deeds and movement-building of Urvashi live on. In this volume, her words are contextualized and amplified by Tony Kushner's preface, as well as an introduction and concluding brief biography by the editors (one of whom is Urv's sister). In between, Urvashi's words are presented in four sections: Building a Movement; Expanding Its Scope; Taking Stock; and The Promise—and Precarity—of Justice. In the introduction, the editors explain the logic of this organizing structure as representative of Urvashi's trajectory from being a leader of this country's LGBTQ+ Rights Movement, to her insistence (first as the head of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and NGLTF Policy Institute, and then through her work with the Ford Foundation, Arcus Foundation, and ultimately The Vaid Group) that the LGBTQ+ Movement must not be a single-issue movement but a human rights movement seeking liberation for all. These concerns reflected in the first two sections of the book are amplified in the third section's admonition to know what you are fighting for (in other words, questions of tactics and strategy) and the final section's focus on solidarity: the dream of a common movement.

One need not agree with all of Urvashi's analysis of these issues and tactics to see how it would be useful for radical teachers to consider using this book in classes devoted to social movements, LGBTQ+ history, feminist/queer theory, organizing in general, the strengths and weaknesses of nonprofits, etc. In the first two sections of the book, topics that might generate fruitful discussions and debate along these lines include Vaid exploring whether a common movement needs to be radical or revolutionary rather than reformist; revisiting the questions of in what sense and to what extent gender and sexuality are social constructs; entertaining the possibility that "identity politics was a kind of necessary mistake" (56), or at least erred by focusing "more on the identity and less on the politics" (55); and maintaining that one of the lessons of ACT UP is "direct action did not help us resolve the old splits of political ideology, race, gender, and class. Instead, direct action reinforced them" (82). The most consistent theme in these sections is the need to resist single-issue LGBTQ+ politics, critiquing what has been called "homonormativity" or "homonationalism" on behalf of a movement integrating sex/gender politics with "economic and racial justice politics" (139). Indeed, integrating these fights was probably Urvashi's most significant contribution to the movement. At a time when most mainstream gay organizations (e.g., the Human Rights Campaign) were not really invested in race and class analysis, Urvashi helped shape the NGLTF and its Policy Institute to be a beacon for intersectional political action, and she kept up this fight her whole life.

The language of the last half of the book reminded me of another late great left hero of mine: Michael Harrington, one of the founders of Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). In his many books on democratic socialism, Harrington had an astonishing ability to distill fundamental Marxian/left principles into jargon-free prose. Likewise, Urvashi's writing and speeches explore the dialectical nature of political change (how residual, dominant, and emergent discourses travel together), the nature of solidarity, concepts of hybridity and intersectionality, how the relationship between base and superstructure shapes political economy, and other central concerns of left thought. It would be extremely useful for students to be introduced to these concepts without the daunting and arcane terminology of much Marxian and queer theory.

Three pieces in the final section of the book stand out to me in particular. In the first, a 2017 address titled "Irresistible Revolution: Understanding the LGBT Movement," Urvashi talks about the economic policies of structural adjustment and globalization that led to "this moment of revolution and of backlash" (164). She argues that Trump was able to harness "people's anger at the economic destruction of our country's middle class" by combining "racial animosity and fear" in a well-oiled propaganda machine "right out of the Goebbels playbook" (164-166). In response, just months before she passed away, Urvashi helped launch what is the subject of the next essay in the collection: "The 22nd Century Initiative to Counter Authoritarianism." This piece, cowritten with Scot Nakagawa (who would go on to direct the organization after Urv's death), outlines a plan to counter the "autocratization" of far-right movements that present an "existential threat to democracy" (173-174). In "Chemo Killed the Small-Talk Gene," Urvashi even turns her journey with the cancer that would take her life into a political struggle. Though at first this journey struck her as a "depoliticized experience," Urv came to realize that "everything about my cancer journey was profoundly about power—which is what defines the political" (191). In the end, she argues that "there's a clear need for an ACT UP-type direct action movement organized around diagnosis, treatment, and care for breast cancer," including universal healthcare (202).

In a standard review, I would now raise my critiques of the book in question. I did and do, in fact, have disagreements with Urv about whether there is such a thing as "a socially responsible capitalism" (58), but then I have the luxury of being an independent socialist and she worked in the bowels of the system (I was a Bernie Bro and she a Hillary Ho—a private joke).

However, I am not objective about Urvashi Vaid or the importance of her work. I am asking—no, *begging*—you to read this book, adopt it in your classes, spread the word, send it to your friends: Do whatever it takes to realize her dream of a common movement. As Rachel Maddow says in a blurb on the back cover of the book, "We all live today in a world Urvashi shaped profoundly—she ought to be a household name." This is the mission of we FOUs (Friends of Urv). There are and will be more conferences on Urv's work, organizations inspired by her vision, and documentaries screening now (https://www.therearethingstodo.com/) and forthcoming (https://www.aneverydayriot.com/). The main gallery at the American LGBTQ+ Museum will be named for Urvashi when it opens in 2028 (https://americanlgbtqmuseum.org/). Some of us are even working on a U.S. postage stamp in her honor. When this effort was mentioned at Urv's funeral, her spouse, comedian Kate Clinton, quipped "I'd lick that stamp!" We should all work together to create that stamp, lick it, and then use it to spread Urv's dream of a common movement.

