

"No Place" in the Classroom: Teaching Utopias, Dystopias, and the American Dream

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At the end of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838), Pym, Peters, and the soon-to-die native Nu-Nu are "overwhelmed" by a "white ashy shower" (217). Haunted by the screams of the "pallidly white birds" whose "eternal *Tekeli-li!*" announced their presence from "beyond the veil," the three lonely companions are "rushed into" an unknown future, blinded by a whiteness that only briefly reveals the potential terrors ahead (217). Poe unofficially ends *The Narrative* with this disturbing image: "there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow" (217). Falling into the chasm of the blank page, Pym's narrative remains unfinished, a taunting reminder that not only Pym but the readers are ultimately controlled by the absent author.

In fall of 2008, I taught an "Introduction to American Literature" course at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. When I remember my first day of class I think of this final scene in *Pym*. A world of whiteness and of terror. I had decided to experiment with a new form of pedagogy that, in planning at least, I was excited about. Designed around "Utopias, Dystopias, and the American Dream," the course content included texts and authors that, as an Americanist and a young teacher, I was deeply invested in: works by early Americans (notably Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin), selections from volume B (1800-1865) of *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, Poe's *Pym*, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), Edward Bellamy's *Looking*

Backward (1888), Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), Ernest Hemingway's *The Garden of Eden* (1986), Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), and the hit-television show *Lost* (2004). My objective, as outlined in the course overview, was to "use the familiar idea of the American Dream as a means to understanding how the various utopic and dystopic visions of America became distorted, revised, and transformed into what we now recognize as the 'American Dream.'"

It seemed simple enough. However, I had planned in addition to this course overview a "Part II" that outlined the course's pedagogical stance. And here is where my terror was born. "Not only," I claimed, "are we interested in reading, interpreting, and engaging with American literature, we will attempt to form our class into a utopic literature classroom. Thus...as a class we will decide a majority of the classroom policies, grading procedures, and assignments...Our goal is to successfully build our own utopic literature classroom: can it be done?" As I stepped into class that first day, it was this final question that haunted me, the "*Tekeli-li!*" of Poe's strange birds. I held in my hand a syllabus that seemed filled more with whiteness—with blank space—than writing. Gone were the typical assignments, grading procedures, and class policies. A full seventy-percent of the class was "to be determined" by the students. Faced with so much uncertainty and whiteness, I felt I had created my own "shrouded human figure."

I. Curriculum and Class

In "Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Teacherly Ethos," Marshall Gregory draws attention to the connection between a curriculum and the teaching of that curriculum. Emphasizing the importance of teaching—an increasingly significant focus in a time when the corporate university often de-emphasizes the role of teachers in student life and learning—Gregory suggests that "we sometimes forget the obvious fact that curriculum

seldom shapes anyone on its own but shapes us, instead, as a consequence of how we are *directed, informed, and led inside that curriculum by a teacher*" (71). While Gregory's argument resonated with my own past experiences as student where my love of literature owed much to the teachers I encountered, I seemed guilty of what he warns against, "a pedagogy which in fact *presumed* that curriculum is all, that texts teach themselves" (71), letting the texts—and the students—teach themselves.

While my method might seem contradictory, my mode of teaching (or lack thereof) attempted to achieve what Gregory later describes positively: "if it is curriculum that contains and displays the idea, it is teaching that bonds the student's mind *to* the idea by creating the feelings that make the importance of the idea a vital force in the life of the student" (74). In fact, the chance I took depended upon my belief that the texts would inspire the students to think about their role in the classroom and that their classroom experience would help them consider the shaping forces of the text. My hope was to create a space where teaching and text crossed, to create a learning space where our class could think about the core issues that the texts had in common and actually *experience* similar concerns and questions. I wanted them to understand that the complicated role of authority (from governance to authorship) was something that these texts and they had in common. To do so, I made my authority as transparent as possible, by creating its absence—its own blank space within the classroom dynamic.

Before I was assigned to teach this introduction to American literature course, I had thought often about one of my primary concerns when it came to teaching: how to get students invested in the material. Coming from a series of small educational systems, I believed pretty strongly in a model of teaching that emphasized student discussion. In part, I was seduced by the type of student I expected to get. Unlike a

normal university course, I was assigned to teach at Unit One (housed at Allen Residence Hall), a program designed to provide "a small-college environment with an intellectually and personally challenging atmosphere in a strong community setting" (University Housing). Unit One offers classes largely closed to non-Allen Hall students. In addition, these students have access to a darkroom, a ceramics studio, an electronic music lab, digital editing lab, and a staff of individuals eager to help students succeed both in the university at large and within their specific Allen Hall community. According to the University Housing website, Unit One is a target for creatively-inclined students, "the arts are at the core of the curriculum in order to teach students to approach all coursework in a creative and disciplined manner" (Allen Hall/Unit One). In short, Unit One students seemed like good test subjects for building a utopic classroom.

