



Bernice M. Olivas

## Politics of Identity in the Writing Classroom

---

I want us to realize that all our citations of high theory

will not save us

and neither will trying to show that we are as rigorous and as serious as our literary colleagues save us...

I want us to realize that even the respectability of bigger budgets will not save us.

As real as those issues are, as real as our struggles with those budgets are

—we act like being broke is new.

We always been underfunded.

We always been figuring it out as we go.

We always been dismissed, disregarded, disrespected.

But we served anyhow.

We took care of our students anyhow.

We transformed one discipline and created our own anyhow.

And it was women who did that work.

It was people of color who did that work.

It was queer folks who did that work.

It was first generation students in New York City and across the country, demanding open admissions, who did that work

(Banks 2015, *arrangement mine*)

---

## Re-uniting, Re-igniting, and Re-alliance

It is precisely because we do discourse, in all its messiness, that we have a chance to be this kind of hub for intellectual work and for justice work on campus and off (Banks 2015).

In 2015, Adam Banks, the chair of the College Communication and Composition Conference, made a powerful call to action in his address to Composition and Rhetoric scholars. He asked us to “take flight” and to “travel across campus, across programs, and into more strategic relationship building.” He warned us it would be messy, but his call resonated across the composition community. However, Banks didn’t call as much attention to the shared creation story between “gender and women studies, indigenous studies, Latina, Latino studies, Asian, Asian American studies, and Africana studies,” or what is often called Identity Studies, and Composition and Rhetoric (Banks 2015). When women, people of color, queer scholars, first-generation students, and their allies were busily transforming “one discipline” and creating “our own”—these same people, these same voices—were demanding new spaces in the academy. Those spaces *became* “gender and women studies, indigenous studies, Latina, Latino studies, Asian, Asian American studies, and Africana studies.” In light of this shared experience, taking flight, is not so much an act of seeking “deep and long term, systematic relationships,” it is an act of re-uniting, re-igniting, and re-alliance.

By making the politics of identity a site of active, aggressive inquiry in the writing classroom, we can reinforce and strengthen the ways composition and rhetoric already resists bigotry, othering, and prejudice. We live in a world where we just need to flip on a television or open our browser to see that we continue to face very real systemic racism, very real racial violence, very real cultural divides. It is not safe to be different in 2015 America. For some, being different is deadly. This is not hyperbole.

In 1967—in response to the Vietnam War and widespread civil unrest—Mary Rose O’Reilly asked, “Is it possible to teach English so people will stop killing each other?” but in November of 2014 a grand jury in Ferguson, Missouri refused to indict a white police officer for the shooting death of an

unarmed black man. In December a grand jury refused to indict a police officer in the strangulation death of Eric Garner, another unarmed black man. These cases, like many before them, are likened to the notorious Emmett Tills case, and the events that led up to them and the events that followed them are compared to the Jim Crow era of lynching by activists of color like Tim Wise and Cornel West. Within weeks, a twelve-year-old black boy was shot by police for having a toy gun in a park. By March, his death is also ruled justified. In April, a video circulates social media; in it a black man is shot in the back fourteen times as he runs away from a police officer. Other people—peoples of color, women, people with disabilities, the queer communities—are also raising their voices to share their narratives, their mourning songs, their pain, fear, and frustration at the systemic inequality they face. In 2015. We, as a nation, are in as much of identity crisis as we were 1967. It becomes more and more obvious that we are still killing each other because we fear each other. And so I am compelled to ask “Is it possible to teach writing so that we stop fearing each other?”

Our students who identify as mainstream struggle with the paradox of contested agency in classes where they are asked to grapple with issues that stem from injustice and inequality. They are Linda Flower’s “people who stand within a circle of privilege [who] may also be standing in need of empowerment. What [they] need is not a space to express [their] identity or the power to resist pressures upon it but the capacity to speak publicly for something of value in a committed but critical way” (216). Frankie Condon points out that “We are products, after all of a history at least as terrible, as wicked, as it might be triumphant” (41). The reality is that few of us exist outside of those harsh realities; most of us have some affiliation with identity groups that did/do horrible things that benefited/benefit us. This legacy is one that most of us carry. It weighs heavily on all of our students. As teachers and learners it buffers us from the trauma and pain we experience when we read, write, or immerse ourselves in accounts of these lived experiences. What is critical about Condon’s argument is that it focuses on mapping ways of thinking that asks folks from the dominant mainstream to reconsider the effect such thinking has on them—effectively

---

creating a space for folks with contested agency to actively think, write, and speak about identity in context to their own lived experiences. White supremacy thinking is an illusion covering deep wounds to the self and the community. Condon writes:

There are few matters in life about which I possess any degree of certainty, but this I know, both as a matter of life experience and as a result of my studies: racism splits us, slices us apart from one another, from our humanity, even from ourselves. Racism chains us to small, crabbed, notions of self, demanding of us a simultaneous denial of relations between self and Other and dependence upon those relationships for a sense not only of our own existence, but also and more especially for our own sense of worth. (3)

If we agree that all of our students, and all of us, live in a world where Discourse shapes our “identity kit[s]” (Gee 142); if we agree the discourse of othering is creating a toxic “doing-being-valuing-believing combination” (Gee 142) of language and social practices for all of us. It falls to us to ask, what happens if we re-consider the way we frame and understand writing through identity and about identity if we re-think the intellectual and social ramifications of writing and inquiring as our living, breathing, complex identities? What happens if we re-explore the pathways hardbroken and hardbuilt by folks in “gender and women studies, indigenous studies, Latina, Latino studies, Asian, Asian American studies, and Africana studies?” Can such inquiry offer renewed praxis, renewed hermeneutics; can it be a way of re-mixing our ways of thinking, writing, teaching, learning, and being?

