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Teaching against the Tide

Transgressing Norms in the American College Composition Classroom

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After observing a school of fish swim in unison, the difficulty, if not impossibility, of compelling one fish to act individually does not escape notice. Such an endeavor is pointless as fish swim in schools for protection; unity is necessary for their survival. As a result of their collective thinking, schools of fish instinctively know not to swim against the tide, working with their environment rather than against it. College and university composition instructors are expected to act collectively while in their individual classrooms, working to meet the basic course requirements identified by their departments. However, we are still individuals whose pedagogical approaches are influenced by our personal and professional experiences and our scholarly interests. We should be encouraged to challenge our students, not only to think critically and to actively engage with texts, but also to explore readings outside of the literary canon, which is often accused of being comprised of the works of dead Euro-American men. As instructors, we learn to "swim" against the academic tide, challenging ourselves, our students, and our pedagogies by transgressing composition text-selection norms. In this essay, I address some of the texts and topics instructors can integrate into American composition courses to present students with unique points of view. By straying from the canon and assigning a variety of texts, instructors provide students with compelling

and socially relevant material, drawing and holding their attention while probing the boundaries of what is considered the norm. These texts encourage students to question commonly-held ideas on race, culture, religion, politics, sexual preference, nationality, or gender, which in turn leads to essays reflecting their observations, questions, and conclusions.

I have mentioned several "touchy" subjects that many Americans tend to avoid discussing as these topics may lead to disagreements. The possibility of contention is a valid concern—particularly in this age of academic budget constraints and the consumerization of higher education. However, these rather sensitive subjects should not convey the need for additional silences or avoidance in the composition classroom. Instead, delicate subjects should be broached in the classroom as, in all likelihood, they apply to one or more of the students—perhaps even to the instructor. By opening discussions on topics that transgress norms, composition instructors can create a contact zone, a term coined by Pratt (1991, p. 34) and defined as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power". Two elements of Pratt's (1991) definition are particularly relevant to my discussion: cultures meeting, clashing, and grappling; and contexts of asymmetrical relations of power. I will refer to both components of Pratt's (1991) theory as this discussion progresses.

McKenna (1990, p.37) contends that the classroom is a workshop and "a creative space in which students and teachers alike work through their subjectivity to an externalization of the intersecting elements of race, class and gender which define us all". This involves transforming the classroom into "a politicized space in which the nexus of race, class and gender are questioned and politically activated" (McKenna 1990, p.37). Here, Pratt's (1991) contention that the contact zone is an area of "highly asymmetrical relations of power" is critical. McKenna (1990) addresses race, class, and gender, which are contextual frames in which power relations can be tested. Power relationships in the U.S. are typically determined along lines of race, class, or gender. Although it would be easy to state that one aspect is more or less likely to determine the allotment of power in American society, it is still difficult to determine which one holds more sway. At any given time, one element can take precedence over the other and power relationships shift in

response. As a creative and exploratory space, the composition classroom can provide students with a forum to examine the causes of power shifts in any society.

Logan (1998, p.55) asserts that composition teachers "need to devise ways to speak the unspeakable". In the classroom, it is less problematic for an instructor to work with her academic environment, opting out of presenting positions that may lead to dissention. However, Logan (1998, p.54) writes that if composition instructors "desire peace and harmony in the classroom instead of welcoming dissent" they "will be dancing around or smoothing over important issues". As instructors, we realize that we cannot have it both ways: a participatory classroom and a peaceful classroom. Many of us choose to swim with the academic tide, opting for a peaceful classroom, but many of us transgress the norm, introducing the texts of Other writers, or writers who challenge the canon by questioning commonly-held beliefs about race, gender, culture, sexual orientation, and other topics. Introducing texts that stray from the norm typically raise questions about power and its negotiations. These texts also lead to the inevitable: Self and Other clashing, while trying to determine their relative positions and allotment of power in the classroom and in society. Because of these complex negotiations, an instructor's decision to swim against the academic tide is critical.

According to statistics compiled by the U.S. Census (2011), the demographics of U.S. tertiary institutions have changed dramatically in the past thirty years. In 1980, the majority of college students were White, with a population of 9,925,000 whereas the Black[1] student population was 1,163,000, and the Hispanic student population was 443,000. By 2008, those populations increased to 14,405,000, 2,481,000, and 2,227,000, respectively. Although White students still lead in enrollment, these statistics indicate that Black and Hispanic enrollment is on the rise. The number of female students went from 5,957,000 in 1980 to 10,321,000 in 2008, almost doubling and with two million more female students than males. In addition, there has been an increase in non-native students from 286,000 in 1980 to 672,000 in 2009 and English as a Second Language (ESL) speakers from 1,111,500 in 1970 to 1,577,800 in 2006. As American colleges and universities become more diverse, courses such as composition should be constantly revised to reflect the ever-changing demographics.

