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Culturally Sustaining Border Pedagogy

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TEACHING WRITING NOW: DIVERSITY, INCLUSION, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

A virtual symposium hosted by the Texas A&M Department of English throughout the spring of 2021 that featured a series of talks and workshops on the topic of how practitioners can better teach writing now by addressing diversity, inclusion, and social justice in the writing classroom. The event was aimed at bringing together scholars doing research in social justice pedagogies, cultural rhetorics, and composition/professional writing in our rapidly changing media landscapes. Events were free and open to the public.

Teaching Writing at the Border

Delivered Wednesday, January 27, 2021, from 2:30 pm – 4:30 pm.

Introduction

This paper is adapted from a presentation of the same title given at the “Teaching Writing Now Symposium” hosted at Texas A&M University in January of 2021. The presentation was an opportunity to speak at one of my alma maters while speaking about a place I call home. Naturally, I took this event as an opportunity to reflect on my experience as both a student and a teacher. Furthermore, this moment of reflection granted me the opportunity to process my experience navigating academia from the moment I applied to graduate programs to the present as a junior faculty member. In this paper, I draw on Django Paris’ concept of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (2012)

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as both a guide for my pedagogy and as a guide for processing my own experience as a student. Later in this paper, I give a full definition of Paris' work; however, one aspect that I wish to highlight as context for how I oriented to this presentation is the emphasis that Paris and H. Samy Alim (2017) bring to the opening of their introduction to their edited collection *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy*, which is to continue to grapple with the question of "What is the purpose of schooling in pluralistic societies?" (p. 1).

This is the question I immediately turned to when I was asked to participate on a panel about teaching at the border. As someone from the Juarez-El Paso border who attended schools in that region from K-16 and then worked as a faculty member at the University of Texas at El Paso, I wondered: What was the purpose of schooling in the borderlands? What was the experience of schooling in the borderlands? I spoke about my own experience as a student, but what was going to be my experience as a teacher? I opened my presentation at the symposium by giving shout-outs to all my teachers at Texas A&M because Texas A&M represented the most formative years of my career in academia. In my time there, I witnessed the resilience of graduate students and the value of community in the face of structural inequality. And now, being on the faculty side of the experience, I can imagine the level of tension and stress that came with walking into the building of the English department at its most chaotic times. And so, as I did during my presentation, I am excited to express my gratitude in writing for the efforts of my teachers and mentors. Everything I do in my classes is a variation or a riff of something that they did that helped me learn and feel included and pushed me to do better.

With this acknowledgment to my previous teachers, I wish to open this paper because, in service to the question of the purpose of schooling, one of the most important factors in what the purpose is and how it manifested is the impact that teachers have on such a purpose. Stated otherwise, students, for better or worse, will carry with them the experience of our teaching. What we choose to value and foreground in the classroom along with how we approach and present our pedagogies will impact our students far beyond the classroom. Thus, in this essay, I tell stories addressing the difficulties and successes that I have experienced while teaching on the Mexico/USA border. Guided by culturally sustaining pedagogy, I offer these stories as part of a larger discourse on what it means to live and engage with a bi-national settler colonial context, community, and culture.

Teaching on the Border

One of the weirdest parts of being who I am—and of going back to my old stomping grounds—is continually confronting the narratives created about me. Reading scholarship about Mexican American students written in the years I was a student is somewhat surreal. Furthermore, to embody the experience of being a student at the university in my hometown and then to go on to become faculty, felt like a privilege and a dream come true. Yet, to work for and consistently be reminded of how institutions simultaneously undervalue their students while undermining them and their potential wears on a person differently when they see this relationship from both sides. While institutions take every opportunity to display their *unique* student populations, very few think about what these populations need. Understanding this context, I wanted to use the lessons I had learned in order to re-imagine my own classroom, even if I could not re-imagine the whole university. I was excited and motivated to teach at the university in my hometown. To be from the border and teach at the border was a rare opportunity. For me, what has always been missing from the stories and narratives about people on the border is exactly that: Their own stories; their own narratives. Despite the nods to the local community and culture through cultural signifiers like menudo at faculty orientation breakfast or mariachis on campus, these gestures cannot capture the full depth of the student population. Perhaps it's too ambiguous to distill fully. Perhaps the faculty and administration are too white to really notice the nuance.

The long legacy of colonialism and settler colonialism has rendered moot much of the discourse on the border. In a population that is about 80–90% Mexican or Mexican American, there is both a sense of homogeneity and, at the same time, fierce lines drawn between class, citizenship, and linguistic proficiency. On campus, you will find pockets of students: Those who cross the border daily, others who only speak Spanish, some who speak Chicax versions of Spanish, others who carpool from the far side of town, and some who can afford garage parking. And there are students like me, who represent a mix of everything.