### **Rethinking the “Personal”**

At some point in their academic career most students will be asked to think about the conditions of failure and systems of oppression that function in our society. They will be asked to think and write about conditions they have no control over, conditions to which they have been subjected. However, due to one of the great contradictions of higher education, they will be asked to do so as if they stand outside of

those systems. They will rarely be given opportunities to explore their own identity in context to the systems and conditions they are asked to think and write about.

J. Elspeth Stucky argues “the neutral stance of literacy educators and researchers is the ideology that literacy research perpetuates, the mask that allows masking to go on. Neutrality is a claim about form, and the very simplest fact about literacy is that it is always contextual” (60). I would argue that among these “reductive” practices is the way writing about identity is often conflated with writing about what is personal (Stucky 60). If we are to take flight into any kind of social justice work, then we have to separate those terms. Identity and personal are not synonymous. The term *personal* refers to information not readily available to the public, information we can choose divulge, information that we have the privilege of keeping to ourselves without inflicting damage to ourselves. In contrast, our identity is contextualized by the society we live in. It has nothing to do with personal information we choose or do not choose to divulge. Instead, identity is wrapped up in the markers of readily apparent social realities and the social biases that construct that reality. These realities are part of us, whether we choose to be part of them or not.

Villanueva suggests that by allowing writers to access skills, traditions, and rhetorical moves that western conventions often ignore or disregard we can reach our reader more deeply than we can using just a conventional scholarly discourse or an objective based ethos. He writes, “The personal done well is sensorial and intellectual, complete, knowledge known throughout mind and body, even if vicariously.” *Memoria* both argues for, and shows how, interconnected, intertwined, and braided narrative/research, narrative/rhetoric creates academic work that is active, vibrant, and effective. *Memoria*, is an example of why, all writers, not just writers of color or students, benefit by writing critically about their identity, privilege, and position in society. These texts show the many ways that writing about contextualized identity is both intellectual and academic.

For example, as a woman, I will always be part of the discourse of feminism; as a woman of color, I cannot escape the discourse of race. These facts are not personal in any space where my body is evident to people around me; they are political in those same places. Each of us has identity markers that cannot be kept personal. Further, we all grapple with identity markers that are less obvious, but which deeply affect our perspectives. For these reasons, I seek to suggest that identity is deeply valuable site of critical inquiry in the writing classroom. Through critical inquiry into contextualized identity, we can the foster habits of the mind that are necessary to good citizenship, community literacy, and empathetic engagement with other complex identities.

### **English 300—Politics of Identity and the Essay Tradition, An Extended Course Description**

This course will explore the essay as a rhetorical tool for social justice. This class is for advanced undergraduate writers and ethnic studies students who wish to study and practice the essay form as a means to speak back to the social conditions that affect peoples of marginalized identity. This class focuses on the complex border-spaces between privilege and marginalization in order to claim space for a more just and sustainable future. This class will use a process of inquiry to better understand the relationship between the essay and exigency.

Much has been written, studied, and debated about the “essay.” Both creative nonfiction writers and academic scholars alike claim the form. At the same time, because is so versatile, the essay is often taken up writers who defy categorization. Many of these writers are also members of marginalized identities. Their writing focuses on their relationship to the mainstream community, institutions, and governing bodies. They use their lived experience of racism, sexism, gender bigotry, and ableism to push back against the power dynamics that create the conditions in which social bias thrives. These dynamics are often the sources of exigency—the drive and force behind the writing. These essayists inquire, define,

---

contest, and disrupt the world we live in. From this perspective, the essay acts a tool of resistance to the status quo.

James Baldwin immediately comes to mind. As an essayist he starkly brings to life some of the most relevant social justice issues we face. He pulls no punches. John McPhee's "The Search for Marvin Gardens" shows us poverty and exploitation. Langston Hughes, known for poetry, gives us a short essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" published in *The Nation*. This offers a powerful call to action and an entry point into a conversation about art, protest, and respectability. Hughes demands that artists

Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing the Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand. Let Paul Robeson singing "Water Boy," and Rudolph Fisher writing about the streets of Harlem, and Jean Toomer holding the heart of Georgia in his hands, and Aaron Douglas's drawing strange black fantasies cause the smug Negro middle class to turn from their white, respectable, ordinary books and papers to catch a glimmer of their own beauty. We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves. (Hughes 1926)

Follow that line of protest backwards and it will lead us back to the tension W.E.B de Bois and Booker T. Washington. It will also carry us forward to interviews, rants, and tweets from folks like Chris Rock, Bill Cosby, and Nicki Minaj. Through the essay we can track the evolution of respectability politics, and more importantly, evolution of the rhetoric of respectability politics. Hughes's defiant call to action is an example of how a protest essay written during the Harlem renaissance continues to resonate with readers

today. It's also short, aggressive, and to the point. The protest essay doesn't ask you to spend much time figuring out what it means, instead it demands that you get up and *do* something about what you have read.

It is this “essay”—the essay that demands our attention, that calls us out, that claims space for the marginalized identity—that we will explore and practice in this class. This means we will be learning two things:

1. How to read from a place of believing rather than a place of criticism in order to better empathize with voices that may challenge our worldviews;
2. A process of writing that inquires into our relationships with ourselves and with others who are not like us and the power that helps define those roles. We will write about our relationship to our communities, institutions, and governing bodies. We attempt to locate exigency in our own relationships to power, our communities, our institutions, and our governing bodies.

