ESSAYS

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Intellectual Awakenings: Thinking, Walking and Teachings in Social (In)Justice

The challenge of being an educator has a multitude of layers. First, there must be a consideration of both where we teach and who we teach. Second, but perhaps always looming over our work, has to be a shift in how we design our personal narratives and our pedagogical philosophies. While either of those will have its bare bones, we must be willing to add, move, and rearrange its parts in order to meet the needs of the students but also to assist us in continuing our own journey as educators. When I first began teaching, almost twenty years ago, one of my fears was that I would find one of my exams circulating through the building, either for sale or just because I overlooked its (de)value. The students, in search of other pricey exams, oftentimes knew the material but were made to feel overwhelmed by the sheer intensity of being asked whether they knew what their professor knew. Like a boat gone too far out into the sea, the students are pulled from the idea that their college-experience is supposed to transform them into the intellectuals they hoped to become. Instead, they were morphing into vessels that held regurgitated information and could periodically repeat it on command. They were no longer considering how what they were taught could be applied to their lives, their jobs, and to ways they thought about the world. Rather, they were hoping to do all possible to memorize "facts" and repeat them as best they could.

In my first year of teaching, it made me uncomfortable when colleagues suggested that their multiple-choice exams always had "tricky questions" just to "shake things up a bit." I found teaching tactics like that to be useless and oftentimes rewired students into second-guessing themselves about things they already knew to be true. After my first two semesters, I did away with the traditional exam and never looked back. This essay then examines my work as an educator in various classrooms dealing with sensitive topics like race, racism, class, gender, and justice, but it also serves as a reflection of my ever-evolving pedagogical praxis. Throughout the piece, I reflect on the narratives of my students who help to not only inform my work but also assist in how they too learn from said experience. This is how we transform the norm.

The beginnings of every semester have fallen into a perfectly-packaged routine, particularly if you've taught summer classes and one term is rushing into the other, it seems. The weather here in New York City sometimes doesn't quite shift yet in early September and we professors don't

always realize we are competing with several human emotions as well as warm weather. Many of the students would rather be anywhere else, but there they are: friendless, anxious, awkwardly timid, accompanied solely by their new knapsack and awaiting their professor. *I get there early and close the door behind me as I get ready for the bum-rush into the room, straight past me into seats somewhere at the far back.*

Almost like preparing for a date, I try to set the mood before the students arrive in the classroom. I put on some jazz and organize all of my materials on the small podium in the quiet of the empty space. When the door opens, I hold it ajar with my foot and greet each one of them. Many of them bid me a courtesy of a good morning or afternoon as many others remain silent and make no eye contact with me. I chalk it up to nerves, but the disconnect in our humanity worries me. I realize when I began the journey of becoming a college professor the students had a different pulse to them, but the world has gotten colder, crueler, and younger people are caught in between technological relationships and their assumptions about what lies ahead for them each semester they remain in school.

The composition of the syllabi over the years has taught me to leave off some of the ingredients to the final recipe, limiting the anxiety for all of us. Over the years I've noticed that the students are plagued by too many details and get lost between the required words, and the commands of what they are supposed to do. A colleague once schooled me on how to make a smaller class so that my life might be easier. *Black Studies will not make life easy even with just one person in the room.*

"Make the syllabus impossible. Include tons of work all over it and you'll see how fast your class dwindles down to a manageable amount. In no time, you'll have half the population," my colleague said. "Maybe you get lucky and even have people who want to be there," she laughed.

"So wrong," I replied half-jokingly. "I have only twenty-five in this one class. It's better than usual," I said, trying to defend students I didn't even know yet.

"C'mon. That's way too many in a single class and it's not like we have just the one class to teach," she scoffed.