II. Authorizing Trust

As its own attempted utopia, Unit One thus encouraged these seemingly crazy utopic thoughts in my head. Knowing that my class size would be smaller (I ultimately had thirteen students in a class that usually contains thirty-six) and that I would have the support of the program itself, I decided to wash my hands of what I often considered to be the biggest stain on my teaching persona: my authority. A critical issue engaging teachers in many different levels of education, the complicated intersection between instruction and authority is perhaps best outlined by Harriet Linkin: "How do instructors in student-centered classrooms negotiate the balance between empowering students to test out interpretive arguments and professional authority? How do we find a common language?" (168).

While I *hoped* for balance, unlike Linkin, I had to accept (in fact the structure of the course encouraged) the possibility that instead of balance, my class could turn into a "student-centered interpretive anarchy" or a

"potentially heavy-handed literary authority" of Linkin's imagining (170). I knew that this foray into untried pedagogical waters would produce something—what that something was, I wouldn't know until I tried it. While I attempted to maintain some small semblance of control (a security blanket involving choosing the texts and requiring a few assignments if only to fulfill the university's requirements for the course) I could easily end up with a classroom where my worse fear was realized, a classroom without student engagement.

Patrick Allit suggests that "[s]ometimes there's an advantage to making [students] feel a little anxious" (74). While my more passive teaching persona balks at this form of power, I still managed to create a lot of anxiety, for myself and my students, on that first day of class. By forcing my students to accept responsibility for the class, I was symbolically (and aggressively) asking every student, every day "how would *you* teach the class?" As if that wasn't challenging enough, while I told my students that they were able to create their own utopic classroom, I was prepared to convince them that my model was best. On that first day I discovered a vision of myself as teacher that I found particularly repugnant. Namely, I didn't trust my students. The close-knit relationship between student-teacher that I had grown accustomed to in my early educational experiences had been slowly stripped away by a somewhat new world of heavy teaching loads, silent discussions, and my own lack of preparation, overwhelmed as a new teacher and young graduate student struggling to balance my own research with a 2-2 teaching load.

In *Writing/Teaching: Essays Toward a Rhetoric of Pedagogy*, Paul Kameen notes "how difficult it often becomes to determine who exactly is authorizing, even in some instances actually author-ing, what gets said in a university classroom" (218). Despite my unintentional acts of sabotage, my students seemed to figure out (and perhaps they already knew) what their role as students gave them: a chance to challenge my authority. On

that first day, what my students forced me to do, and thankfully so, was trust them. After a series of warnings and questions designed to push the students into creating strict guidelines and requirements that would enforce student participation, one student (Jillian) had the courage to say, "Why don't you trust us?" Jillian's comment made me aware of what was really happening. The class had largely been split: instructor vs. student. Each side was arguing from a position of defense based on past experiences. While I was guarding against an imagined student body that I could not trust to be invested in the class, they were guarding against instructors who they didn't trust to be invested in them. Needless to say, it was an awkward teaching moment. Faced with Jillian's appropriate accusation, I had to sit down and explain why I didn't trust these students I had just met. Sometimes I wonder if that honesty—that vulnerable moment—is where I finally let go, where I finally got away from that "shrouded figure" of terror. Despite that first rough day, no one dropped my class.

III. Our Classroom's "No Place"

One of the earliest texts I assigned was a chapter from *Visions of Utopia* (2003). In the introductory chapter, Edward Rothstein outlines the common definition of a utopia as "no place" (2), not an "impossible place" but a "place that can conceivably exist—and, in the teller's view, a place that *should* exist" (3). Yet he also warns that "one man's utopia is another man's dystopia" (4), pointing explicitly to the fact that at the core of utopian thinking is not freedom but obedience (7). The topic seemed relevant to both the period I wanted to begin with (the American Revolution) and to the everyday life of my students. It was an election year where the "Tea Party Movement" had a specific resonance and the "Join or Die" rattlesnake of Benjamin Franklin's imagining was popularly found on Glen Beck's 912 Project website. Moreover, I thought that discussions around the "American Dream" would provide students with a common reference

point, an entrance into these difficult and strange texts. I thus supplemented our course material with contemporary pieces—from a *Time's* article entitled "Sarah Palin's Myth of America" to the "Our Purpose" page from the Wal-Mart franchise.

