

"Facilitating Discussions About White Privilege in the American Literature Survey Classroom"

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ABSTRACT

Although all students experience difficulty working with concepts like white privilege or institutional racism, American literature survey students seem particularly reluctant to analyze narratives that either propose alternatives to melting pot conceptions of American identity or that require them to examine ethno-racial, class, gender, and linguistic dynamics from which they might benefit. The reason for students' resistance may be twofold: first, many students expect the survey to reflect their own (predominantly white) racial, ethnic, class, and (primarily) monolingual English speaking social locations. And second, because most students have been taught at the K-12 level in ways that confirm their social locations, many are academically and emotionally unprepared to participate in university-level classes that employ a critical multicultural pedagogical approach. Consequently, in this article I review a strategy for addressing students' resistance to "minority" literature and to non-celebratory pedagogical methodologies, which is to facilitate a discussion about whiteness that focuses on the racialized dynamics inherent in different pedagogical approaches. This strategy is useful because it enables students to think purposefully about the way core subjects like American literature have been falsely constructed to naturalize whiteness, and about the extent to which American education was conceived from its beginnings as a socially conservative force. Second, it helps students discern how common approaches to teaching ethnic content can result in the trivialization of a culture, the reinforcement of stereotypes, and the erasure of relations of inequality. And, last, the strategy encourages students to reconsider the ideological position they often automatically assume "minority" writers to occupy—in other words, students take steps toward recognizing writers do not consider, for instance, internal colonization, bilingualism, or nativism in order to attack monolingual white Americans, but rather to imagine a democratic alternative to a monolithic (literary and national) origins narrative that erases a sizable segment of the nation's population. Ultimately, the strategy I outline accomplishes a vital objective of antiracist, critical multicultural pedagogy, which is to deconstruct that which we "take to be common sense" (Jay and Jones 107).

I. Introduction

As a graduate teaching assistant, I read pedagogy literature enthusiastically, and while everything I was learning at the time seemed fundamental to my growth as a teacher, the work of theorists such as Henry Giroux, bell hooks, Paula Moya, and, of course, Paolo Freire were critical in helping me to think concretely about the connections between teaching and

social justice. I was not interested in facilitating classroom discussions that superficially celebrated difference. Rather, I wanted to engage critically and systematically issues of classism, heterosexism, racism, and white privilege. The more I read, the more I was drawn to the idea that the classroom cannot be a neutral space; thus, early on I wished to construct classroom environments that encouraged students to reflect actively upon the complex intersections of raced, gendered, sexed, and classed social identities configured by the American authors we discussed. My hope was that students who were inspired to make thoughtful connections between what we read in the classroom and their lives beyond might become more sensitive and even activist-oriented participants in the myriad communities to which they belong.

Following Paulo Freire, constructing such a learning environment is contingent upon two related points: dismantling the classroom hierarchy that situates educators as the sole authority, and fashioning a dialogic classroom. Equalizing the student-teacher dynamic is at the heart of Freire's well-known methodology, resisting the banking concept of teaching. According to Freire's model of liberation pedagogy, dialogic education fosters "transformation rather than the *domestication* of individuals" (Enns and Sinacore 7), whereas the traditional banking model of education requires that students become passive repositories for knowledge and learn to rely on authority, conformity, and consumerism, which act as subtle controls to keep them "docile," "unthreatening," and in service to the state (Miller 11). Freire's pedagogy and radical pedagogies like it are attractive because, ostensibly, they combat various forms of student powerlessness. Resisting the banking concept has special resonance when there is a racial, class, or gender gap—or, more likely, some combination thereof—between students and teachers that strengthens the teacher's authority in an already imbalanced power dynamic. Freire's pedagogy combats charges that, inevitably, students will be too intimidated to engage challenging ideas because decentering the classroom encourages students to draw on their own experiences; it privileges students' voices rather than

instructors'; and it draws out students' latent ability to think and inquire about issues that matter to them, thereby making learning more relevant to students' lives (as well as a less intimidating process).

