

Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice
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Don't Shoot the Messenger: The White Instructor and Ethnic Literature
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"We must begin to speak, knowing that words alone are insufficient. But I have seen that meaningful dialogue can lead to effective action. Change is possible. I remain hopeful." -- Beverly Daniel Tatum, *"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" and Other Conversations About Race*

"[D]iscourses do actually live in bodies. They lodge in bodies; bodies in fact carry discourses as part of their own lifeblood." --Judith Butler, "How Bodies Come to Matter: An Interview with Judith Butler." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1998, vol. 23, no. 2

One semester I had a crisis in my American Diversity course. The conversations about race were consistently on edge, ready to explode, if not already exploded. One day after an interactive exercise in class, one student said, "None of the white students came over to talk to us," referring to herself and another student of color.

Before I could even react, let alone think of a response, a white student jumped in, "But someone did go talk to you. You didn't come over and talk to any of us!"

Here's what had happened: That day, a few weeks into the semester, I brought a chart into class that listed various identity categories (race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, ability) that corresponded to different colored dot stickers. On name tags, students were to write their names and then put stickers on their name tags for the parts of their selves that felt the most salient in the classroom. After students chose their stickers, they were to wear their name tags and talk in pairs or threes about their choices: why did they pick those stickers? About three minutes into the talking, I asked the students to find someone new, to talk to someone they hadn't yet talked to. The point of talking in small groups is to diminish vulnerability and yet allow people a space to

communicate who they are in the classroom and—my main hope—give them the opportunity to self-identify and dispel assumptions. I adapted this exercise from one that Mathew Ouellett from the UMass Amherst Center for Teaching had used in the Teaching and Learning in the Diverse Classroom (TLDC) program with faculty and graduate students, and I had used it at least twice before in previous semesters and it had generated lively discussion about how we are different selves in different contexts and what assumptions are made about us in those contexts.

That day I noticed that two students in the back of the room had not gotten out of their chairs to mingle. They were also two students who were visibly of color, one of whom, Maribel,¹ had already been very vocal in class about the racism she experienced on campus. She had told me privately that in the U.S. her Latina identity was often erased by people who only saw her blackness. She and another student, who was of African American descent, had stayed together during the exercise.

After students talked in their groups for a few minutes, I opened the discussion up on a broader level: What did we learn about identity in the classroom?

Again, the question is shaped so that no one feels put on the spot in the large group and the intention is to move us to the level of analysis and synthesis of experience. Yet, usually, there was a silence, as there often is when an instructor asks an analytical question. But this time I didn't have to force myself to keep the silence and wait, because Maribel spoke right up to confront the other students.

A few minutes into the increasingly volatile discussion, I asked the students to take a pause and spend some time individually writing about their responses to the exercise and subsequent discussion. Maribel said that the exercise further exposed and made vulnerable the students of color in the classroom. Though this same activity had gone smoothly twice

¹ Students' names have been changed to protect their privacy.

before in other classes, it was bound to have different effects in different groups. How could I have been so clueless? How could I have missed the mounting tension that had been waiting for this outlet?

When I walk into any of my writing and literature classes at UMass, even the course called American Diversity, the racial and ethnic diversity is not immediately discernable. Students of color are too few and far between, sometimes the “only” in the class. As a white instructor for predominantly white students, then, I negotiate the work of making explicit those unspoken dynamics of racial difference without putting students of color involuntarily in the spotlight or alienating white students. Why do I feel particularly qualified for this job? Well, I don't, except in as much as I'm committed to infusing my scholarship and teaching with the intellectual rigor that comes with learning about diverse cultural experiences. Talking about differences is terrifying, but also exhilarating. I make mistakes all the time, and yet I find those mistakes to be the core of my learning experience. Probably the biggest mistake for any white instructor of ethnic literature is allowing white students to make assumptions about who you are because you are white, too, such as the assumption of collusion in prejudice and white privilege. Of course, any assumptions carry the possibility of creating misperceptions and misunderstandings.²

The other challenge is students' anger. Since the teaching of literature, in my opinion, necessarily includes the teaching of cultural and historical contexts, students of all backgrounds who haven't been exposed to that history and who feel overwhelmed by it when they do learn about it,