Our discussion about the utopic classroom took longer than I had imagined. We spent five class days discussing what made an ideal classroom while reading (and giving less attention to than planned) John Locke's "Of the State of Nature" (1680-1690), selections from Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (1776), and Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence (1776). However, our conversations on classroom dynamics (should we have a monarchy? democracy? anarchy?) dovetailed nicely with the class reading material. It so infected our discussion that the syllabus we ultimately created mirrored the Declaration of Independence. Ratifying the syllabus with student signatures, the syllabus ended with this statement: "Once this syllabus has been signed by each member of the class, including the instructor, it has been thus ratified...If, however, the class discovers that the syllabus promotes a 'long train of abuses and usurpations...it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off' the syllabus or amend these glaring faults."

While time consuming, these early moments created relationships in the class that I think would be difficult to develop without this initial "utopic" framework. Giving students control over their own course material forced us to discuss our expectations for the class, from the role of writing and grading to discussions on student and teacher responsibilities. In fact, these conversations didn't end in those first few weeks. Whenever our class structure faltered, we paused, discussed the problem, and then tried to fix it. Our utopia was always a "no place" because it was always in progress, always being formed. We certainly failed to discover the recipe for an excellent literature course but learned instead that it was the messy *attempt* to create a utopia that made the class successful, a success

based on the development of trust, our willingness to declare our at times divergent desires. This trust allowed us to seek our own flexible balance between teacher and student authority.

Granted, my judgment on the relative "success" of the class is limited to my own pleasure in teaching these students. However, students happily informed me that while they thought I was at first "crazy" they eventually came to terms with the class; it unexpectedly turned into a "good" class. Moreover, my university evaluation ratings (if these reports count for anything) were high: I scored 4.7/5 while the course itself scored 4.9/5 (a discrepancy indicating, or so I like to think, the students' realization that the course was successful because of *them* and not me). While they reamed me for a surprisingly tough midterm, my students' anonymous comments indicated that we achieved at least the semblance of shared authority: I was "easily approachable," "open-minded," and "an equal to us." Interestingly, the students' main concern was for *me*: "I felt as though the class was more utopic for the students than the instructor," said one--demonstrating again how little we ultimately know about each other.

Teaching utopias (and thus dystopias as most of our texts became) taught me to keep in mind a kind of teaching that Kameen defines as a "specific kind of 'between'"—the space between a question you ask and the answer you receive (250). As he states, "I actually wait with an open mind prepared to hear what is about to be said. I feel as if I am empty of 'myself,' as if I have a lot of available space just waiting to become occupied, and a lot of available time, to accept and engage with and learn from whatever is coming my way" (251). This position is shockingly hard to maintain. With the fears of "filling-up" time, covering aspects of the text that you feel obligated to cover, taking time to *listen* can prove harder than it looks. No longer haunted by that empty space in my syllabus, I learned to develop not only teaching moments that embraced this "emptying" of

self but to construct a class that was willing to "empty" its expectations at its start. Despite Rothstein's suggestion that "the unpredictable is just what a utopia is unprepared for" (7), I discovered that it is this unknown that proved the most productive. Perhaps, at least for our class, this uncertainty was our "no place."

IV. "Couldn't it just be a dream?"

On our last day of literary discussion, we were finishing up Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel, *The Road* (2006). The novel seemed to begin where Poe's *Pym* ended, opening with an unknown figure, a "creature...with eyes dead white and sightless" (3). We spent most of our discussion days working through the novel's strange form, attempting to accustom ourselves to this world of violence and love. As we discussed the possible meaning of the novel's conclusion, a quiet, although thoughtful, student (Andy) spoke up. Noting the novel's apparent obsession with "awakening," Andy asked, "Couldn't it just be a dream?"

The entire class was stunned. We had been working within the literary conventions of the text, pushing doubt and disbelief aside, and more or less accepting the world McCarthy created in all its horror and beauty as somehow real. Andy's comment reminded us again of utopia's reliance on the nonexistent. He reminded us of the inherent tension within utopias, of the way in which reality pushes against the dream. His comment also seemed appropriate to the class itself, a haunting reminder of our own uncertain position: was our class too just a dream?

The answer will probably always remain a mystery. But one thing I learned (and I hope my students did as well) was that mystery--anxiety, uncertainty, the unknown--can be beautiful. At the end of his novel, McCarthy closes with ancient trout whose "white edges...wimpled softly" in the "amber current" of the stream" (286). Like Poe's hieroglyphs, these trout carry mystery on their backs, "vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be

put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery" (287). Learning to work with your students often feels like a maze, a map you fail to have the tools to read. Yet if I learned anything from this class—these texts and students—it was this: sometimes it is worth risking the haunting cry of the "*Tekeli-li!*" in order to find that less disturbing, quiet hum of mystery.

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