Reflecting on my own early social locations (welfare- and then working-class, Latina, first-generation postsecondary and post-baccalaureate student), I suppose it is unsurprising that I was drawn to such a pedagogical stance, or that I had such earnest concerns about my future students' educational, political, even personal welfare. As a brand new graduate student teacher who believed in the transformative powers of the radical, liberation, feminist, and multicultural pedagogies about which I was learning, I was worried. My own positive and negative experiences as a student had enabled me to see firsthand how powerful teachers can be, how much influence they wield, and how teachers can, in substantial ways, confer authority on certain students, pave the way for some students' success while blocking others'. I wondered, what happens when students feel unable to take advantage of the transformative opportunities models like Freire's offer? What happens if students are unable to recover their voices? But lately, as an assistant professor on the tenure track, my teaching experiences have led me to wonder not what happens if students cannot recover their voices, but rather, what pedagogical direction should I take when students aggressively resist participating, especially when they resist engaging in readings whose ideas elucidate ongoing histories of oppression or that encourage them to contemplate their own complicity within systems of oppression.

II. Reflections on Teaching Multicultural Literature in the American Literature Survey

My entry into the professorial world was at a very small, private, religiously-affiliated liberal arts college in the Midwest where, in 2008-2009, 3.6 percent of a 1479-member student body belonged to an underrepresented group and I was one of a small handful of faculty members from underrepresented

groups. The vast majority of my students were locals who had deep ties to the region, and most had very limited interactions with people whose racial, ethnic, religious, or socioeconomic backgrounds were different from their own. In most classes I was the only minority present. In my early interactions with this student population, I assumed that students would be academically and emotionally equipped either to interrogate the assumptions underlying foundational American literary texts in the first half of the American literature survey, or to consider diverse points of view about the nature of American individual and national identity in the second. Many students, however, refused to participate in discussions and those who did either gave perfunctory responses to my questions or rebuffed my encouragements to engage in critical analysis by tendering reductive commentary to assigned texts instead.

For instance, on a day that was devoted to analyzing Abraham Cahan's short story, "The Imported Bridegroom," one class member remarked, "We're all Christians here, why are we reading this?" Another student dismissed wholesale Nuyorican poet Pedro Pietri's "Puerto Rican Obituary," declaring nonchalantly, "Anybody can get what they want but they have to be willing to work hard to get it." And still another student objected vehemently to assigned readings by Sherman Alexie ("Assimilation;" "Dear John Wayne"), calling "it" (Alexie? The readings?) an "abomination." In each case, the rest of the class would nod their heads in agreement. Even if most students were either too polite or too diffident to be directly confrontational, my first ever course evaluations as a tenure-track professor spoke loudly to their resistance that first year, not just to the reading assignments or to my pedagogical choices, but also, ultimately, to me: "We only read women"; "She hates men"; "She hates white people."

I am now in my second year teaching at a mid-sized, public university in a major metropolitan area in the northeast, where my regular course rotation includes a 200-level U.S. Latina/o literature class and the American literature survey sequence, "U.S. Literature To Realism" and "U.S. Literature Since Realism," respectively. As of 2012, twenty-four percent of the student body, and

roughly nineteen percent of the faculty, are from underrepresented groups. Regardless of race or ethnic background, students here tend to be less affluent than their Midwest counterparts. Many are first-generation college students, and a large percentage of these are transfers from community colleges who have significant work and family obligations in addition to attending classes. Yet, in spite of their less traditional route to university and in spite of their less-privileged class background, many students I teach in the surveys demonstrate similar attitudes toward the readings as my previous students.