She was right about over-enrollment, but I didn't think that our syllabi should pre-define who we were as educators, and ultimately create an identity for any of us that was untrue. Additionally, the overburdening of a syllabus just posits that the course from its outset has a shadow of impossibility and bears no mark on the quality of the course or the instruction itself. The students can also sniff-out random assignments and recognize the disrespect to their abilities when their required work has no impact on how they consume or produce information. The "busy-work" as I call what my colleague suggested I add to my syllabus would have no impact on the student and would create the arduous task of trying to sincerely define a legitimate pedagogical benefit. Once I distribute a syllabus, I ask the students to go over the assignments that are already listed (more or less will come as the term moves forward) and ask if they wish to tweak the actual

process of completing the assignment. Having the students work on the structural design of the assignment allows them to share their expertise in particular places and gives a variety to the assignments we are to assess. Here is where I employ a simple idea that quality over quantity will always give you something of great meaning. *Didn't we get into this game because we believed we had something to teach and ultimately we wanted to enlighten the learner?*

"These things matter when you are a faculty member of color teaching in a discipline that by name alone is a sign of resistance," I said to another colleague as I shared the just-learned tidbit of how to shrink the class enrollment.

"That's true," said the older Black professor. "Never turn a student away who wants to learn from you," he said. "That's a mistake we can't afford."

There is, of course, a crippling effect of teaching too many students at once. The sometimes unnoticeably automatic result is our creativity as educators being stifled, leaving us all feeling cramped in spaces of discomfort. That particular semester, I had decided to teach the introductory class on "expressions of racism" which generally comes with a heavy first-year enrollment. I was assigned multiple sections of the course as well as an additional course on Black New York City. The latter is host to upper-level students nearing graduation. Black New York City hadn't been offered in over ten years, and the senior students who had taken me for the introductory course years prior urged me to offer something new before they graduated. I almost always take those special requests from students. Among many of my colleagues, it's easy to assume that because my courses are in Black and Latino/a studies that the students would mostly be Black and Latino, but they aren't. Our college no longer holds a large population of Black and Latino students as it once did when I was hired many years ago. It is not rare to teach a Black Studies class with thirty-five students enrolled and have under ten students of color among the seats. I can recall several recent semesters in which I taught a Black studies course to packed rooms of close to forty students and had two-three Black students among the roster. Many times, the students of color are outnumbered and feel isolated in a class that is supposed to address the issues some have personally faced. Being the numerical minority in the room creates a silencing and positions the students as experts in areas in which they either fiercely embrace and become the "voice" or quiets their expertise and helps to foster resentment for the topic altogether.

The first assignment, a self-reflective narrative, is one that requires the student to sit with themselves and think about who they really are as individuals within our larger learning community and their lives outside of the classroom. I usually ask the students to also include an encounter with racism and how they managed during that time. Some of the students describe painful memories filled with hate, fear, paralysis as a bystander, violence, abuse and general oblivion about the world. Others saw too much before the age of twenty-one. *What happened to the fun of being a young adult?*

"I learned of Black people watching *Boyz N the Hood*," said one of the white students during one of the first class meetings.

"What's that?" her classmate nearby responded.

"*Boyz N the Hood*? A movie about black boys in bad neighborhoods and how they all are in gangs and stuff," she said.

"How did *that* teach you about black people?" one of the black students called out.

"I guess because I'm not from America, I didn't know anything about blacks. I learned a lot from that movie," the student said, defending Singleton's work.

The black student lowered his Knicks cap on his head, outstretched his long legs, and gave me a knowing expression, "This is your class. Please handle that, Dr. B," he said with a smirk that hid the anger I knew was slow steeping.

"You mad?" a black female asked the young man.

Before he could answer, she followed her question, "Don't be mad at her. I cross the street when I'm by myself and see a black man coming my way too. You have to blame society for that. Blame the media. It's not her fault, she's not even from here."

"But you are. You're from here, and you're tellin' me you're afraid of me? You come from a worse neighborhood than I do. I should be scared of you," the young black male student retorted. He was becoming visibly upset though he masked it well behind his comedic responses. My male student was angry because he believed that as a black female, his classmate should've understood his position and depiction in society as "their" struggle, as opposed to her defense of non-black students who had no frame of reference at all about such experiences. After class he whispered to me that his black female classmate was a "sellout" and would always be until someone like me could "wake her up."

Boyz N the Hood certainly wasn't the worst reference made by a student about exposure to black identity, international or otherwise, but it meant we had work to do, particularly as the class had a slim population of students of color and I had been commissioned with the responsibility to enlighten her and others like her.