Spanish was my first language; I mostly lost it when I entered elementary school. I grew up taking weekend trips to Juarez to visit family. I spent the rest of the week playing American football. One parent had no trouble assimilating; the other still gets nervous speaking English. Of all of these, I assume my students experience some combination. One thing was for certain: there were few opportunities for students to reflect and make sense of their identities. I knew this from the conversations I had as both a student and, later, as a faculty member. With this experience in mind, I was

excited to make space for this kind of reflecting that would hopefully not only help students reflect on but learn to value the rhetorical cultural practices that they practiced and, more importantly, that mattered to them.

Teaching Story One: Introducing Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

During my first year at UTEP, I had the opportunity to teach a summer graduate course for students who mainly were K–12 teachers working on a master’s in English and/or working toward their dual-credit certification. Shortly before the course was scheduled to begin, the edited collection *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World* edited by Django Paris and H. Samy Alim (2017) had just come out, and I decided to theme the course around this text. Paris coined the term in 2012 with his article “Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice,” with the intention to build off of Gloria Ladson Billings’ (1999) concept of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. I must note that she has a chapter in the edited collection by Paris and Alim. Both concepts aim to reject deficit models of education, and as Paris put it, in his “loving critique,” culturally relevant pedagogy only brought us to tolerance in the same way that multiculturalism only taught us to acknowledge but not how to engage across culture (Paris, 2012, p. 93). Paris (2012) further clarifies that “culturally sustaining pedagogy requires that our pedagogies be more than responsive of or relevant to the cultural experiences and practices of young people—it requires that they support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence” (p. 95). In their work together, Paris and Alim (2017) go on to say that “culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (p. 1).

Given that the students in my graduate seminar would mostly be K–12 teachers, this felt like the perfect text to frame a course around. For me, the emphasis on the word “sustain” that Paris and Alim placed upon pedagogy was the important distinction. What should we be perpetuating and fostering? To me this question squarely put into conversation the possibilities for connecting the discourses in cultural rhetorics, especially by scholars Cobos, Rios, Sano-Franchini, Sackey, and Haas (2018) who placed a special emphasis on embodied practices. What practices do we want to sustain and what would they foster? The language that Paris, Alim, and Ladson-Billings

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brought to their work in education was exactly the type of work I felt was missing from my undergraduate experience and especially from my K–12 experience. Feeling excited for the opportunity in front of me, I submitted my course request, “Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy.”

This request was promptly met with a revise and resubmit. It was explained to me that, according to the criteria for courses to count towards a dual credit certification, none of the courses could have the word “pedagogy” or significantly be about pedagogy. Dual credit certification courses had to be about content strictly. The sentiment I gathered from this logic is that we want teachers to focus on content but not on how to teach this content. This disconnect, I imagine, is what Paris, Alim, Ladson-Billings, and countless educators have been arguing against throughout their careers. The exact emphasis on “sustaining” argues why it matters to fully engage with the pedagogy on how to teach certain content. Nonetheless, knowing that processes at institutions involve semantics more than substance, I changed my course title to “Culturally Sustaining Rhetorics” and went about my business.

The course was overall an interesting experience and one of the most enjoyable experiences I have ever had teaching. We collectively hung on to the words of every chapter. My students of various ages represented an accurate demographic of my hometown of El Paso. In a class of 13 students, most of them were Mexican and Mexican American. There was one Black woman and two white students. Like the local politics in El Paso, despite representing a minority of the classroom’s population, the white students did not hesitate to push back against a few of the chapters. They expressed the *feeling* that the authors were unfairly attacking white people. As far as I can tell, a vast majority of the authors in the edited collection are BIPOC teachers and scholars. One of the most important aspects of the edited collection is that co-editors and authors unapologetically confront white supremacy.

Presumably, for my white students, this was their first time being asked to confront white supremacy. I am willing to assume that this was also the case for the majority of the students in the course. Collectively, based on their feedback, this was the most whiteness had been uncentered in a classroom space. This became evident when the white students levied their accusation against the authors in the edited collection and a few of the Mexican American students came to their defense. I am not quite sure I prepared for this specific conversation, but I knew it was not outside the realm of possibility. The specter of assimilation and the rhetoric of El Paso as a melting pot on the border always left this possibility open. It is the same kind of rhetoric that allows for a white politician assuming the moniker of Beto to rise to national prominence while at the same time making minimal impact on the local

community they claim to represent. And this is the same kind of rhetoric that a university will use to tout its status as a Hispanic Serving Institution while continually hiring white faculty and administrators.