For instance, last spring, we were concluding the semester in U.S. Literature Since Realism by reading a series of short stories and excerpts from longer pieces by American women writers including Alice Walker and Gloria Anzaldúa.¹ Discussion of Walker's "Everyday Use" had been adequate in one section and lively in the other, but when it came time to discuss Anzaldúa's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," students in both sections of the survey shut down. In the first class, the markedly subdued discussion ended on a rancid note: as the group prepared to leave, one of the many students who had been silent for the entire period asserted, "She [Anzaldúa] needs to understand that you can't have a country if everyone speaks different languages and is trying to be different, it's about unity." Amidst murmurs of agreement, the class finished packing up and left. Revealing to myself my own prejudices and naiveté (I believed that I would not experience such blatantly prejudicial attitudes among this more urban—and, I assumed, more cosmopolitan—student population) I held out hope that the other section would be more receptive to having a nuanced and robust discussion about the myriad politics of language Anzaldúa raises in her work. Disappointingly, students' reactions to "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" in my second section of the survey were very much the same.

As the day wore on, I felt increasingly compelled to learn more about this still-new-to-me student population's receptiveness to the study of ethnic

¹ The students' primary text is the shorter, seventh edition of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, edited by Nina Baym.

American literature, generally, and Latina/o literature, specifically. Why were their reactions so eerily similar to those of the ostensibly very different population I had just left? Thus, at the beginning of the next class period, I asked my students in each section of the survey (forty-one junior and senior English majors in the course of the day) to respond anonymously to a series of questions that included the following:²

- Have you read before any U.S. Latina/o literature? If so, which authors and/or texts?
- What have you learned (in school or elsewhere) about the history of Latinas/os in the United States?
- Do you feel most prepared to read and discuss African American, American Indian, Asian American, or Latina/o literature?
- How do you feel about reading Latina/o literature in the American literature survey?

The overwhelming majority of student respondents had prior experiences reading African American literature (97.4%) and reported feeling most prepared to discuss works by African American authors (68.3%).³ An overwhelming majority of students also reported having had prior reading experiences with Native American literature (95%), although far fewer students felt prepared to discuss works by Native American authors (17.1%). The same held true for students' experiences reading and discussing Asian American literature: a majority reported having substantial prior experiences reading Asian American literature

² I adapted these questions from a survey Carol Zitzer-Comfort gave to her Ethnic Literature of the United States students in fall 2005. For a complete list of Zitzer-Comfort's survey questions, see page 161 of her essay, "Teaching Native American Literature: Inviting Students to See the World through Indigenous Lenses." Also, please note that I asked students to omit in their responses any applicable reading experiences that I facilitated, in the survey or in other classes they may have taken from me.

³ My students responded quite similarly to Zitzer-Comfort's: she also reports students as having a disproportionately high level of familiarity with African American literature.

(85.7%), but even fewer felt prepared to discuss it in the survey classroom (9.8%).

Significantly, either standing alone or in comparison with the other sets of numbers, the statistics related to the study of U.S. Latina/o literature were surprisingly low. Only 21% of students reported having read any literature produced by Latinas/os prior to reading the selection by Anzaldúa that had been assigned for our earlier class period.⁴ Only 19.5% of students reported having a basic knowledge of the histories of Latinas/os in the U.S. And 0% of students reported feeling prepared to read or discuss Latina/o literature. Last, below are some representative responses to the final survey question, "How do you feel about reading Latina/o literature in the American literature survey," which I have placed into three groups:

Group A

- "I think it's important, especially in the second half of the U.S. Lit Seminar [survey sequence]. Obviously a part of the first half of the seminar should be devoted to the founding of the United States."
- "I feel like it is broadening our understandings of literature, but in American Lit, I think we should concentrate on American literature."
- "Confused as to why its [sic] in American Lit class and [I] feel unprepared to contribute due to the little to nothing background I have on the subject."

Group B

- "Intimidated because I don't know much."

⁴ Of the 21% of students who responded that they had prior experiences working with U.S. Latina/o literatures, only half could recall the names of authors or texts they had read. Two students reported having read Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*—one of whom also reported having read (an unspecified text by) Richard Rodriguez; one student reported having read excerpts from "a book called *¡Yo!*, by either a Puerto Rican or Cuban author" (the author of *¡Yo!* is, of course, Dominican writer Julia Alvarez); and, last, one student reported having read (an unspecified text by) Junot Díaz.