² My experience has been that finding out about students, their lives, expectations, and interests at the beginning of the semester not only helps their learning and helps me prioritize my teaching, but it can head off some headaches down the line. A lot of the literature on teaching and learning also sees pre-assessment as a crucial element in best teaching practices. See Thomas A. Angelo and K. Patricia Cross, *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers* 2nd Edition (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1993) for more information about using pre-assessment strategies in the classroom.

sometimes direct their anger and frustration at the instructor who has exposed them to it. My whiteness, for some, means that I am merely the “messenger,” not participant in those histories and cultures. For others, my whiteness may trump any authority I claim on the subject. Over the years, I’ve developed a syllabus and a pedagogy that includes crucial elements to prevent students from seeing me as a “messenger” and to encourage students to learn from each other’s experiences and expertise. I don’t necessarily want to prevent their anger and frustration, confusion and guilt. I see those emotions as natural phases of a process of understanding and investigating the discrepancy between received mythology about race and ethnicity and the more complex and challenging real experiences of people in the U.S. As Beverly Daniel Tatum notes, “feelings of guilt and shame are part of the hidden costs of racism” (94). (And, as many educational psychologists argue, our affective lives contribute to, and sometimes inhibit, our learning.) However, I do want students to see themselves as agents in the issues raised by the literature we read, and I want them to become astute readers and analysts of what they read and see, and what they experience.

Also, as part of a larger trend at UMass Amherst towards more intentional pedagogy around questions of diversity, I’ve been made more conscious myself of how to be more deliberate in my syllabus design and teaching practices. In 2001-2002, through the UMass Amherst’s Center for Teaching TLDC fellowship, the UMass English Department participated in a year-long self-assessment of diversity in its curriculum, student population, and recruitment and retention practices. UMass Amherst shortly thereafter convened a Community, Diversity and Social Justice team to assess and make recommendations in these areas on a campus-wide basis³. For the reasons I’ve enumerated above and in the larger

³ See www.umass.edu/wost/cdsj/ for more information on the University of Massachusetts Amherst Community, Diversity & Social Justice Academic Affairs Team and its reports.

campus context I just mentioned, I've developed three main elements in my classes that I describe below.

Racial Identity Development

During that crisis semester in my American Diversity course, activities and readings I had used previously with success not only flopped but seemingly backfired. Perhaps I had become complacent. The students of color who were vocal also stirred up the tension. Though their anger and vocal criticism of other students' and my comments made my heart beat rapidly every day, I welcomed the way they were shaking us all up and forcing us to question our assumptions and preconceived notions.

Despite the tension in the classroom, our discussions seemed productive to me, until a white male student came to my office to talk about his feeling silenced by the students of color. Though he was fairly diplomatic and reasonable about it, the way that he positioned the other students as the "problem" troubled me. When I brought this up to some colleagues, one of them, Karen Cardozo, suggested having students read Tatum's work on racial identity development. I quickly found a copy of Tatum's *"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" and Other Conversations About Race*, read it, and copied selected excerpts for my students. We stopped the scheduled syllabus and read and discussed. Tatum has separate chapters on racial identity development for people of color and for whites, and I find that white students sometimes bristle at the chapter on white identity development, but more often they feel relieved by it because Tatum offers a way of seeing guilt and shame as a stage in the process of understanding racialization and racism. And "process" suggests movement and progress. After we read Tatum in that first class, the same male student came to my office to thank me for giving them the reading because it allowed him to

understand where his own feelings and perspective were coming from (and what went unsaid: where his classmates might be coming from).

Now I continue to include Tatum in my courses that explicitly address race and ethnicity, and I continue to have students read her about a month or so into the course, once they've—if not become comfortable with each other—gotten to know their classmates a bit. What Tatum does for all of us, students and teachers alike, is offer a framework for analyzing our own positions and perspectives in the struggle to understand and eventually challenge racism and racialization. With that purpose in mind, I share with the students my own background growing up white in southeast Washington, D.C., an experience quite different from the majority of white students in my classes, but one that nonetheless didn't shield me from racial prejudice and privilege. As students of literature, using the tools Tatum gives us, we can map our own journey of racial identity development and how that journey influences our readings of literary texts. We ask questions such as: Why do I respond to this story or this word in the way I do? Why do I easily empathize or not with a particular character? What are my blind spots? How might I read this differently in one year, five years, twenty years? Similarly, Tatum's explicit goal to create more productive conversations about race forces the class to think in meta-terms about how productive our own classroom dialogues are and to understand why and how we might be coming at the same topic from so many different angles and life experiences. The "messenger" then is in each of us, influencing how we understand and respond to each other and "ethnic" literature.