Some of the questions we'll explore this semester are:

1. Who am I in context of community I was born to, the communities I choose to participate in, the institutions I claim, and the bodies that govern me.
2. What does mean to be privileged and/or marginalized and how do we write about it, why do we write about it.

We'll begin the course by orienting ourselves to the language and concepts that apply to the essay and the politics of identity, and then we will attempt to use these to analyze and describe the narrative methods of writers of the protest essay. This course hopes to accomplish the following:

- Provide students with practical strategies and useful concepts for revising their own work ;
- Distinguish some of the characteristics of the protest essay;
- Help students develop a language for talking about privilege, marginalization, power dynamics, and exigency; a knowledge that they can employ not only when thinking about their own work



but when discussing power dynamics with others in workshop settings, in teaching, and public readings.

### **The Protest Essay as a Tool for Social Justice: A Brief Philosophy**

The writing classroom is a powerful place to analyze of othering and to inquire into the contextualized self and an ideal space to interrogate systems of privilege and marginalization created by othering because it offers us the opportunity to write about these experiences, to share our lived experiences, and to reflect on those experiences, to step away from notions of neutrality and objectivity and to make content the focus of our study. Stucky argues that a part of the trouble with ideologies and mythologies of literacy is that that “content is the least acknowledged, least talked about, least valued aspect of most of the current research on literacy” and that “this has allowed discourse about literacy to proceed without regard to what people are saying” (60). Writing gives voice and brings the focus “back to what people are saying.” If discourse analysis can be described as a study of the ways language is linked to social behavior and the ways language functions to shape ways of thinking, then the writing classroom is well equipped to develop practices that can support writers as they inquire into the ways we use language to create systems that privilege and marginalize. Some of those tools include personal narrative, literacy narratives, expressive and reflective writing, and inquiry-based writing. Certain approaches to writing support writing work that delves into the discourse of othering. Place-based writing, for example, can be used to discuss the ways privilege and marginalization physically manifest in a place.

This class is portfolio-based. This approach allows students an opportunity to present their best work for evaluation. This is more likely to happen when they can apply everything that they’ve learned at the end of the semester. Portfolios also are more likely to encourage genuine revision. This is also a discussion-based class. Students are responsible, with guidance from me, for leading discussion. By encouraging students to help generate content, it is far more likely that the discussions will address the

---

questions most students share about the material. This strategy also allows for the opportunity to create new knowledge—things come up in discussion that I can't always anticipate or know.

Although Banks argues that “trying to show that we are as rigorous and as serious as our literary colleagues [will not] save us,” we wouldn't be good teachers if we weren't thinking about how the praxis and hermeneutics of our classroom act to help writers develop intellectual and critical habits of the mind. The Council of Writing Program Administrators, The National Councils of Teachers of English, and The National Writing Project identify eight habits of mind essential for success in academic writing as

- *Curiosity: The desire to know more about the world.*
- *Openness: The willingness to consider new ways of being and thinking in the world.*
- *Engagement: A sense of investment and involvement in learning.*
- *Creativity: The ability to use novel approaches for generating, investigating and representing ideas.*
- *Persistence: The ability to sustain interest in and attention to short-term and long-term projects.*
- *Responsibility: The ability to take ownership of one's actions and understand the consequences of those actions for oneself and others.*
- *Flexibility: The ability to adapt to situations, expectations, or demands.*
- *Meta-cognition: The ability to reflect on one's own thinking as well as on the individual and cultural processes used to structure knowledge (1).*

It is my argument that framing writing courses around inquiry into the lived experiences not only supports all eight habits of the mind, such courses can act to help writers better understand a) the ways the discourse of othering works in the world, b) how the discourse of othering has places them into systems of privilege and marginalization, and c) how the discourse of othering has shaped or affected their worldviews and shaped the ways they perceive people different from themselves. The process a writer uses to build ethos when writing about or through their contextualized identity remains the same as other scholarly pursuits. The writer must locate a topic, research the topic, join the ongoing discussion about the

topic, and finally, stake a claim based in that work. However, instead of building ethos just through data that exists outside of the writer, ethos also comes from deep inquiry into our own embodied relationships to our communities, institutions, and governing bodies. Writing and inquiring into identity extends Burke's parlor metaphor so that the parlor is physically, politically, socially contextualized.

Both Composition studies and Identity Studies offer a rich repository of essays, monographs, poetry, performance art, and research emerging from inquiry and writing about the contextualized identity that speaks to the intellectual integrity of such praxis. As an example, in Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, a rich exploration of the contextualized self, Anzaldua examines her relationship to the borderlands, her sexuality, and her languages as well as her relationships to her communities and her governing bodies. She emerges after having written about these relationships with a new consciousness, a new way of understanding herself. In the process she employs numerous rhetorical devices, research methods, and deep critical analysis.

### **Essaying Social Justice**

Because Identity Studies is a rich conglomeration of rhetorics, approaches, strategies—of ways of knowing the world, and of making knowledge—it works to nuance and complicate assumptions in both Composition Studies and critical pedagogy. Identity Studies directs our attention to ways other people experience learning, writing, social awareness, and social justice by offering a rich repository of their narratives and accounts of lived experiences.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2009 TED Talk "The Danger of a Single Story" gives us language, a new way of thinking about stereotypes, meta-narratives, systemic racism. She gives us an easier term: she gives us the "single story." Telling a student when they are feeling frustrated, entrenched, or challenged, that they have fallen into believing, without questioning, a single story of a people, has better results than telling them that defending a stereotype or that their world view is embedded in racism. Vine Deloria, Jr's

---

“Indian Humor” shows how a “single story” actually in-real-life-affects people. Defining the single story of Native Americans as told by mainstream America with films, ads, book covers, and newspaper clippings is almost too easy. Watch the “Red Man” scene in Disney’s *Peter Pan* before talking “Indian Humor.”