- "I think my professors have done a good job making the courses varied in terms of ethnic background of the authors. However, I am still mostly reading white authors. Sometimes I worry about generalizing."
- "I feel ethnic literature is needed because after taking this survey I feel bad not having read any ethnic lit beside African-American."

Group C

- "America is all cultures, so it feels normal. I enjoy hearing new voices, its [sic] refreshing."
- I like it → it's different/cultural → not like 'dead white men' works which, while greatly vary, don't offer the same 'flare.'"
- "I don't know a lot about these cultures but I like learning about them and their beliefs, ideals, histories, and ways of life. Sometimes I think my life is boring, it's always better to read about someone else."

The first three student respondents, Group A, appear to view the study of Latina/o literature through a nativist lens, demonstrating varying levels of enmity toward reading any work in the American literature survey whose connection to the United States they judge to be tenuous. This student set may be perceived as the most difficult to work with because they often exhibit hostility toward discussing literature with which they feel unable to identify, or they express resentment at having been assigned readings they consider irrelevant or otherwise unworthy of study. They may equate American national identity with whiteness ("the first half of the [survey] should be devoted to the founding of the United States") and with the English language ("Confused as to why [it's] in American Lit class"). Such attitudes appear to support José L. Torres-Padilla's observation that "racist euro- and anglocentricity" continue to structure "perceptions of national identity and culture in the United States" (13-14).

The next set of three student respondents, Group B, reveals ambivalence, rather than anger, about reading Latina/o literature in the U.S. literature survey sequence. Their uncertainty may stem from feeling academically under- or unprepared to analyze the materials properly (students report feeling "Intimidated" and they "worry about generalizing"). Students in Group B may also be exhibiting what Paula Rothenberg identifies as "the other side of racism" (1). Instead of articulating resentment about the issues ethnic curricula raises, students feel "guilt or moral outrage," but they are not necessarily compelled to "gain an understanding of who benefits from racism" or to think about how to "begin to take steps to dismantle" white privilege on either personal or institutional levels (Rothenberg 1). I might also extrapolate from these responses that this group of students perceives the study of any ethnic American literatures as something they must "experience," not necessarily because such literatures have aesthetic or conceptual merits that are important to examine, but because it is what well-rounded liberal arts students should do ("I feel bad about not having read [more widely in U.S.] ethnic lit").

The final three respondents, Group C, demonstrate a welcome enthusiasm toward having the opportunity to read Latina/o literary texts. But underlying this enthusiasm is the perception that such literature constitutes a brief, feel-good, and, crucially, unreflective jaunt into American diversity. Latina/o literature is "flare," as one anonymous student troublingly put it, a "refreshing" temporary diversion from either their "boring" lives or the boring, albeit essential, reads that form the real business of the American literature survey sequence—i.e., the study of high art produced by "dead white men," to quote another student respondent. The students who fall into this category unwittingly cast U.S. Latina/o literatures as a "side-show for white people who look on with delight at all the differences that surround them" (Dyer 12).

Although on the surface the aforementioned student responses suggest a range of receptiveness toward analyzing U.S. Latina/o literatures in the American literature survey classroom, they do share common ground. Across the board,

their responses naturalize white-ethnic culture and position Latina/o literature as divergent from that presumed norm. They also reject or minimize literature they perceive to be un-American in every sense of the term: in its supposed "foreignness," in its critique of U.S. relations with Latin America, and in its criticisms of the treatment of Latinos in the past and present. Whether consciously or not, my students often expect the survey to mirror "them," to always reflect their own racial, ethnic, class, and (primarily) monolingual English speaking social locations. Unfortunately, when such students find themselves reading literature that not only does not reflect their experiences as American citizens or their understanding of what an American is, can, or should be, but that also requires them to examine the often unequal ethno-racial, class, gender, and linguistic dynamics from which they might benefit, some simply refuse to participate in discussions, while others assume an antagonistic presence in the classroom. Both responses can seriously disrupt the learning environment.⁵

