

Critical Pedagogy Series

English Department
Vanderbilt University
Fall 2015

The inaugural meeting of the Critical Pedagogy Series was held on October 27 from 4:30-6pm. This series was developed by the English Graduate Students' Association at the suggestion of Department Chair Dana Nelson. Its intent is to foster community between graduate students and faculty via open dialogue about race and power in the classroom and the larger university. Professor Marzia Milazzo was our invited guest for the first session. What follows are meeting highlights based on a collaboratively reviewed notes document.

Graduate students selected Silvia Toscano Villanueva's "Teaching as a Healing Craft: Decolonizing the Classroom and Creating Spaces of Hopeful Resistance through Chicano-Indigenous Pedagogical Praxis" as a reading for the session. In response, Professor Milazzo also suggested Eddy Francisco Alvarez, Jr.'s "Jotería Pedagogy, SWAPA, and Sandovalian Approaches to Liberation." These two readings were circulated before the meeting with the understanding that we would focus discussion on the first.¹

We began by discussing the conditions and motivations of Villanueva's article: she teaches in a 31% Hispanic-serving Community College and writes partially in response to the besiegement of Mexican American Studies in Tucson, Arizona, nearly 25 years after the Plan de Santa Barbara, a groundbreaking plan to create Chican@ Studies. Although this environment is markedly different from our own, we discussed having classroom goals and feeling classroom pressures similar to some of those she describes. Villanueva writes, for instance, of receiving administrative pushback for assigning readings only by authors of color, and we discussed how to handle perceived pressures from our own students (*e.g.* fear of poor evaluations) to "diversify" (*i.e.* include more white authors) our reading lists similarly. We considered, for instance, whether or not there should be structural requirements or mitigations for teaching concentrated on race and power. Ultimately, however, we concluded that every class does not offer enough time to establish an adequate framework for these discussions, especially if the class objective is (as in 1100W) something other than the understanding of those things.

Discussion also turned to the role of experiential knowledge in the Vanderbilt classroom. In the article, Villanueva defines "barrio pedagogy" as a teaching method wherein the educator affirms students' local knowledge within an academic context; her primary focus is on how such a pedagogy, which gives students the ability to reclaim culturally specific experiences as valid forms of knowledge, enables healing (28). But what happens, a participant queried, when students' "culturally specific knowledge," for instance, affirms an offensive stereotype? Is there is

¹ Silvia Toscano Villanueva, "Teaching as a Healing Craft: Decolonizing the Classroom and Creating Spaces of Hopeful Resistance through Chicano-Indigenous Pedagogical Praxis" *Urban Rev* (2013) 45:23-40. DOI 10.1007/s11256-012-0222-5. Eddy Francisco Alvarez, Jr., "Jotería Pedagogy, SWAPA, and Sandovalian Approaches to Liberation" *Aztlan* 39.1 (Spring 2014): 215-227.

a strategic way to center the experiences of people of color in a class body that is predominantly white? How should we address--or not address--white anxiety and white guilt?

Professor Milazzo shared her own strategies, which we found immensely promising, for dealing with some of these problems. First, in classes where such issues will be discussed, objectivity and bias need to be addressed in day one or day two. She recommended assigning Albert Memmi's "Mythical Portrait of the Colonized," a ten-page piece from *The Colonizer and the Colonized*.² Second, she emphasized the importance and potential utility of encouraging students to be--and ourselves to be--specific about what community they are referencing (to specify what definition of "indigenous" is being used, for example). Third, Professor Milazzo and many of the teaching graduate students also noted the benefits of getting undergraduate students to problematize those stereotypes *on their own* instead of confronting them directly about the misguidedness of their beliefs. To this effect, Professor Milazzo suggested assigning ungraded (or completion-graded), student-generated critical questions about the reading which can be (and usually are) problematized during class discussions. Since we cannot assume that students know or don't know something just because of who they are, and since never know who might be the critical voice, this is a way to allow those areas and dynamics for learning to arise in a more decentered way.

In accordance with her aim to heal by affirming personal experience, Villanueva also discusses fostering the use of first person in student writing. Some of the graduate students were interested in this discussion on both graduate and undergraduate curricular levels. The question arose: should we, as a department, be pushing back against, for example, stodgy journal conventions that forbid first person, especially since journal conventions are what graduate students, per Cassuto, need to be taught to conform to? Acknowledging that writing can be both a tool of colonial power--in part by invalidating certain first person perspectives--and a decolonial tool, we considered that in the undergraduate classroom we might do the exact opposite of forbidding first person. Instead, we might encourage or require students to use it. This could help students understand how personal narratives are used in critical race theory, for instance, to critique the law by looking for its "narrators."

What was meant by "decolonial theory" in the classroom and how it differs from multiculturalism was also a main topic of discussion. Describing decolonial pedagogy, Villanueva quotes Edmundo Norte (2011), who specifies that the process of decolonization consists of the following:

- First, a rediscovery/recovery, which leads to an enhanced awareness.
- Next, a confrontation of pain, guilt, shame, baggage, and wounds requiring mourning, which in turn necessitate collective healing via the transformative power of people being vulnerable together.
- Subsequently, a dream for an alternative, followed by a commitment to that alternative.
- Finally, action that can be taken to move the dream forward. (qtd. in Villanueva 37)

² Albert Memmi, "Mythical Portrait of the Colonized," *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. 1957. Rprnt. (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1991).

The graduate students and Professor Milazzo discussed what we felt was an imperative that decolonial pedagogy be distinct from multiculturalism (i.e. “everyone has a voice”) and instead be something critical, something that mobilizes marginalized experiences to critique power and structures of power. We also discussed how, to some extent, even if in some slow way, a “decolonial classroom” requires dealing with colonial remnants in the larger structure of university—disciplines, for instance, and the dismantling of ethnic studies.

As the end of the meeting approached, participants in this series also discussed Villanueva’s commitment to hope, which many found problematic. Whereas Villanueva insists that “[t]o devote a space only for critiques without offering hope is to ensure despair,” we find that insistence can be uncritical, especially when it is, as Professor Milazzo pointed out, how students tend to want to read (37). Professor Milazzo suggested that transformation and action might be better paradigms to shift the classroom toward when the inklings of “hope” arise.