Focusing on identity as a site of inquiry in the writing classroom is an act of intervention, and it runs contrary to ideologies of neutrality and objectivity, and it is a wild approach to vigorous intellectual pedagogy, but it’s not new. Many of us already “do discourse” (Banks 2015) in a way that promotes empathy, compassion, and solidarity. Inquiry into identity, if we frame identity as lived experiences contextualized by relationships with communities, institutions, and governing bodies, is a powerful practice because identity and literacy are deeply connected. Because human identity is so complex and varied, inquiring into contextualized identity offers nearly limitless points of entry into writing practices that encourage writers to think about larger social issues.

In order to teach for empathy, we must encourage self-awareness about social positions of power and marginalization. In the humanities, the term othering is used to describe one of the ways us/them dichotomies of power are created and maintained. Such binaries argue that there are two kinds of people—us and them. “Quiet Hands” is a protest essay written as a blog post about pop culture from the perspective of an autistic woman. It has to be both seen and read for full impact but the single line, “When I was a little girl, I was autistic. And when you’re autistic, it’s not abuse. It’s therapy,” creates a clear binary between the autistic writer and the people who abuse her with the best of intentions. Like many protest essays, its power lies in its demand that the reader take sides—something we are usually trained to avoid—and to quote Terry Pratchett, “No one ever thinks of themselves as one of Them. We’re always one of Us. It’s Them that do the bad things” (Location 2801). Teaching empathy can be as simple/complicated as finding a text that makes the reader exist in the marginalized body for even a single disconcerting moment.

Us signifies the group of people an individual identifies closely empathizes with. Them signifies peoples who are different from us in ways that are seemingly insurmountable. When we mix in power and

privilege, difference becomes something inherently threatening to us, our ways of life, or our privilege. This threat becomes a way of justifying actions that, if committed against other members of the “us” group, would be received by society as criminal. The most obvious and pervasive danger of othering is that it helps to create structures of privilege and marginalization based on identity markers such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and ability, while allowing the dominant culture to disavow racism, sexism, ableism, or homophobia, what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva calls racism without racists. Silva’s study shows that people can and do vote in favor of laws that disadvantage people of color, blaming social inequity on what they perceive to be weaknesses of character rather than systemic inequity (Bonilla-Silva 2000), and actively avoid interactions with people based on race while simultaneously advocating for “equality.” Othering is how we can argue that that “everyone deserves a fair shot” and still vote to close Head Start programs in low income neighborhoods.

### **Anti-Othering and the Essay Classroom**

In 1967 Mary Rose O’Reilly asked if her position as an English teacher would allow her to make a significant change in the ways people thought about violence. She was looking for a way to mesh pedagogy and passivism in the classroom so that the students leaving her classroom would help to create a ripple effect that would engender a real change in the world. Her core reasons for seeing the writing classroom as a place where such a change could be possible are same reasons I believe that the writing classroom is a space where we can confront and interrogate othering, privilege, and marginalization. The writing classroom is space well designed for both analysis and writing about our lived experiences. By bringing the two together and framing our lived experiences and identities as a site of inquiry, it is possible to develop ways of teaching writing so that writing becomes an act of shedding light on the way the discourse of othering functions. It is possible to bring the discussion of privilege and marginalization into the writing

---

classroom in a way that focuses on how these things happen, why they happen, and how they affect all of us when they happen.

Typically, we don't talk about gender, race, or class issues in a writing workshop unless a writer writes about them from the perspective of the marginalized—and when that happens it's terribly common for the writer to be forced to prove the authenticity of the character. “Why does race matter in this story?” is a common enough question. The reason that question emerges is because in the absence of a marginalized body we can pretend that the space is free of issues of marginalization. We need to flip that framework. We need to ask writer, “Why is this character white? Why is this character male? Why does your character move through a colorless, classless world?” Re-framing the conversation so that it's about power and privilege that exists even absent the marginalized body lets us focus on how the discourse of othering is *as* damaging to the privileged *as* is to the marginalized. Michael Chabon's “The Omega Glory” isn't really about people, it's about time, but he asks us to think of the power and privilege we have as the adult and the decision makers of today. He asks us to reconsider the world through the lens of the “Long Now.” He asks:

Ten thousand years from now: can you imagine that day? Okay, but do you? Do you believe “the Future” is going to happen? If the Clock works the way that it's supposed to do—if it lasts—do you believe there will be a human being around to witness, let alone mourn its passing, to appreciate its accomplishment, its faithfulness, its immense antiquity? What about five thousand years from now, or even five hundred? Can you extend the horizon of your expectations for our world, for our complex of civilizations and cultures, beyond the lifetime of your own children, of the next two or three generations? Can you even imagine the survival of the world beyond the present presidential administration? (279-280)

The follow up questions to this essay is: Are we happier in ten thousand years? Are we loved and safe and well fed? What is really standing between us and a future where we are happy, loved, safe, and well-fed?

---

And, what, what, can we do to make that future happen? What are we doing that makes that future impossible?

As writers and writing teachers we have to learn and teach ways of making ourselves more resilient, more ready to *see* the cogs and gears of society in motion. Identity Studies and Composition Studies maintain that discourse can be disrupted, disempowered, and changed through analysis. Inquiry empowers students to do what Paulo Freire calls “naming” their worlds. Freire and Macedo claim literacy as method of attaining “a critical reading of reality” which empowers us to “name” our worlds (36). They argue that the act of reading the word and the world can serve as a way to ready students to challenge existing structures of inequality and oppression. Freire explains that “to surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity” (47). Freire and Macedo note that reading isn’t enough, we also need to offer students ways to “recognize various tensions and enable them to deal effectively with them” (49). The writing classroom privileges discussion and reflection which offers students the ways to “recognize various tensions” and writing about those tensions is one way to “enable them to deal effectively” with those tensions and so is an ideal space to actively analyze acts of othering that we experience, witness, or perpetuate. When students are given the tools to see the constructions of injustice, they are given the tools to resist pressure to maintain injustice.