Current student populations suggest that the composition classroom must become a contact zone in which Self and Other engage rather than one in which they wage war for cultural, racial, gender, or any other type of supremacy. This objective can be reached when instructors assign works by Other writers, which are typically excluded from the canon. While striving for the inclusion of the texts of the Other, the composition classroom must also address issues of exclusion. McKenna (1990, p.31) writes, exclusion is "eurocentrism, ethnocentrism, sexism, classism and…racism", factors that "underlie choices of what to teach and where to teach it; what to publish and what not to anoint as literature". Twenty years later, McKenna's (1990) observation is still relevant as identifying those texts "worthy" of being included in the canon is still a point of contention in the academy. The questions still remain: What are the goals of composition? and How can instructors meet these goals while transgressing the course's norms?

The goal of the composition classroom is to produce not only academic writers but critical thinkers. I identify an academic writer as someone with the ability to produce research-based scholarly texts reflecting an in-depth analysis of any given topic. The term "critical thinker" is multi-definitional, but for the purpose of this essay I define it as someone with the ability to question assumptions and to interpret information. Critical thinkers and academic writers are produced in courses that include texts reflecting broader perspectives and by instructors who allow students to discuss and wrestle with the theories posed in each text. Subjects that were previously avoided or works that were excluded from the canon should be brought into the composition classroom and given as much credence as their canonical predecessors. Inclusionary text-selection practices in the composition classroom provide readers with broader perspectives. In moving toward a more inclusive composition classroom, instructors can select texts penned by international writers. Schaub (2003, p.94) suggests that instructors work to "internationalize our classrooms" which he defines as "providing students, within the mission parameters of a particular writing course, with reading, writing, and research assignments that foster in them a more global vision for their writing and their conception of writing". Schaub (2003, p.94) also describes internationalizing the classroom as taking the additional step of "rede-

signing…composition courses to make the international focus of assignments an explicit goal".

The composition classroom must also undergo a transformation in which the Other's voice is allowed to articulate more than it has in the past. Royster (1996, p.29) writes "that 'subject' position really is everything", meaning that the subject must be given both a safe space and an opportunity to voice her experiences. Royster (1996) contends that although the subject's voice is often appropriated, the possibility of allowing the Other to articulate her experiences still exists. The Other can describe her experiences through writing, which can then be included in composition courses. The inclusion of the Other writer serves two purposes: it provides students with the subject's position as articulated by that subject, which is a perspective that students may have limited exposure to in classroom or personal settings; and it allows a true exchange of information between the Self and Other.

At the college where I teach composition, instructors are given the option of choosing from several texts. The texts are diverse, reflecting the instructional styles and perspectives of the faculty, and all faculty members are encouraged to participate in the text-adoption process. As a graduate student, I developed a sample syllabus using an anthology of essays written by well-known authors. When I was offered my first teaching position, the department chair, upon reviewing my sample syllabus, advised me to "stick with what you know". In keeping with the department chair's suggestion, I adopted a newer edition of the text for my Composition I course. I found that this text is comprised of excellent essays told from a variety of perspectives and written in language that is neither so simple that it offends students' intellectually nor so complex that it confuses them. While it is easy to dismiss this text as it is compiled in the U.S. by American educators, the readings provide a good balance between the Self's and the Other's perspective.

I have also followed the department chair's advice by straying from the text and the norm. As I am a postcolonialist and a Caribbeanist specializing in gender studies, female, Afro-Caribbean, womanist, citizen, transnational, and Other, I know from experience that the canon is often exclusive texts by writers who speak to me and of my experiences. To provide some balance, I include additional texts from other sources addressing topics or identify-

ing groups that students may not have encountered. The inclusion of unfamiliar texts, topics, and authors provides the students with a panoramic view of the world, which positively contributes to their ability to produce critical essays.

At this time, I would like to expand Schaub's (2003) definition to include providing students with a panoramic worldview. For instructors, this involves daring to assign non-traditional readings that some students may oppose because the positions expressed in the texts differ considerably from their own. This can be a difficult task as it is easier to slip into familiar pedagogical patterns and habits than to work against those inclinations. Schaub (2003) warns against allowing complacency to creep into our pedagogy, which is a mold that instructors must fight against falling into despite the ease with which we assign the usual, expected texts.