III. Addressing White Privilege By Teaching the Hidden Curriculum of Whiteness

Although the aforementioned informal survey responses are disconcerting, I am reluctant to consider the students' responses, or their primarily negative reactions to their brief foray into the study of Chicana literature, as an indication of their entrenched racism—or as a sign of their irremediable shortcomings as critical readers and thinkers. Rather, my sense is that their resistance may be the inevitable product of teaching U.S. literature from Anglo-

⁵ While silence is one common student response to course readings (or pedagogical approaches or theoretical positions) that conflict with their own beliefs and life experiences, another is the use of teaching evaluations as potentially career-damaging weapons. Student anxiety (or ire) can lead to serious repercussions for any instructor in any discipline, but this is a particular danger for teachers of ethnic literatures, especially when students only "[want] to 'read stories' . . . and not be 'beaten with politics'" (Clem 131), which I interpret as some students' distinct disinclination to analyze their own subject positions. Moreover, there is a large body of research that suggests this issue is compounded when instructors occupy the same social locations as the minority literature they teach. For information on the correlation between teaching multicultural, feminist, or queer curricula and negative student evaluations of teaching, see, for instance, Enns and Sinacore, Bowman, or DeSoto.

and Eurocentric perspectives that continue to structure many secondary level (and some college level) English classrooms. For instance, a melting pot approach to teaching U.S. literature glosses over the fact that "[m]ulticulturalism" is the raw material from which "the image of monocultural America is produced" (Antonette 35), and erases the long history of legal, social, economic, cultural, and political processes that facilitated the equation of American individual, cultural, and national identity with whiteness. To offer another example, the ostensibly culturally sensitive and inclusive "mosaic" model casts myriad ethnic and racial groups as discrete entities. Leaving aside the fact that the image of a mosaic suggests broken pieces, or pieces that have to be broken to form a whole, the mosaic model fails to account for the intersections and imbrications of races, ethnicities, evolving epistemological standpoints and cultural practices, and even languages that students are obliged to engage when they analyze critically U.S. Latina/o literatures. Consequently, because most students have been taught at the K-12 level in ways that confirm their social locations by situating them "in a kind of harmless connection with a series of exotic others" (Harris, qtd. in Graff, 92), many reject the opportunity to participate in university-level classes that employ critical multicultural pedagogical approaches that require students to evaluate their own subject positions.

Few students are fully cognizant of the fact that different ways of structuring classes not only impacts their attitudes about a course's content, but affects the ways students perceive myriad issues that impact their lives beyond the walls of academe. To be sure, a significant body of research supports the claim that learning about multicultural or social justice issues (in any discipline) provides a number of benefits for students, including gaining an increased cultural awareness about and sensitivity toward ethno-racial groups besides their own; having an increased desire to participate in political processes addressing social justice issues; and experiencing an overall minimization of feelings of racism, sexism, or homophobia. Increasingly, however, some studies suggest that for "many of today's college students [who] grow up in relatively

homogenous environments," single curricular experiences with diversity "may create a sense of disequilibrium" that they must somehow resolve in the span of one semester (Bowman 557). Students become charged with the task of either assimilating these experiences with their present beliefs about race, class, gender, and sexuality, or "accommodat[ing] their own attitudes and values to fit their experiences" (Bowman 546). For those students who perceive that their own racial, class, gender, or sexual privilege is being directly contested, having such limited experiences may only lead to their being even more "resistant to integrating the knowledge and perspectives from their courses with their pre-existing worldviews" (Bowman 544-46).