Shifting the focus of the conversation asks writers to activity work to build resilience to what Robin DiAngelo refers to as “fragility.” Her work focuses on common behaviors among white folks confronted with difficult conversation about race. She observes:

White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-

inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium. Racial stress results from an interruption to what is racially familiar. (54)

I assert that privilege breeds fragility. Responses imbedded in fragility are present in conversations about rape culture, homophobia, transphobia, and dis/ablity. Fragility is present in the classroom. It leads to both resistance and apathy.

Victor Villanueva continues on to say that apathy can be pierced by arrows of scholarship made sharp with lived experience, with narrative. His work challenges readers to re-see the making of knowledge, to re-see the importance of identity for the scholar, researcher, and teacher of writing and rhetoric. He asks the reader to conceptualize writing as a process in which the writer engages in analysis that simultaneously inspects that which the writer knows and *how* the writer came to know. He suggests that writers of color need to create scholarly work that employs a vast variety of rhetorical devices. Their work commonly faces deep resistance from a mainstream society that has a hard time seeing systemic racism and the ways it creates conditions of failure for people of color. Villanueva likens such work to arrows equipped with apathy piercing tips that are crafted through narrative, poetry, memory, and counter-narrative. And they are, but more than that, the writing of such narratives, the deep reflective work required to create arrow sharp essays, makes the writer more resilient, mentally tougher, more empathetic, and more aware. These are habits of the mind that benefit students on every part of the power/privilege spectrum. Giving all of our students the tools to write these arrows benefits all of us.

One tool that helps us see the constructions of injustice is a camera. Asking students to take camera and simply walk through their local places and pay attention to how certain identities are represented or where they are absent, to take picture of these spaces, to reflect, research, and write about these pictures, can have a powerful impact. I once asked a class to take a camera and to look for find modern Native America, not the “single story” Indian, but modern indigenous identity, in Lincoln,



Nebraska. Most of them brought back a picture of a modernized drug-store Indian that graces a prominent smoke shop.

### **Politics and the Essay**

In Composition Studies and Identity studies anti-othering pedagogies emerged from the energy emanating from the social justice movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The same concerns and issues faced by the nation inspired writers and teachers to take a closer look at the ways we teach. bell hooks lays the groundwork for the kind of teaching that combats both the damage of othering and invites students to step away from that cycle and critically examine it. In *Teaching to Transgress* she argues for what she calls “Engaged Learning,” which she asserts is a type of teaching and learning that engages the body, soul, and mind. Following that work, we actively seek to apply what we learn, no matter what it is, to all parts of our lives. hooks points out that we learn and listen to narratives of lived experience as something outside ourselves. More importantly, we teach students that “objectivity” is the ultimate academic skill. We teach them to begin by looking for the problems in a text, we teach them to begin by doubting the writer’s lived experience. We ask them to dissect the argument, the scene, or the voice—and all the while we *know* the writers we have chosen are telling hard truths—from a place of neutrality. We value neutrality so much that we teach writers and students to read and hear narratives of genocide, holocaust, and state-sanctioned violence without reaction or empathy. In doing so, we give ourselves and our students a built-in way of expressing fragility as a critique or analysis without ever asking them to do the opposite. How then, can we ask them to have compassion for writers from marginalized identities or for each other? We can’t just ask for it, we have to teach it.

In some classes I make my students write the “Where I am From” poem—not once, not twice, but three times. I don’t mean I ask them to revise it, I ask them to rewrite it from a different starting point, a different perspective, each time. And I ask them to share it, by doing a Quaker reading of them. We stand

---

in circle and read, one at a time, until we have read them all. We thank each other for sharing. I use that as the platform to help them understand what it means to begin by believing the writer—even when it’s hard, even when “racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves” (DiAngelo 54). I tell them that they should read everything in my class, the first time, as a Quaker reading. And then I ask for their first reading response: what might have been hard or painful for the writer to share; and I ask them why it might have been hard. Teaching students whose identities are marked by privilege a way of reading and writing that helps the writer to clearly see the cycle at work and to understand their position in it—not to call them out but to invite them to step away from the cycle and an offer new sense of their “own existence” and “sense of self worth” is a critical part of engaged teaching.

This is complicated by the fact, we the teachers, must also contend with our own identities. hooks tells us in “Engaged Pedagogy”:

When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess. Engaged pedagogy does not seek to simply empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks. (21)

Teachers from privileged identities struggle with fragility, teachers of color are often teaching texts that are telling our stories. Once, in class made up of mostly white students, I read aloud from *Black Elk Speaks*. I had put images of Wounded Knee on the overhead:

In the evening they marched off up Wounded Knee Creek, and then we saw all that they had done there. Men and women and children were heaped and scattered all over the flat at the bottom of the little hill where the soldiers had their wagon-guns, and westward up the dry gulch all the way to the high ridge, the dead women and children and babies were scattered. When I saw this I wished that I had died too, but I was not sorry for the women and children. It was

better for them to be happy in the other world, and I wanted to be there too. But before I went there I wanted to have revenge. (201)

I would be lying if I didn't say that this retelling of a critical moment in my indigenous history, for a white audience, didn't make me almost choke on rage and pain. Lying if I said I didn't have to fight back tears. It took everything I had to ask my students to go home and write about why they thought my reaction, and the reaction of native readers might be different than theirs.