"You're my first brown teacher—professor, I mean. Well, this is my first semester, but you're my first," a young Asian boy called out.

"He's about to get his Black Studies cherry popped!" another student called out.

"Let's hope the experience is a good one then," I said as the room began to giggle at the subliminally vulgar statement that didn't acknowledge whether or not I had been offended. His comment about me being his first was shocking. Here we were in New York City and they were in their first semester of college, and I was the first person of color to teach this young man. *We should all be worried about that alone and first.*

Assignments like the self-reflective narratives as well as genealogical research projects revealed things I wish I hadn't known. One of the students disclosed an unhealthy fear of the police wherever he went, though he was born and raised in Queens, New York and shared his community with cops all the time. He wrote in his paper that it didn't matter what state he went to as part of his athletic training; he was petrified of cops. Another student shared that she was probably going to drop out of school because of her older brother's imprisonment. Her family just couldn't afford for her not to work full-time as the legal fees continued to pile up and her brother's innocence was looking slimmer and slimmer as the months of his incarceration increased. Other students had shared that they bridged suicide multiple times because the world was too chaotic to live in and they had not yet fully decided that remaining here had a valid point. The stereotype of the "model minority" was still enforced at home and all they wanted to do was see the world and read things of interest, not of requirements. The truth was, "I hate math and I despise science, and I don't care to get a great paying job. There's so much to see and I don't think I'll see any of it," read one paper. I sat with each of the narratives which collectively were about a hundred and instead of being excited about teaching them I was weighed down with worry and conflicted emotion about my work. *Someone needs to reach them differently. Many of them feel forced to be here and their success will be measured by someone else's happiness and the size of their assumed paycheck*.

I first assigned selections from Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to give them a foundation for understanding how we would look at oppression and interpretations of liberation. We would try to understand the functions of oppression with a variety of players and move away from blaming individuals and simple "society" as they referred to things unknown and other variables. The text proves hard for most of my students who had never been exposed to concepts the way Freire presents it. Once we began to break the text down and connected it to real-life examples, the students were quickly empowered as they suddenly changed their vocabulary to make sense of the world in a philosophical context. For example, a major thread woven into *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is the call to re-establish one's vocabulary. The power of vocabulary has been overlooked and places us into a space in which we cannot identify our oppression or liberation. Simply put, we don't have the words to define our experience. I implore the students then to consider the use of their vocabulary when identifying examples of oppression. We move from "the white man" to terms like power, privilege, institutional racism, and so on. Use of these terminologies allows for further work in defining both historical and contemporary cases of oppression, even perhaps at a domestic level to international. For those who found themselves outside of the margin of oppression, living in a privilege others envied, they almost as quickly wanted to identify as allies and human solutions to the problem and not part of the larger issue at hand.

Moving into the middle of September, the weather still had not shifted and as New Yorkers walked around in shorts and t-shirts. I decided to move the classroom outdoors into various places within the city, almost entirely abandoning the syllabus I had spent so much time creating. We had been discussing food access in low-income communities that were heavily populated by Blacks and

Latinos across New York City. I wanted to drill into the students that eating green was not far away from the original diet of people of color and to stray them away from believing that the fast-food restaurants packed into economically stressed and socially challenged neighborhoods was purposefully designed. Given free admission to the Brooklyn Botanical Garden, I moved our class into the 52-acre green space as I introduced the students to edible plants native to Black and Latino places across the globe.

"They drink this in a punch or like a tea back home in my country," one student said as she stroked a sorrel plant.

"Where is back home?" I asked.

"Jamaica. I didn't know they had this here too. Do they drink it the same way?" she asked.

"We'd have to ask one of the gardeners but I drink it the same way as you do," I smiled.

"Me too," said a baby-faced young man who was late to arrive to class that morning.

"Get out of here, professor! Really?!" The Jamaican student said feeling an instant connection as did I.

Continuing to take advantage of the peculiar fall weather, I took my students to Central Park for a walking tour of the lost Seneca Village the following week.