Performance

Tatum asks us to make connections between our embodiment in the world and our understanding of the meanings of that embodiment. Our bodies matter, and there is some educational research on kinesthetic

learning that indicates that even physical movement can influence learning⁴. In academic circles, it's almost a cliché nowadays to talk about performance and subjectivity in the same breath. But have we fully explored the potential of a pedagogy that takes into account that we live not in our bodies but *through* our bodies? By using performance in the classroom, my agenda is to make my body and students' bodies salient in our literary analysis. What does it mean for a white student to utter Harriet Jacobs's words aloud? What does it mean for a male student to inhabit the first-person narrative of the mother in Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*? And how do our own particular bodily presences shed light on character, language, and form in these texts?

My courses incorporate a variety of performance on a continuum from low-stake activities to formal assignments. In the informal range, we read aloud passages from literary texts in class and add gestures or other movement to the recitation. This performative activity can help us reflect on how our voices and movement shape the meaning of language. Furthermore, this activity slows down our reading of literary texts and allows us to do the kind of close, analytical reading that we often ask of students in class and in writing. I have students read aloud on the first day of class as a way of introducing performance as a part of our everyday classroom practice. On that first day, we also do a movement activity I call the "I-statement" exercise. I explain that it's a fun way to start getting to know each other a bit. But I also have another agenda, or two.

We start by standing up and walking about the room, getting to know the space with our physical movement, noticing that there are windows (if there are windows), how many chairs get in our way, whether the floor has been swept (rarely) and who the other faces are in the room with us. We then shake hands as we pass and say our names. Then I say,

⁴ For example, see Howard Gardner's *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

“Shake feet!” “Shake elbows!” This usually makes everyone stop in their tracks and giggle nervously. The only ones who comply are the students near me who reluctantly raise a shoe to mine.

Then I ask them to find a partner and tell each other one truth and one lie about themselves. The surface point is to break the ice and get the students talking about themselves. Inevitably the question “Do we tell our partner which one is the lie?” comes out and I say, “That’s up to you.” Once the talking dies down, I ask anyone if they’d like to share what their partner told them. There are a couple volunteers. Someone has never seen snow before. Another person spent the summer fishing in Alaska. Are they lies? We can’t be sure.

The next part of the exercise is the core of the activity. Each person will at some point make an “I-statement,” such as “I like to ski” and everyone who can make that same statement will move to stand with him or her, and everyone else will move away. I often start with my own statement, either “I am an only child” or “I love asparagus.” Soon the students are volunteering their own “I-statements” and there’s a nervous excitement building. What will be said next? Will I be a part of the group? Will I be the only one left standing alone?

Some statements are predictable (“I live in Southwest dorms”), some not so predictable (“I want to be a brain surgeon”). But interestingly, the majority of the statements are not discerned by simply looking at a person. And it seems that students studiously stay away from those statements that do name an identifying feature already seemingly visible. Perhaps because what we think we know visually seems already too obvious? And yet it always happens that as the semester progresses our not-so-visible ethnic and racial identities reveal themselves. One time during the activity an international student said, “I am not originally from the U.S.” and he was the only one in the room. It was fascinating to me that he chose to do that, whereas the experience of being the “only”

usually occurs in the exercise when someone else's I-statement leaves an unsuspecting person standing alone. I also try to court that for myself when I say "I'm an only child" and have at least once been left standing alone.

At the end of the exercise, we sit down to write and reflect: What did we learn about ourselves? What did we learn about others? What might this activity mean? There are a myriad ways of finding meaning in the activity, from seeing it as an ice breaker to an analogy of how we create identity communities. In a course that explicitly focuses on those seemingly discernible differences of skin color and culture and gender and class I will try to steer our conversation towards the question of why we choose in this exercise to reveal those aspects of ourselves that are not visible. What does that mean in a course about diversity? What does that say about difference? Why do some differences carry more weight, become more politicized, than others?