I try to avoid succumbing to complacency by including essays penned by authors expressing opinions that challenge assumptions of power relations. I assign texts by feminist writers who pose questions about gender equality, feminism, and women as Others. These topics are quite applicable in composition courses taught in the U.S. today as there are more women attending tertiary institutions than men. Although it is not difficult to locate essays from the canon penned by White, male, American writers advocating norms, I introduce texts by female essayists that question American norms, which can be harder to find. For many instructors—particularly female instructors—there is a hesitance to introduce "chick" topics. Many of us fear the constant barrage of objections posed by male students about the readings. In addition, we cope with students making assumptions about our text choices based on our appearances. Ardis (1992, p.168) notes, "students often want to position a teacher as a native informant because that's the easiest way for them to account for a teacher's authority vis a vis her subject matter". For some of my students, I assign female-centered or -authored texts because I am a woman and I am privileging my "kind". They believe that I am exercising my power in the teacher-student relationship. However, I make no secrets of my motives, which are to expose my students to unfamiliar writers expressing a variety of ideas and to provide a forum in which to actively debate the concepts presented. To meet this challenge with 21st century students, it is sometimes necessary to select older texts, such as those by second-wave feminist writers.

One of the greatest problems associated with introducing feminism as a topic of critical examination in the composition classroom is the negative connotations associated with the movement and with women who self-identify as feminists. Discussions of texts centering on feminism can be problematic as this term has become the new "F-word". Jamila (2002, p.94) writes of feminism, "the dreaded F-word continues to be so weighed down by negative connotations that few people are willing to voluntarily associate with it". There is nothing more detrimental to a female public figure in the U.S. than for her to claim an affiliation with feminism, especially with the country's current trend toward conservatism and traditionalism. Forty years after the second-wave feminist movement of the sixties, popular culture is still saturated with images of radical feminists who are cast as bra-burning, convention-shunning, long-haired hippies who unanimously support abortion. This is a rather narrow view of a heterogeneous group, but a topic that must be actively addressed. To question this image, I assign Gloria Steinem's (1979) "The Good News Is: These Are Not the Best Years of Your Life" in which she discusses feminism and activism on college campuses during the early 1970s. Steinem (1979) believes that although the college campus is viewed as a site of rebellion and free thinking, women's activism increases, not decreases, with age. The article is written for an audience of traditional, female college students in the U.S., suggesting that if they are members of the Women's Movement, they will become more radical with age (Steinem, 1979).

I mentioned earlier that U.S. college gender demographics have changed so dramatically in the past thirty years that as of 2008, there were 10.3 million women enrolled in U.S. tertiary institutions compared to 8.3 million men (U.S. Census, 2011). Of this population, 779, 000 women were over the age of 35 and considered non-traditional students because they were older, returning, part-time attendees. This group of non-traditional, female students, which may include students with families and full-time employment, has little in common with their traditional counterparts who tend to be younger, first-time college students without families, and employed part time. Therefore, my courses are often populated by an array of female students who do not strictly conform to Steinem's originally-intended audience profile. Assigning Steinem's (1979) essay poses other problems not related to gender or my role as a native in-

formant. Because Steinem is no longer as well-known as she once was, she must be introduced to a new audience of readers. Therefore, assigning her essay leads to historical and social examinations of the roles of gender and feminism in current American society in comparison to the American society of Steinem's (1979) essay.

Teaching has expanded my knowledge of student populations and their heterogeneity. As a result, I no longer assume that students are familiar with Steinem, the 1960s, or with second wave feminism and usually begin the discussion with a brief history of all three. Students bring their prior experiences to this discussion, often sharing a considerable amount of misinformation about feminism. However, Steinem's essay is a good selection because it raises questions. Students want to know why the feminist movement was important and if it is still relevant. I can only answer the first of those questions from a historical perspective, and I encourage students to debate the second.

Steinem's (1979) essay provides an excellent introduction to feminism and the feminist movement, but it can be accused of lacking universal appeal. Steinem's (1979) audience is White, middle class, and in college, which is one of the major criticisms of second wave feminism: that it is largely a tool of a privileged, Western few to the exclusion of the Other. As a result, students are exposed to one interpretation of feminism from Steinem that is exclusive of their self-identities. To counter Steinem, I assign texts by third wave feminists offering a different perspective on or a variation of feminism. Sonia Shah's (1995) "Tight Jeans and Chania Chorris" is an excellent counter to Steinem's (1979) brand of feminism because Shah is a third wave feminist, an American born to Indian immigrants, and someone who spent her childhood traveling between the U.S. and India. As the child of physicians Shah is privileged, but she is also Othered as the daughter of immigrants and a woman of color. Shah's parents also maintained close ties to their home country, India, and Indian culture. As a result, Shah has an Indian, international, and American worldview.