In order to circumvent or at least lessen the possibility of creating a classroom situation in which studying, in this case, Latina/o literatures leads to the further entrenchment of already existing prejudices, I propose addressing the issue by teaching the conflict, as Gerald Graff might say. But instead of assigning additional course readings about white privilege or institutional racism that may only alienate students further, I suggest broaching such potentially explosive issues by taking a metacognitive approach—facilitating an informal discussion about what American literature survey students perceive the function of education to be and how the presentation of multicultural content in the survey sequence might impact their receptivity to that content.⁶ Addressing issues of white privilege through a discussion about course design and instructional approach is a useful strategy because it acknowledges the concern (that few

⁶ Originally I devised this strategy for use in my introductory U.S. Latina/o literature courses at my previous institution, where I found it to be quite successful in diminishing students' resistance to the study of materials and concepts they perceive to be offensive or racist against white people. I have since begun to use this strategy in my survey classes at my new school and, encouragingly, I have gotten similar results because, as I have come to realize, the problems of time and exposure essentially are the same. Due to time constraints and individual departments' curricular demands, it may be difficult for instructors to take a wholly comparative approach to teaching the American literature survey, which may mean students work with ethnic literatures in a very limited context. Thus, whether we are considering a single unit on a given ethnic literature in an otherwise highly "traditional" survey course or a single diversity course students take to fulfill a multicultural/global requirement, such as an introductory course in U.S. Latina/o Literature, unless the students already have a genuine interest in the materials, they may finish the class feeling even more resentful and resistant to the ideas those readings proffer than when they began.

students will ever directly voice except in anonymous teaching evaluations) that they are being challenged or indicted. Acknowledging those feelings by providing students with a vocabulary to articulate their concerns early in the term alleviates students' resistance toward challenging materials later, which helps reduce the number of class periods when hostile silence reigns, and lessens the number of reductive and reactionary responses to readings that can derail class discussions. Ultimately, even as the strategy accomplishes a vital objective of antiracist, critical multicultural pedagogy advocated by theorists from Freire in the 1960s to Moya in the new millennium, which is to encourage a critical consciousness, this pedagogical approach adapts radical teaching practices to the exigencies of a normative classroom.

I begin by giving a very basic overview of the genesis of American literature as a field of study. Students learn that American literary studies is linked to a post-revolutionary, Whig political project that aimed to emphasize the English origins of the American nation (Baym 463). I explain that in the late-nineteenth century, this project acquired special resonance as education reformers recognized the importance of teaching American literary history to young, poor, and "usually foreign-born" students. Such histories inculcated implicitly the idea that "non-Anglo-Saxons could become American only to the extent of their agreement that only those of Anglo-Saxon lineage were really Americans" (Baym 462-63). Taking a few minutes to sketch out a brief overview of the political function of American literary studies constructs a vital scaffolding; when students understand the raced and classed origins (and ideological purpose) of American literary studies, they have a critical framework to contemplate how public education in the United States has been, from its beginnings, "theorized . . . as a socially conservative force."

Next, I describe two common methods used today to incorporate ethnic content into curricula (especially at the K-12 level): the "contributions" and "additives" approaches. I explain that the former approach is marked by the inclusion of famous individuals of color or disparate cultural events into a

curriculum without attending to their importance within ethnic communities. For instance, in elementary school classrooms students may celebrate Cinco de Mayo with a party and smash a piñata, but they may not learn about the Battle of Puebla and its impact on Mexican self-governance, which the holiday commemorates. The latter approach adds a unit or book to the curriculum, but the content is studied from Eurocentric perspectives. Thus, for example, middle or high school students may learn about the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo as having facilitated the United States' industrial boom in the second half of the nineteenth century (the territory the U.S. gained from the treaty was abundant in natural resources like gold, silver, and oil). But they do not learn about the historical or contemporary significance and effects of the treaty from Mexican or Mexican American perspectives—how, over 160 years later, the program of American expansion and the relocation of the U.S.-Mexico border remains, for some, "*una herida abierta* [an open wound]" that divides a culture (Anzaldúa 24-25).