Huge questions, but they are the questions that will carry us through the semester.

At the other end of the informal-formal continuum, my courses include an assignment (see Appendix 1) adapted from one I experienced as a graduate student in a feminist drama class taught by Jenny Spencer at UMass Amherst.⁵ The performance assignment I use in my courses is intended to give students the opportunity to craft their own creative text for an audience—their peers. The assignment is specifically not about acting out a text we're reading, and I purposely do not want students to feel obligated to act or to have acting skills. Instead, the stated purpose of the assignment is to present an engaging interpretation of a text to prompt a lively class discussion. I ask students to think of it as a group essay or reading journal *in response to* a text and to be as creative and interactive

⁵ Jenny Spencer, "Contemporary Feminist Drama and Performance," English Department, UMass Amherst, Fall 1995.

as they want to be. The performance group is also then responsible for facilitating class discussion for about 15 minutes after the performance.

If I hadn't already realized it that semester with the colored dot exercise, I would have quickly learned through the performance assignments that encouraging active learning in the classroom means giving up control of center stage and risking unanticipated events. This risk is of course heightened by fully ceding presentation and facilitation roles to students, and often, when the assignment is not clear or the students not motivated to engage their full creative intellect, the performances can flop dreadfully. But the assignment also risks brilliance. For example, in one of my general education literature courses, students "performed" Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* by painting and cutting out a larger-than-life representation of Pecola Breedlove. As the class watched spellbound, the performers gradually dismembered Pecola while reading aloud relevant passages from the novel. Chillingly, the group's performance enabled Morrison's themes to materialize before our eyes. And though we didn't explicitly discuss philosopher Judith Butler's notion of the "abject" body, we didn't have to read Butler to understand how white beauty conventions had created Pecola's abjection.

What this assignment allows—flop or brilliance—is the opportunity for students to create the agenda for discussing the hot-button issues of race and ethnicity, among others. I frame the experience with the assignment and the choice of text, then I step aside. No longer is there a "messenger," but rather we are all participants.

Legal Texts, Legal Fictions

Being a participant begs the question of what we're participating in. As Michael Omi and Howard Winant have argued, we are born into

systems of racial meaning.⁶ The legal system has long shaped notions of race, ethnicity, citizenship, and personhood, and literature has a long tradition of questioning the law in its philosophy and practice.

In reading “ethnic” literature and primary legal texts together, my students and I examine the interrelations of legal and cultural constructions of ethnic and racial identity. I use legal texts, one, because I’m interested in how the law shapes subjectivities and how literature responds to those shapings. But, two, also because when students see the inequities *written into law* they can no longer deny institutional racism and instead our conversations start with “how does this happen?” and then move to an analysis of the circulation of racializing discourses between the law and cultural products such as literature.

More specifically, we explore how writers challenge the legal language of racial subjectivity that has influenced the histories of Native American sovereignty, slavery and segregation, and immigrant and citizenship status. For example, we read Sherman Alexie’s serial killer novel *Indian Killer* alongside the Declaration of Independence and The Indian Removal Act of 1830. In discussing the Declaration’s use of language such as “merciless Indian Savages” and Andrew Jackson’s rise to elected office as an “Indian killer,” students begin to see the possible irony in the title of Alexie’s novel. Furthermore, in light of the language of paternal protectionism as a rationalization for the legal policy of removal and genocide in The Indian Removal Act, the novel’s lack of conventional resolution takes on new meaning. Alexie’s *Indian Killer* not only fails to deliver the satisfaction of the guilty one brought to justice, but the novel also fails to identify who the Indian Killer is, at least in the traditional expectation that one of the characters will be revealed as the perpetrator. We then face the questions: What are the implications of this failure to

⁶ See Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: from the 1960s to the 1980s*. (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986).

reach resolution in the narrative on the *unresolved* legacy of colonization, forced assimilation, and genocide? What power do writers have to de-form the narratives that have shaped Native American subjectivity through the law?