To these students and their accusations, I simply replied, “You have the rest of the class and term to show me where in the book white people are being attacked.” I am still waiting for the evidence. It was an important moment for the class. Collectively, most of the students’ proximity to whiteness allowed them to see any critique of white supremacy and furthermore a centering of non-white culture and people as a threat to the status quo of white supremacy. A threat to what they felt was normal. For me as a teacher, it was a cathartic moment. For me as an El Pasoan, it brought to light a lot of what I feared. But it is an underlying tension of living on the border. Whiteness and white supremacy are constantly reinforced: in our language, in our citizenship status, and in our quest for upward mobility. Whiteness and white supremacy are also upheld when we try to imagine the population of the city, often using the word “diverse” to describe the community, when in fact, El Paso is one of the least diverse places because such an overwhelming majority of the city is Mexican and Mexican American. Conversations like this were important for the class. We had to confront the white gaze we had internalized. Because the students and I were an accurate representation of El Paso’s population, we could no longer pretend like our “diversity” could shield us from upholding that which continually oppressed us and our oppression of others. How could we be oppressed when we represent the majority? Yet, the moment we approached de-centering whiteness, it felt like an attack against white people and anyone that lives in whiteness’ shadow. As we processed this, it felt like the class came together as we all unpacked our relationship with white supremacy and carefully read the critiques each author raised as well as celebrated the brilliant work they were doing with youth and their pedagogical practices.

For me, the payoff would come at the close of the semester with final projects. The final project prompt asked everyone to “find a culturally sustaining rhetoric and write about it.” Drawing on some of the studies we read about, I encouraged students to engage in a wide range of methods, including ethnography, auto-ethnography, and social media analysis, to name a few. After having spent a semester reading about how youth were critically engaging with their language, culture, and community, I assumed the students had spent the semester thinking of examples in their own lives. And so, as I introduced the final projects, I asked my students to name some examples they could think of so I could write them on the board.

I was met with silence.

The type of silence every teacher is familiar with; where it seems like you now live on a deserted island.

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Everything we had built up to felt like a failure. As someone who always grades myself based on the quality of students' work, somewhere along the way I failed to bring everything all the way home for my students. We talked throughout the semester about the culturally sustaining pedagogy of youth but never quite made the leap to what they considered to be sustaining. At the same, I knew there was something deeper happening with my students. I considered the following possibilities: If there were examples of things that were sustaining us individually, then we were not making space for acknowledging them. If there were not examples of practices that sustained us, then we would be in bigger trouble. Either way, all those years of being undervalued and undermined by the institutions around us as well as our collective community consciousness continued to render our voices and our stories mute.

One of the points of emphasis that Paris and Alim (2017) argue for in the framing of their introductory chapter is the question, "What would our pedagogy look like if this gaze (the white gaze) weren't our dominant one?" This is both the root of why I believe students had trouble naming what practices were culturally sustaining and also an important reminder of what is required of us as educators if we are interested in enacting culturally sustaining pedagogy. Something I truly believe is necessary, especially for our undergraduate and graduate students, is the reminder that by shifting this gaze, we are potentially shifting everything. Perhaps my biggest error was asking students to identify what was culturally sustaining through a regular academic research paper. What was I doing to make space for these border students? What shifts did I need to make in my own pedagogy? Despite this initial failure on my part, I do want to credit my students for developing good projects.

Teaching Story Two: A Student-Driven Example of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

All my greatest accomplishments as a teacher are moments when students go above and beyond on their own. As a graduate instructor, if a student turns their final project into a publication, I find few outcomes more gratifying than that one. This story starts in my first semester as faculty and in the first graduate course I ever taught.

The course was "History of Rhetoric": a course nobody in the department wants to teach, a course I happily teach because of the potential for teaching a core course while disrupting how we teach the rhetorical canon. What better space to shift the discourse on rhetoric than to get to reimagine what its history looks like and how we practice it. In her seminal article, "Disciplinary Landscaping, or Contemporary Challenges to the History of Rhetoric," Jacqueline Jones Royster (2003) argues that

what we know about the history of rhetoric is limited to what we have allowed ourselves to know. Royster's assertion is that the history of rhetoric exists in such a way because it has been landscaped that way. Furthermore, she pushes us "to re-envision the landscape, to see more, to understand what's visible in more dynamic ways, and to develop new theories" (2003, p. 163). Inspired by Dr. Royster, I decide to scrap the syllabus that was passed on to me from faculty who previously taught the course and build out a new syllabus that expanded the history of rhetoric to include rhetorics of Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and the Americas, with an emphasis on women in the history of rhetoric.