When we teach something like "The Border Patrol State" by Leslie Marmon Silko, most of us have chosen this kind of reading know that Silko is speaking from a true space, we are aware of the issues at hand, and we have our own views, perspectives, our identities to contend with. But if we don't engage in the practices that allow us to read and write from a place of empathy and believing the writer as well as a space of critical analysis, we are only doing half the work. Imagine if students were allowed, encouraged even, to explore their own fragility from a place of believing Silko when she says:

To my relief, the strange violence the Border Patrol agents had focused on us now seemed shifted to the dog. I no longer felt so strongly that we would be murdered. We exchanged looks—the dog and I. She was afraid of what they might do, just as I was. The dog's handler jerked the leash sharply as she sniffed us, as if to make her perform better, but the dog refused to accuse us; she had an innate dignity that did not permit her to serve the murderous impulses of those men. I can't forget the expression in the dog's eyes; it was as if she were embarrassed to be associated with them. I had a small amount of medicinal marijuana in my purse that night, but she refused to expose me. I am not partial to dogs, but I will always remember the small German shepherd that night.

Imagine if we ask—why might a white reader from the Midwest feel like this essay is an attack on them—before asking students to explore Silko's use of pathos, ethos, and logos or how does she creates a sense

---

of fear in this passage? This way of reading, writing, and analyzing might change the landscape of the writing class. This is *engaged* reading and writing.

The writing classroom is uniquely suited for engaged reading and writing because a certain consciousness of identity is deeply embedded in the act of writing and in the act of teaching writing. This consciousness of identity is most apparent if we look at the published texts that emerge from our disciplines, and if we look at the texts we teach. For example, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* is a text found in many classrooms across the disciplines. Composition classes use "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" to talk about language rights and language discrimination—or to simply talk about crafting essays with more than one language. Creative nonfiction classes uses it to demonstrate the vast range of possibilities in the genre of creative nonfiction, rhetoric classes use it to talk about the existence of different rhetorics, women and gender studies use it for its critique of the patriarchy, and Latina studies use it to show us (both Latina students and white) the kind of writing Latinas are capable of. The way we use this text shows just how important identity is to the work we do. The texts we choose also show us that this way of learning and knowing is not risk-free, easy, or painless.

Current pedagogy frames many of the approaches and heuristics that emerged in these times as "student-centered." Composition Studies are particularly affected by feminist writers/teachers, writing center scholars, and scholars of color who, in their own struggles to make space for their stories, changed the way we teach writing. Gail E. Hawisher, in her foreword to *Feminism and Composition* tells us that feminists in composition "repeatedly demonstrate a commitment to classroom practices as a site of activism for Feminists in composition. Time and again, they call for not only a thoughtful practice but also a theory of teaching that is grounded in the conditions of students' lives" (xvii). This focus on voices and narrative, of both teacher and student, and the desire for a thoughtful pedagogy continues to permeate the field. Donald Murray took this work up and changed the field when he asked us what it might mean to teach writing as process instead of a product. Peter Elbow took it up when he argued that writers need

---

space to talk and write and share and revise and collaborate. It is this argument, that our classroom practices are already a site of activism, which has sustained and propelled feminist teachers and writers as they have worked to shape the writing classroom as a space where it is okay, as Faye Spencer Moar tells us to “[Center] on notions of identity” where the writing classroom becomes a place where “Questions like how women write and how being female affects work in the composition classroom [can become] subjects of discussion,” where “composition teachers and scholars [ask] these questions in response to the students they [encounter] (*Feminism and Composition* 347). These questions reverberate through the field and asking them undoes the perception that all writers learn and express themselves in the same way. These questions created space for difference in the ranks of writing students and writing teachers. It was feminist teachers/writers, teacher/writers of color, queer teacher/writers and their allies who realized that the writing classroom needed to be a space where such questions could be asked. By creating space in writing instruction for teachers and students alike to question the status quo, we are able to give rise to counter-narratives, the study other Englishes, and code-meshing among other pedagogical approaches. This work opens doors for queering composition and cultural rhetoric.

The ramifications of the activist tradition in Composition Studies are clearly seen in the NTCE’s 1974 “Resolution on the Students’ Right to Their Own Language.” This single short statement laid a foundation for anti-othering pedagogy in the writing classroom. I ask my students to read this checklist before we begin writing and talking about language—because it establishes the idea that writers acknowledge a more complex understanding of language than they might be used to. And it stops, before they start, conversations embedded in grammar policing writers whose home languages are different from what my students perceive as standard English. Considering that language bigotry and language exclusion work together to frame and shape institutional racism and othering in education, which is universally considered the surest route to social mobility, it can be argued that pedagogies that actively work against language bigotry and language marginalization are pedagogies that directly confront othering. This

---

resolution is both the framework and cornerstone many sources of anti-racism pedagogies in Composition Studies. It states: “Resolved, that the National Council of Teachers of English affirm the students’ right to their own language—to the dialect that expresses their family and community identity, the idiolect that expresses their unique personal identity.” This resolution firmly contextualizes identity as an important, valid, and worthy of both respect and study. It gave writers/teachers who were *different*—writers of color, queer writers, working class writers, and disabled writers—a firm place to stand in their advocacy for teaching practices that respected and validated student identity.