Once students have a sense of how the contributions and additives approaches conventionally function, I ask them to form small groups, share their personal reactions to the information they have just received, and produce a list of ways they believe the aforementioned instructional methods may affect their own perceptions about multicultural course content and their understanding of American national identity. After several minutes working in small groups, we reconvene as a class. Each group presents one point they made about the connections between the implementation of multicultural curricula and its impact on their understanding of American national identity, which I record on the board. The list we generate together provides a starting point to brainstorm how myriad power dynamics inherent in our larger society might be challenged (instead of supported) in a classroom environment. This last activity assists students in taking an important next step. Many students begin to move from simply becoming aware of the existence of such dynamics in an educational context to understanding how that new knowledge might productively assist them in

modifying both the way they approach the study of Latina/o literature inside the classroom and their interpersonal sensitivity outside of the classroom.

IV. Conclusion

It is important to note that the increasing commodification of higher education compounds the difficulty of teaching Latina/o literature in the survey or as a stand-alone class—as well as of taking critical multicultural pedagogical approaches in the classroom. In his essay, "On the Uses of a Liberal Education As Lite Entertainment for Bored College Students," Mark Edmundson argues that the liberal arts in the United States is in a state of crisis because the "university culture, like American culture writ large, is . . . ever more devoted to consumption and entertainment" and to pleasing fickle student-consumers in order to raise revenue (40). Moreover, since "one of the lessons that consumer hype tries to insinuate is that we must never rebel against" or "indict the current system" (42), many American students refuse to become participants in their academic discourse communities (which requires thought, inquiry, dialogue, and perhaps most importantly, personal responsibility). Rather, they see college as a means to an end: jobs, money, and high standards of living and consumer power. If this materialistic attitude is as pervasive among American college students as Edmundson believes it to be, then where do revolutionary methodologies like Paulo Freire's fit, methodologies that have had such an enduring appeal for scores of educators, including myself? I fear that while Freire's methodology might work in a classroom of highly motivated learners—for example, students who have been directly impacted by poverty, by racism, by heterosexism—Freire's system may well be doomed to function, in the trenches of the contemporary American literature classroom, as little more than a way for teachers to feel good about their work.

In order to understand why using Freire's pedagogy in a contemporary U.S. classroom context may be problematic for some instructors, a bit more must be said of the pedagogy itself. Vital to Freire's work, which is influenced by his

experiences teaching disenfranchised persons in Brazil, by liberation theology, and by Marxist theory, is *conscientização*, which often is translated as critical consciousness. Critical consciousness describes the process by which students learn to perceive economic, political, and social inequities and begin to develop strategies to take action against systems of oppression concomitant with their academic development which, in Freire's context, is the development of literacy skills. As students begin to discern the ways the colonizing culture both determines their place in that culture and teaches them to internalize their own oppression, students begin to claim and project their voices in order to initiate social change that, ideally, transforms abstract learning into concrete political action or "praxis."

Many U.S. educators teach, as Edmundson points out in his perennially-timely essay, the middle and upper echelon of American society, the children of those who have made it—economically speaking, the group of young people the American university system desires. It is no secret that, in an era of rapidly shrinking budgets, colleges and universities are overwhelmingly tuition-driven, and so they turn their backs even more quickly on the intelligent yet poor student in favor of the intelligent or even mediocre student whose parents have the means to "pay the full freight" (Edmundson 43).⁷ The reality is that U.S. educators do not teach an illiterate peasantry for whom education is a critical means for overcoming material conditions—the likes of which the vast majority of Americans (including working- or lower-middle-class students like mine) will never probably know.