"I wish I went to a school where the teachers did that," one of my black female students whispered to me as she pointed to a group of little white children and their black gym teacher playing ball on the great lawn.

"Me too," I said.

"Well at least I'm here with you now," she laughed. *Our pain was real. It hurt. We wanted to be outside too. We played on concrete but we would've loved to run on grass just part of the day. Our public schools were nowhere near Central Park, and our teachers back then didn't think to take us there for a field day.*

Not funded for these types of escapades, the students and I each chipped in three dollars a person to learn more about the missing population of Central Park. The park's tour guide talked at length about the first and lost black community that lived in Seneca Village which was once a thriving and organized collection of churches, schools, and homes. He showed us pictures of porcelain wears, discovered children's shoes, and toothbrushes along with other artifacts.

"The rich wanted to see green and enjoy that green space for their leisure so they mowed down Seneca Village for their pleasure," the tour guide said.

"So what happened to the black people that were here?" one of my students asked the guide.

"Gone. You can imagine that if they come with money for your neighborhood most likely you are going to get gone," the guide responded.

"A first example of gentrification right, Dr. B.?," another student asked.

I shook my head in silent agreement.

"We're walking on top of someone, you know that right?" A student said as we moved from one spot to another in the park.

The following couple of weeks we went to the African Burial Ground which faces directly across the street from one of New York City's federal buildings. I told the students that while we are spending so much time outside of the classroom, they were to continue engaging with the assigned readings and we would discuss through our online discussion board about them. The students didn't mind abandoning the syllabus, but they also dutifully completed the readings and actively interacted online which folded our class into the newer pedagogically challenging hybrid model.

At the burial ground, the students and I were hosted by a Park Ranger who treated us to a film about the struggle to reclaim and recognize the African Burial Ground being underneath our city's financial epicenter.

"Did you see this coffin, Dr. B?," one student asked as she hooked her arm into mine and pointed towards an intricately hand-carved wooden box.

"I didn't," I replied, my eyes fixated on an illuminated frame holding hundreds of pictures of skeletons lying in dirt, being solely identified by number.

"I think I might go to Ghana and have a coffin like this made just for me. I'd feel closer to my ancestors I think," she said smiling.

"Aren't you from Barbados?" her classmate teased.

"We're all from Africa," she said, punching him in the arm.

"You are not from Africa. I am from Africa," another student said. "You must do some research around your lineage, nwanne" the student said. "Then I will buy you a coffin from Nigeria instead. Ours look better."

"Very morbid, very. Talk about life," I said, my eyes still fixated on a picture of a slave discovered under the very ground I stood upon. "You found Mr. 101. He's special," the Park Ranger said to me in a whisper as we stood side by side in silence.

The Park Ranger took us outside of the building next where we stood in front of mounds of fake grass that were elevated into heaps.

"These bodies came back to reclaim their land. They want respect," one of the tour guides said.

The student standing next to me tightly squeezed my arm.

"Say that again," one of the male students said to the tour guide.

"Don't you see? The mounds are rising. The ancestors want recognition and want people to remember that they are here," the guide said again.

"I'm super freaked out," said one of the white female students.

"It's a bit jarring, but ask questions," I whispered to her.

"What do you mean they want to reclaim their place?" she asked.

"So, people don't want to admit this is true, and the city won't do the measuring, but the federal building across the street is sinking. It's on a slope, although the sidewalk looks level. Really, though—it's sinking and the mounds over here—the graves—they are rising. The slaves want their rightful place and want people to see they are here no matter how hard people try to hide the dirty history," a stranger who joined the trip said in the most stoic and believable voice.

As we continued walking the burial ground, we headed down a small set of stairs and landed in a crowded space under a large marble hanging structure not very high above our heads. Our bodies were touching, meshing into each other as small gnats flew into our faces and away again. *No one is breathing.*

"Do you know where you are?" the Ranger asked.

No one uttered a word.

"In a slave ship," she said.

Just then, one of my students who had taken several classes with me before, and who I cared very much for, grabbed my hand and began to cry. Even in the dark shadow caused by the ship's structure and the tightness of our standing positions, I watched as tear after tear rolled down her cheek dragging her blush with every stain.