In my classroom I focus on asking students to inquire into the dynamic of the English Only Polices in writing classrooms. We begin with the NTCE’s 1974 “Resolution on the Students’ Right to Their Own Language.” By establishing that the NTCE recognizes other Englishes as legitimate before we look at history of African American English Vernacular (AAVE) in the classroom, we are forced to ask ourselves why our initial reaction to AAVE is often deeply negative. Next, we read a wide variety of perspectives on the subject, including Stanley Fish and Vershawn Ashanti Young’s response to Fish. In this unit, which is often my third unit, I ask my students to produce three short pieces of writing. The first is a rhetorical analysis of Fish and Young. I ask them to begin by respecting the NTCE resolution. They are not allowed to discuss *if* AAVE is valid—instead they are asked to mark and discuss the academic rhetorical moves the writers make. I ask them to consider how research is used, how evidence and support is used, and to pay close attention for logical fallacies such as faulty generalizations. By pulling language out of the equation, and by operating under the premise that Young has a right to write in his own language a part of the intellectual exercise, my students are more likely to see that his article is logically and persuasively reasoned.

At that point we can begin to discuss why it can be assumed that his article could not be the better article. Next, they write a literacy narrative about their interaction with other languages and other Englishes. This assignment opens up discussion of how privilege and marginalization often rely on the foundational belief that there is a Standard English and a valid reason for everyone to learn to speak and

write it. Finally, I ask them write a researched essay on a topic that is informed or affected by the issue of language in the U.S. This work forces students to dig deeper into the conversation, but also allows them to decide on the topic of their essay. By combining teaching practices common in the writing classroom, the rhetorical analysis and literacy narrative, with narratives, model texts, and theorists from Identity Studies, this unit prepares them to research a current issue that is affected by privilege and marginalization and gives them time to analyze their own hidden biases and the ways they came to develop those biases before delving into the data and research.

This combination is important because it works to help ready students to deal with difficult and often fraught topics. The difference between inquiring into contextualized identity in order to examine an issue and inquiring into topic is that it becomes a prerequisite that the writer can locate a personal connection to the topic. After that, the writer must examine that connection in relation to the rest of their evidence and discussion as part of the inquiry process. Bruce Ballenger suggests that inquiry begins with a question—and the question that I firmly believe every writer must ask is *What does it mean to be X identity in Y place and why does it matter?*

This isn't just a question for the students, but for teachers, for writers. In bell hooks' conception of holistic, engaged, pedagogy, it is the teacher who must delve into the ways in which they have come to know the world so that they better understand the reasons they respond to their students. Because hooks is terribly aware of the damage done by teachers and professors who treat their social biases as normal even though they are, theoretically, committed to social justice, she recognizes just how important it is that teachers know themselves and know their students "in context" to themselves. I often point to the way teachers of color, in an effort to give the students a better shot in the "real" world, strip them of their home languages—an experience I can personally lay claim to— and inevitably, there is at least one student who can speak personally on what it means to lose language for their own good. It's this kind of teaching, though anchored in the desire to do good, that is often underpinned by unexamined social bias.

---

In 2002 hooks revisited the issue of identity in the classroom in *Teaching Community* and in this text she inquires into what it means to teach as a woman and scholar of color who celebrates difference to students raised to be “blind” to difference. This “critical look” can happen in the writing classroom as an actualized praxis that acts to help students unlearn “white supremacist” thinking through a series of activities based in analysis, which allow students to see how the discourse of othering is constructed and then—armed with this new way of seeing—students can be encouraged to dismantle the construct.

hooks herself gives us the ideal writing prompt to begin this kinds of discussion when she talks about asking her students “if they were about to die and could choose to come back as a white male, a white female, a black female, or a black male, which identity would they choose” (26). This prompt could easily be adjusted to discuss any number of identity issues; we can consider what kind of writing might emerge if students were asked: “if you were to die would you choose to return a citizen of an urban space or rural?”

### **Conclusion: Going Places We Cannot Fully Know**

My hope for us is that as we worry a little less about being neat and clean, a little less about respectability inside our departments programs and universities, that as we embrace boldness, complexity and even a little irreverence and messiness that we will be able to take flight into intellectual, pedagogical and programmatic places that we might partially see but cannot yet fully know (Banks 2015).

According to Bonilla-Silva and other identity scholars (Bell, hooks, and Wise) argue that racism in today’s world is deeply coded. For example, in the case of young black men like Michael Brown, the word “thug,” and the connotations connected to it, are, at best, code for dangerous and criminal, and at worst a modern update for the N-word. If asked, most people will say that a “thug” can be any human of any identity. However, undertaking a textual analysis of the news or news commentary, it quickly becomes evident that the word “thug” is most often applied to young men of color. Many of the young black men involved in a questionable police homicide in the last year were labeled as thugs by various media sources. Their bodies



were labeled as inherently “armed” because of their size, their pasts scrutinized for hints of violent patterns. These “thugs” were deemed so dangerous that the police had the right (the privilege) to act as judge, jury, and executioner. This kind of coding thrives in highly segregated communities and is present in political rhetoric, advertising, and entertainment. Further, this kind of coding is not just happening in the context of racism, it happens in the context of all forms of othering, too.

Coded language is part of the reason othering is so effective and nearly invisible, part of the reason it is so pervasive that it is perceived as normal. It happens in the news, online, in ads, in the classroom, and everyday conversation. It happens so consistently and regularly that an argument can be made to define it, according to James Gee, as a Discourse (Gee 1991) with all the weight that capital letter implies. It is a pervasive way of thinking and talking about marginalized identities that shapes the way we behave in the world. It is the discourse of Bonilla-Silva’s not-racist. This identity kit includes ways of speaking and thinking that are, under the surface, deeply bigoted—racist, sexist, homophobic, and ableist—but coded so that those identity markers are never actually talked about. Othering relies on specific language behaviors that are used in rhetorical acts to dehumanize peoples based on identity markers like race, sexuality, and gender. The discourse of othering is a set of values, beliefs, attitudes, and ways of being that directly impacts the ways we behave in the world. More importantly, it is a set of values, beliefs, attitudes, and ways of beings that allows those with privileged identities to define the ways those with marginalized identities are allowed to function in the world. It masks the racist, ableist, sexist, classist, and homophobic social biases undergirding our preconceived notions of anyone we designate as other.