Consequently, if the majority of students in the United States view education only as a means to an economically comfortable end, they may be less

⁷ Kevin Carey, director of education policy at the New America Foundation, paints an even bleaker picture: in a February 22, 2013 opinion piece published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, he argues that "a substantial amount of merit aid is actually antimeritorious, used to recruit academically marginal students with wealthy parents" (A21). Charging financial aid administrators with using "shell-game strategies to subvert the goals of need-based financial aid", Carey asserts that "[s]carce, hard-won public resources [such as Pell Grants] meant to help the poorest students attend college are effectively being siphoned off to benefit those who need and deserve them least" (A21).

likely to respond to Freire's (or any other) radical methodology because the methodology does not take into account their perceptions about the function of the U.S. postsecondary educational system. In fact, with particular regard to the American literature classroom, some may well be downright hostile because such a pedagogical approach is necessitated upon their willingness to think critically and reflect on the ways they benefit socially, politically, or economically from, for instance, institutional racism or patriarchy. And here is my concern: if, regardless of class status, the students being recruited into higher education perceive higher education as a burdensome task to complete as quickly as possible in order to become employable, not as a sanctuary for free critical thinking and self-reflection; and if many of those students are not vulnerable, intimidated, or oppressed so much as they are apathetic or entitled, then it is, perhaps, unsurprising that Freire's pedagogy is missing the mark. For, regardless of which pedagogical approaches instructors choose to take, most U.S. postsecondary students will refuse to engage because, quite literally, they can afford to: they already have what they need in a material sense and, thus, have little use for revolution—or for a knowledge of the history of revolution in U.S. culture and letters.

If most American college students are coming to view a college education as a product to rate, reject, embrace, or to passively accept; if students view a college education as merely a tool that will enable them to make more money; and if university administrators buy into the adage, "the customer is always right," the consequence of having such beliefs is that professors will not dictate what texts or information is taught: "professors will be yet more vulnerable to the whims of their customer-students [and their parents]. Teach what pulls the kids in, or walk" (Edmundson 45). I am especially concerned about how this mentality will impact the teaching of U.S. ethnic literatures. How do educators who perceive learning as a critical aspect of becoming an ethical and engaged citizen, teach students who don't seem to be stimulated by intellectual inquiry and discovery, and who only care about doing just enough to pass? In relation, if, as

radical pedagogical theorists posit, teaching is inherently political, how do we encourage students to think about the politics of race, sexuality, and class in American letters when the "cardinal point of doctrine is never to piss off the [student] customers" (Edmundson 48)?

Incorporating a simple "awareness" exercise such as the one I outlined above enables students to capitalize on a number of important opportunities without alienating or enraging them. First, students think purposefully about the way core subjects like American literature are falsely constructed, in fact "studiously so," to be "'naturally' or 'inevitably' 'white'" (Morrison 2308). Certainly, students understand abstractly that education has a socializing function, but they may not comprehend the extent to which how their instruction profoundly colors their perceptions about the world around them. Second, students discern how common approaches to teaching ethnic content can result in the trivialization of a culture, the reinforcement of stereotypes about an ethnic group, or minimizes or erases "relations of inequality attributable to gender, sexuality, social class, and physical handicap" as well as race and ethnicity (Moya 147). Discussing the fact that Anglo- and Eurocentric course content and perspectives are the primary axis around which ethnic content revolves prepares them for studying literature privileging Puerto Rican, Cuban American, Dominican American, and Chicana/o perspectives (in addition to more frequently taught works by African American and, to a lesser extent, Native American and Asian American writers). Third, the exercise initiates a process in which students begin to re-consider the ideological position they assume Latina/o writers to occupy. To clarify, students take steps toward recognizing that Latina/o writers do not consider white privilege, institutional racism, internal colonization, bilingualism, immigration, nationalism, or nativism in order to attack monolingual white Americans, but rather to imagine a democratic alternative to a monolithic origins narrative that erases a sizable segment of the nation's citizenry. Moreover, discussing white privilege in American educational contexts offers students from underrepresented groups "academic resources for theorizing and critiquing what they know from

experience" and removes them from the vexed position of being situated as "the only 'native speakers' who know anything about racism" (Jay 113). Last, the exercise encourages every student to understand that all people are constructed as racialized subjects. When students are able to grasp that critical concept, they begin to discern the importance of considering whiteness "in order 'to make visible what is rendered invisible when viewed as the normative state of existence: the (white) point in space from which we tend to identify difference'" (Carby, qtd. in Dyer 11).

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