After those trips, the weather finally began to nip at us and we retreated to our classroom for several weeks to continue discussing assigned readings. Our first return indoors confronted us with the written words of Trayvon Martin's mother who successfully humanized her son so violently taken from her. Passage after passage in her book demanded that the students reckon with their mortality and their positions in the world. *You can't un-think any of this now. You can't un-know it. What will you do with this information? Will you think more of Trayvon as a human being now and less of a case study?*

By the end of the semester, the social and emotional movement of the students was taking place. We had all been touched in different ways by what we learned, the themes we explored, what we saw together, and the spaces in which we stood that we had previously been taken for granted every day.

For the final assignment, I asked the students to purchase a sketchbook from a local art store and document their journey in our Black Studies class. The size of the sketchbook frightened many while it inspired many others.

"Those blank pages should serve as a reminder of how we all walked in here. We've done so much, seen so much, and know so much more now that we should be able to fill this book with no problem," I said smiling.

What resulted was a small library of sea-foam colored sketchbooks that would give readers an eye into the lives of transformed undergraduates who depicted their traveling somewhere between a first semester studying racism and a last semester of university education. There were letters written to Sybrina Fulton, Trayvon's mother, pictorials of lives lost to racism and violence, confessions of ignorance and awakenings and, among most, self-reflections of walking in social (in)justices.

In this essay, I shared just a few of my pedagogical examples, though there could have easily been hundreds more and that many more to be had. Our pedagogical philosophies are not just our own; they impact the way our students begin to think about the world. Through our teachings they are either seeing the world through murky funnels or developing new vocabularies that will help them embody their intellectual growth. Transformative pedagogy, one that seeks a social justice, begs of us, demands of us, to place our students at the center of our work and consider not just what we think they ought to know, but what they come knowing already and just how thirsty they are for more.

At the time I submitted the original essay, my students and I had been examining constructed ghettos in New York City. Many of them had uninformed and baseless ideas about what Harlem looked like. After reading scholarly papers that hued multiple stereotypes based on "expert" theories that they were unable to fully dispel, I told everyone to pack their bags and we abandoned the classroom to take the city bus some hundred blocks up to Harlem. The students were astonished at the bustling of the community, and the legitimate involvement in a variety of things its residents seem to be deeply into when we arrived. People were working, teachers and students were heading to field trips, stores had customers, and restaurants were preparing for service. Despite the grimness of some of the neighborhood's pockets of lack and neglect, it was unlike what they had imagined, and more in contrast to the theoretical paper we were deconstructing while in the classroom. Heading back to campus via the train, it was the last time I saw my students in that class, in person. The following week COVID-19 hit our city, and the students and I were no longer together in our learning community but were behind our computers trying our best for social and human engagement. I used the opportunity not to become

overwhelmed by the massive workload and life-shift ahead, but allowed for the students to talk about and embrace their new lives under quarantine. We still had much to talk about when it came to race, class, gender, community and social justice, particularly in a heightened-awareness moment of our lives. I am currently reworking our syllabus with only two months left for the semester to write and design assignments that incorporate our current realities within the context of the social dynamics that we are thematically responsible for as per the course description. We have spent several days re-examining our readings as well and trying to make connections between the past and our present as we look to build our future. Despite the forcefulness with which our lives have just been upturned and re-arranged, this is a defining moment of what we will do and can do for our students to transform their educational experiences and leave a lasting impact.

In more recent days and alongside the pandemic's shift in our intellectual lives, we have had to tend to the global obviousness of inequality. In Black Studies, in particular, the particulars of our training and our class methodologies have been overwhelmingly recognized as a kind of familial and safe space. In this carved out community that serves as shelter to so many, students feel freer, protected, and able to articulate ideas and experiences others may not ever understand. Students are once again constricted in a new type of fear, confusion and rage. For many, it is their first time confronting racism in this type of way. Though we continue to mourn the loss of so many of our brown-skinned American citizens, the press upon us to both intellectualize and soothe our learners is ever more present and pensive.

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