By bringing the politics of identity into the writing classroom as a site of active and aggressive inquiry, we can reinforce and strengthen the ways composition and rhetoric already resists bigotry, othering, and prejudice. We live in a world where we just need to flip on a television or open our browser to see that we continue to face very real systemic racism, very real racial violence, very real cultural divides. It is not safe to be different in 2015 America. For some, being different is deadly. Therefore, if we agree

that Discourse shapes our “identity kit[s]” (Gee 142); if we agree the discourse of othering is creating a toxic “doing-being-valuing-believing combination” (Gee 142) of language and social practices; if we agree the discourse of othering supports behaviors and ways of thinking that makes it possible for *all* of us to enact social injustice based in racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, and transphobia; then it falls to those us who *already* and study rhetoric and language, to make this discourse visible in the classroom. It falls to us to merge our voices with voices from Identity Studies in order to speak loudly that discourse *is a learned behavior* and learned behaviors can be *challenged, disrupted, and dismantled*.

## Works Cited

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands: The New Mestiza /La Frontera*. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987. Print.
- Banks, Adam. "Funk, Flight, and Freedom." *YouTube*. YouTube, 24 Mar. 2015. Web. 09 Apr. 2015. Online. 2015 CCCC Chair Adam Banks' Address on the future of the Conference on College Composition and Communication.
- Bascom, Julia. "Quiet Hands." *Just Stimming*. 5 Oct. 2011. Web. 5 June 2015.
- Ballenger, Bruce P. *The Curious Writer*. Boston, Mass.: Longman, 2011. Print.
- Brooke, Robert. *Rural Voices: Place-conscious Education and the Teaching of Writing*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2003. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.
- Butler, Melvin A., chair, and the Committee on CCCC Language Statement. "Students' Right to Their Own Language." Special Issue of *College Composition and Communication* 25 (Fall 1974): 1-32. Print.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. *Racism Without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010. Print.
- Chabon, Michael. *Manhood for Amateurs: The Pleasures and Regrets of a Husband, Father, and Son*. New York: Harper, 2009. Print.
- Condon, Frankie. "Dynamic Complexity: Teaching, Learning, and Politics." *College Teaching*. 56.2 (2008): 89-95. Print.
- Condon, Frankie. *I Hope I Join the Band: Narrative, Affiliation, and Antiracist Rhetoric*. Logan: Utah State Univ. Press, 2012. Print.
- Delpit, Lisa D. "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children." *Harvard Educational Review*. 58.3 (1988): 280-98 Print.
- DiAngelo, Robin. "White Fragility." *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, Vol 3 (3) (2011) pp 54-70 Print.

- 
- Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*. National Writing Project. University of California, 2105 Bancroft Way #1042, Berkeley, CA 94720-1042. Tel: 510-642-0963; Fax: 510-642-4545; e-mail: nwp@writingproject.org; Web site: <http://www.nwp.org>, 2011. Print.
- Freire Paulo. *Education for Critical Consciousness*. London: Continuum, 2008. Print.
- Freire, Paulo, and Myra B. Ramos. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 1984. Print.
- Freire, Paulo, and Donald P. Macedo. *Literacy: Reading the Word & the World*. South Hadley, Mass: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, 1987. Print.
- Gee, James P. *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses*. London England: Falmer Press, 1990. Print.
- hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress: Education As the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- hooks, bell. *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. New York: Rutledge, 2003. Print.
- Hughes, Langston. "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926)." Modern American Poetry. Web. [http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g\\_1/hughes/mountain.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_1/hughes/mountain.htm)
- Giroux, Henry A. *On Critical Pedagogy*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013. Print.
- Hairston, Maxine. "Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing." *College Composition and Communication*. 43.2 (1992): 179-93. Print.
- Kirsch, Gesa. *Feminism and Composition: A Critical Sourcebook*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003. Print.
- O'Reilley, Mary R. *The Peaceable Classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1993. Print.
- Pratchett, Terry. *Jingo*. S.l.: HarperCollins e-Books, 2014. Internet resource.
- Sandoval, Chela. *Methodology of the Oppressed*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2000. Print.
- Silverstein, Jason. "I Don't Feel Your Pain: A Failure of Empathy Perpetuates Racial Disparities." *Slate* 27 June 2013. Web.

---

Trawalter, Sophie, Kelly M. Hoffman, and Adam Waytz. "Racial Bias in Perceptions of Others' Pain."

*PLOS One* 7.11 (2012): E48546. Online Resource.

Young, Vershawn A, and Aja Y. Martinez. *Code-meshing As World English: Pedagogy, Policy, Performance*. Urbana, Ill: National Council of Teachers of English, 2011. Print.

Villanueva, Victor. "Memoria Is a Friend of Ours: on the Discourse of Color." *College English*. 67.1 (2004): 9-19. Print.

Villanueva, Victor, and Kristin L. Arola. *Cross-talk in Comp Theory: A Reader*. Urbana, Ill: National Council of Teachers of English. 2011. Print.

Villanueva, Victor. *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1993. Print.

Wise, Tim J. *Colorblind: The Rise of Post-Racial Politics and the Retreat from Racial Equity*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2010. Print.