Some people shouldn't die. But when they do, and especially when it is someone whose voice was as vitally important as Urvashi Vaid's, it's up to those of us who remain to keep their legacy alive.

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This journal is published by Pitt Open Library Publishing..

ISSN: 1941-0832

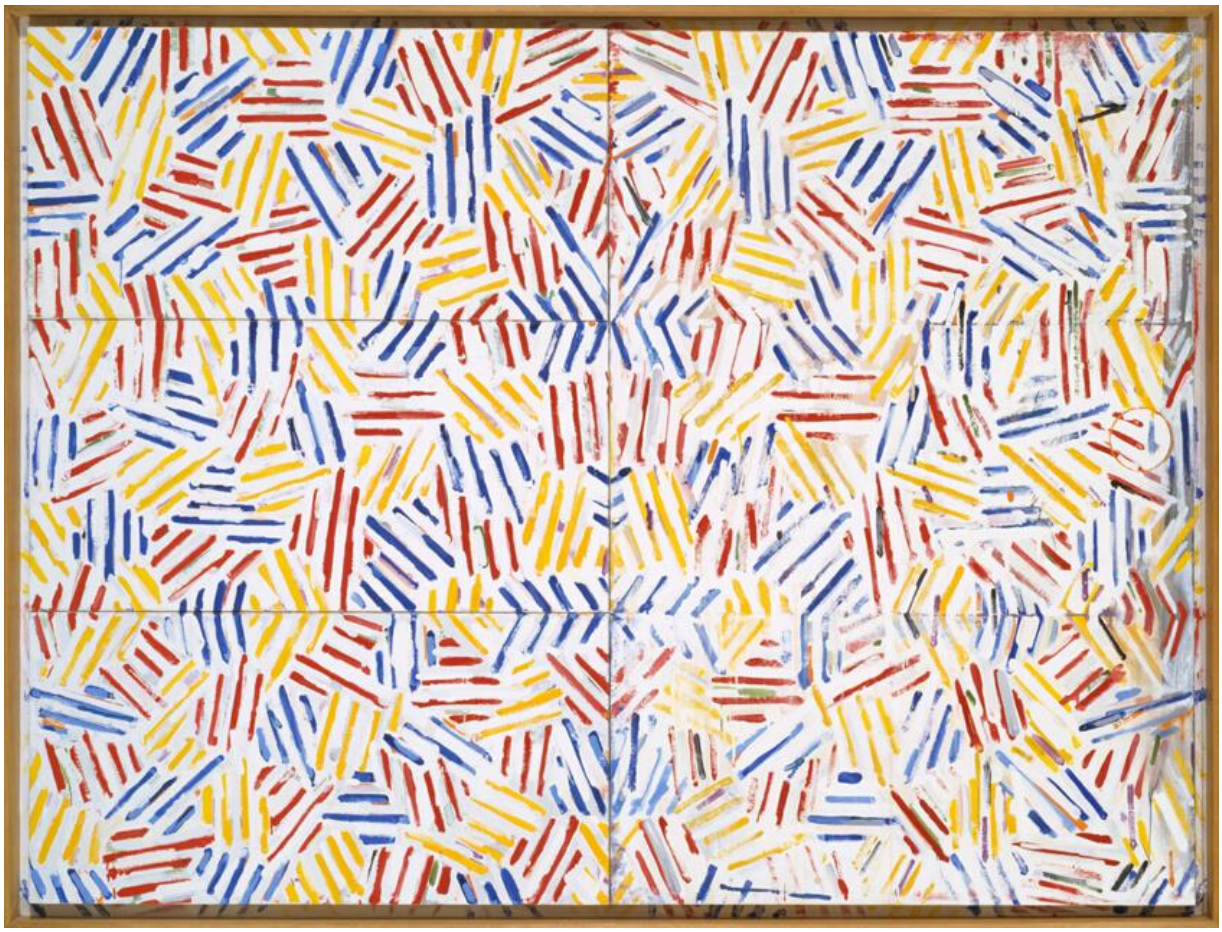
RADICAL TEACHER

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

Poetry

# On (once again) Observing First-time Voters

by Theric Jepson



CORPSE AND MIRROR II, 1974/75. JASPER JOHNS. ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO OPEN ACCESS COLLECTION.

# On (once again) Observing First-time Voters

2024

I haven't voted early
perhaps in admission
that for all its ugh
I do not want this election to end.

I remember 2016,
even if now's eighteen-year-olds may not.
I remember then's weeping, then's fear,
then's uncertainty they'd get to vote again.

Now's are more expectant of disaster,
which may mean they accept it.
That they—we—are together ready to give up
and allow the horrors of history to bury us in our beds.

Hard to fight [the abnormal]? Yes.

Harder to stand
to fight again
and again [the normal].

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