Reading a novel alongside a specific legal text can thus generate many questions. However, a comparative ethnic approach throughout the syllabus can generate more questions about how the legal history of racial formation has been a comparative one itself, often pitting one social group against another. A comparative approach in the same course also allows students to explore authors' shared projects across diverse ethnicities in response to those legal shapings of difference. For example, in reading Alexie's *Indian Killer* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* together, we see that the U. S. benefited from the exploitation of Chinese "sojourners," Native Americans, and Irish immigrants in the building of the transcontinental railroad. At the same time, the U.S. denied citizenship to Chinese immigrants outright based on race, took land from American Indians to build the railroad, and allowed discrimination against Irish immigrants. Then we read Nella Larsen's *Passing* along with the 1896 Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* and we can see how even seemingly enlightened positions against racial segregation could rest on the exclusion of another group. In particular, we notice that Justice Harlan's dissenting opinion in *Plessy v. Ferguson* asks us to consider the following as an argument against racial segregation: "There is a race so different from our own that we do not permit those belonging to it to become citizens of the United States. ... I allude to the Chinese race" and yet "a Chinaman can ride in the same passenger coach with white citizens." In these historically specific ways, racial differences and divisions are not only encouraged by legal acts, but are often *created* by legislative and judicial decisions. In turn, writers engage those histories,

narrate their impact on particular lives, and write imaginative stories of resistance and redefinition of selfhood.

By assigning writing projects—low-stakes and high-stakes—that ask students to tell their own stories alongside analysis of relevant literary and legal texts, I aim to allow students to also position themselves in relation to legal and literary discourses. One former student wrote such an eloquent essay about her experience as a Vietnamese immigrant that I included her writing in the syllabus for the next semester's course.

CLOSING:

I find that these three course elements—racial identity development, performance, and legal texts—have particularly worked to help students engage in “ethnic” literatures in ways that require them to own their participation in the circulation of racial and ethnic meaning. They also require me, as teacher, to reveal my positioning within the conversation not as “messenger” but as fellow participant. Furthermore, these three practices contribute to a more interdisciplinary focus to a literature course. Thus, they build continuity between literature and other cultural materials at the same time they teach students to “read” the world they inherit and inhabit. In this way, I think they can be adapted to any course in literature, since all literature is “ethnic.”

At the end of that “crisis” semester, one of the students of color decided to write her final analytical paper on our classroom conversations and selected texts from our syllabus, and thus she openly explored her own evolving understanding of race and racism. For me, this is one of the most rewarding aspects of teaching: to learn from my own students and their interactions with literature and each other.

Appendix 1:

Performance Group Assignment

Once during the semester you will be in a performance group. Each group will be responsible for “performing” a cohesive *interpretation of the group’s responses to an assigned text*. I am certainly not expecting Academy Award-winning dramatic performances, but I am looking for thoughtful and thought-provoking responses to the readings that take a specific angle on the text and show some evidence of outside research.

The purpose of this requirement is to present thoughtful and thought-provoking ideas about a text to engage the class in lively discussion. Think of it more as a performance of a group essay or reading journal *in response to* a text, not as a performance of the text itself. I emphasize that your performance should *not* be a direct reading of a text or an acting out of a scene from the text, though it should include language and ideas from the text. In fact, resist a narrative approach to the performance; that is, try not to perform a story *per se* but rather an interpretive analysis. Try to be interactive and include the entire class in the performance. Be as creative as you want to be. Feel free to use costumes, props, audience participation, movement, music, etc. If the group would like to use Audio-Visual equipment, let me know *one week in advance of your performance* so I can reserve it for you.

After the performance, group members will be responsible for conducting class discussion after the class completes a brief response in writing. (Performance responses affect your final participation grade.) Each group will have to meet at least once outside of class to plan and rehearse your performance. Plan ahead. I will not be sympathetic to groups that want to postpone their performance date for reasons of poor time management.

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Performances should be **no less and no more than 10-15 minutes, not including class discussion**. On performance day, performers will bring to class:

- 1) One typed copy of performance presentation script to be handed in, including a bibliography of outside sources.
- 2) Enough copies for everyone of a 1-page outline of ideas and questions you will present to the class.
- 3) Visual aids or props, which may include costumes, posters, objects, audio or televisual materials, etc.

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