Shah's essay addresses the complexities of being a feminist and living between two cultures that are often at odds, which is a situation that many of my students personally experience. Shah (1995) describes the differences between her conceptualization of feminism and her parents', noting that their opposing views often lead

to misunderstandings and heated discussions. These disagreements ended when her younger sister began dressing like the other girls in her class, wearing tight jeans, off-the-shoulder shirts, and too much makeup. From Shah's (1995, p.114) perspective as a feminist, her sister was "exploiting herself and setting herself up for the kinds of exploitation and abuse" Shah suffered at the hands of White, middle class boys years before. Shah (1995, p.117) is shocked by her sister's "taboo display of flesh in full parental view" when her sister returns from a trip to India wearing chania chorris, which "are sets of midriff-baring blouses and long full skirts worn under saris". Shah (1995) is more taken aback by her conservative parents' response. They are pleased with their younger daughter's attire although her back is completely bare except for two small bows holding the blouse closed. Shah (1995) learns that it is not the tight jeans or the short shirts her parents object to, but their younger daughter's complete immersion into American culture at the expense of Indian culture.

After reading the text, the class engages in a conversation about cultural differences and how dissimilarities impact family relationships. Some of my students are immigrants or are the children of immigrants. They find Shah's (1995) essay fascinating because it, in many ways, mirrors their experiences growing up in the U.S. For those students whose families have lived in the U.S. for two or more generations, Shah's (1995) essay is a revelation, detailing the unfamiliar experiences of transnational families and broadening their understanding of the international or transnational Other. Awareness of the non-American Other comes at a price: students stop recognizing the American Others in their midst. At times, the American Other is grouped in with "we Americans" although her experiences may suggest that she is quite different from the traditional American who is White, male, and middle class.

The racial demographics of U.S. colleges have changed in the past thirty years to include higher enrollment of Black and Hispanic students. Despite an increase in students from these two groups, many college students admit that they have read very few texts, if any, by Black or Hispanic writers. This reflects a lack of diversity in the curriculum, which I address by assigning essays by Black and Hispanic authors. One such essay is Maya Angelou's (1997) "Graduation" (Chapter 23), an excerpt from her autobiography *I*

Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. In the essay, Angelou (1997) describes her experiences as a Black female growing up in the American South during the 1940s. The pivotal event in the text is Angelou's (1997) graduation from junior high school, which is marred by the actions and questionable motives of a local White politician.

Angelou and her entire graduating class are Othered by the comments of a White politician at the graduation ceremony and are told that the local White school will receive new textbooks, but their school will receive new sports equipment. Immediately, the children and their parents are reminded that although academic achievement is a great concern, limits have been set for them and their educational achievements are, essentially, meaningless. Many of my students have some difficulty accepting limits being set for one person by another as they live in a historical period and society in which race provides fewer barriers to success than it once did. I am not suggesting that my students are blind to prejudice, but that they have, or believe they have had, fewer personal experiences with prejudice than someone twenty years their senior.

Essays such as Angelou's (1997) provide introductions to the Other who is American, Black, and female. The historical perspective of the text is often eye-opening for students who may be unfamiliar with the U.S.'s rather complex racial history. From a historical and personal perspective, Angelou's (1997) essay is insightful, giving an account of past events through the eyes of someone who lived them. With the exception of a few students, the responses to Angelou (1997) are typically positive as readers find her style accessible.

The number students enrolled in American colleges and universities, who are not American born, has grown in the past thirty years. This information suggests that the number of ESL students enrolled in composition courses has likely increased. If the course materials can, they should reflect those language differences. As I teach in a state bordering Mexico and many of my students are Spanish-speaking, I include texts utilizing both English and Spanish such as Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) "How to Tame a Wild Tongue". Including Anzaldúa's (1987) essay serves two purposes: it introduces students to Hispanic writers and it places monolingual, American-born students in a position of interpretation.

Anzaldúa's (1987) essay has become a constant and is incorporated into my reading list every semester because I believe that the

inclusion of this particular text is critical given the large number of Spanish-speaking students in American colleges and the current national discourses on language in education. According to the U.S. Census (2011), Spanish-speaking students comprise 823,000 of the 17 million college students in the country as of 2006. In the U.S. states bordering Mexico, there are constant political debates about bilingual education and language rights. Parents, educators, and politicians bandy statements back and forth about which language should have national primacy: native languages or the more common standard American English. Some White, middle class, English-speaking students find these debates irrelevant; they repeat common media and political claims such as the national language of the U.S. is English although this has never been codified. By assigning Anzaldúa's (1987) essay, I place students who are English speakers in the position of interpreting a "foreign" language. I create a situation in which they are "Othered" and in which they must analyze a text, searching for meanings without the advantage of having prior knowledge of the text's language. The responses usually vary; students who speak Spanish are comfortable with the text whereas students who have no prior experiences with Spanish are at a loss. Some students refuse to complete the reading because they cannot understand any of the Spanish terms. It does not occur to them to use one of the free online translators or dictionaries. They, unlike their ESL counterparts, do not learn to navigate the unfamiliar linguistic territory in which they are placed. By the end of our discussion on Anzaldúa's (1987) essay and multilingual environments, many English-speaking students have greater empathy for ESL speakers who must somehow survive in a country and construct a life without fully understanding the language.

I neither claim to know what my students' sexual orientations are nor do I make a point of forcing students to transform the classroom into a confessional. However, I am aware of trends leaning toward conservatism in the U.S. to the exclusion of the Other who is a member of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) community. I will state that members of the LGBT community probably feel isolated and some heterosexuals may have difficulty accepting sexual orientation differences. As a new instructor, I hesitated to introduce texts by LGBT writers for various reasons, all of which stemmed from my own cowardice; I feared the possible backlash from stu-

dents. However, as I became more comfortable in my role as an instructor, I assigned Andrew Sullivan's (1996) "What is a Homosexual?" In this essay, Sullivan (1996) answers the title question from his position as an Other: someone whose sexual orientation diverges from the heteronormative. Sullivan (1996, p.13) as the subject voice notes, "No homosexual child, surrounded overwhelmingly by heterosexuals, will feel at home in his sexual and emotional world, even in the most tolerant of cultures". The student responses to this statement vary from empathy to disgust as Sullivan (1996, p.13) observes, "every homosexual child will learn the rituals of deceit, impersonation, and appearance". Some students, both male and female, are so outraged by Sullivan and his essay that they refuse to complete the reading. These students choose to accept a zero on a writing assignment because they believe that reading this essay constitutes compromising their principles. The opposite end of the spectrum is comprised of students who support members of the LGBT community because they believe that isolating this group is prejudicial and neo-segregationist. Other students adopt a centrist position in the discussion because they are uncomfortable with homosexuality but are not comfortable excluding a portion of their society's population from the benefits to which they are entitled by default. Forty years after New York's Stonewall riots, twenty years after the institution and repeal of the U.S. military's Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT) policy, and the recognition of same-sex marriages in some states, homosexuality is still a topic that generates some negative responses. While I am not suggesting that composition instructors use instructional time for social reform, we should take full advantage of teachable moments when they arise. Therefore, it is critical that we encourage our students to think and to question—particularly about a topic as socio-culturally relevant as this one.

U.S. college and university students are not a monolithic group, and their opinions are as diverse as they are. Because of the variations among the student population, composition instructors must sometimes transgress the norm by selecting texts outside of the canon. When students are presented with intellectually stimulating texts that interrogate their perceptions, they are more likely to actively engage in debates, which benefit the students and the instructor (McKenna, 1990; Pratt, 1991; Wilson Logan, 1998). The concept of allowing students to aggressively debate topics — to challenge

the authors, the reading topics, their own ideas, and society's structures — is crucial if these same students are to positively contribute to the society in which they live. As instructors, we can no longer afford to step delicately around "touchy" subjects by avoiding these topics and the texts that address them at all costs. We cannot always accept the academy's proclivity for selecting instructional materials from the canon and must find ways to incorporate canonical texts and newer, more transgressive texts into our syllabi.

The challenge to university instructors is to combine meeting the composition course's instructional requirements with exposing students to a variety of new and different ways of seeing the world and the varied groups that occupy it. We meet this challenge by sometimes working against our academic environment. "Swimming" against the academic tide can be problematic for instructors. Those of us who choose to transgress the norm may find ourselves labeled radicals and summarily dismissed by our colleagues. This poses a challenge as we try to build our careers and forge professional relationships. However, despite our reservations, we should still strive to encourage our students to explore the many experiences that all texts have to offer.

Notes

1. I use Black to identify all people of African descent living in the U.S. The use of this term instead of the more popular African American is to acknowledge that many Blacks in the U.S. may identify with another nationality.

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