As far as first-time graduate teaching experiences go, I could not have asked for a better group of students. I imagine this is what my white colleagues across the field have experienced for much of their careers--a classroom that mostly looks like them with some diversity sprinkled in. About halfway through the semester, a colleague passed by me in the hall and said, "I love the Día de los Muertos altar your students made to the women of the history of rhetoric." I replied to my colleague, "What?" in a confused tone. They repeated their statement, and I was still totally unaware of what they were talking about, but I thanked them for letting me know and decided to go visit the altar in question. To my surprise, a group of students from my history of rhetoric course, a group of mostly women, were so inspired by the readings about the ancient women¹ in the history of rhetoric that they decided to enter the university's Día De Los Muertos Altar competition with an altar to those women. To say the least, it was inspiring to see students take this kind of learning into their own hands. The students created this altar as an extension of their learning, as they were inspired to see themselves represented in the curriculum. We were then inspired by this project to create a blog post for the Sweetland Digital Rhetoric Collaborative's Blog Series (Soria et al, 2018)

(available at <https://www.digitalrhetoriccollaborative.org/2018/01/11/altar-to-the-women-of-rhetoric-dia-de-muertos-altars-as-a-material-rhetorical-practice-for-shifting-the-history-of-rhetoric/>).

As I reflected on what this group of students had done, I appreciated the connection they made between a cultural practice that was personally significant and an engagement with historiography. In a history of rhetoric class, students were

¹ The ancient women who inspired the students included Enheduanna, Sappho and Aspasia. For more on any of the women mentioned please read Royster's "Disciplinary Landscaping, or Contemporary Challenges in the History of Rhetoric" and Glenn's "Sex, Lies and Manuscripts: Refiguring Aspasia in the History of Rhetoric".

practicing how they wanted to engage in both the content of what they were learning as well as a practice that was going to sustain this learning going forward. I had the opportunity to teach this history of rhetoric course again the following year, and I knew a handful of my students from my earlier “Culturally Sustaining Rhetoric” course would enroll. Taking the lessons from both courses, I knew that I wanted to model the final project in my history of rhetoric seminar after the Día De Los Muertos altar that the previous students had created.

This new final project was exactly the shift in gaze that I needed to make. Student presentations and reflections hit all the marks that you want as a rhetoric and writing teacher. It was a multimodal project that challenged students to create and make meaning through multimodal practices. Because they built these altars in their homes, they had to take photographs or make a video of their altars to present them and turn them in. This added that layer of perspective and reflection. This opened up discussion for questions, such as “What does this look like as a cohesive thought?” and “What are the parts that you want to emphasize?”

As someone teaching on the Mexico/USA border, I was interested in listening to students talk about both their understanding and articulation of the significance and meaning of altars. Día De Los Muertos, thanks most recently to Disney, has become commodified. As one of our Mexican National students Moy Renteria discussed in the video from the previous year’s altar, Día De Los Muertos in his experience is more commercial and not something you did personally. This may be due to the fact that Día De Los Muertos traces its roots to various Indigenous ceremonies practiced throughout Mexico and Central America and not as a product of the settler colonial nation state of Mexico. Yet, for Indigenous immigrants, Mexican immigrants in the USA, Mexican Americans, and Chicanxs, Día De Los Muertos maintains a certain level of cultural significance.

In this second iteration of the “History of Rhetoric” course, the students in the class reflected on how difficult it was to create the altars despite their appreciation for them because they had never actually made their own. This supported what Moy Renteria had said about the novelty status that altars had but the engagement with making the altars helped forge this practice as significant. This was a different type of challenge from the one that came in the other course. Students were more inclined to engage despite not being sure about what they were doing. They eventually realized that your altar is your altar, and there is no wrong way to do it. This was a significant shift from when I asked the “Culturally Sustaining Rhetorics” students to come up with some culturally sustaining practices. For the non-Mexican and Mexican American students in the class who did not have a direct personal connection with altar making,

I asked them to introduce what their relationships to altars were, and they had the option to engage or come up with something different. Overall, we were able to shift the gaze and yet not leave anybody behind.

Conclusion

I want to end this essay with that feeling that students gave me when they said that they had never made an altar before. To me it was the same feeling that was making it difficult for them to name what was culturally sustaining in their work. There is something about the conditions that a border creates that silences. Because a place like El Paso is so overwhelmingly Mexican and Mexican American, there is an assumption that the presence of these people—or rather of what the white gaze would consider diversity—are being celebrated. While I will not say the opposite is true, they are neither celebrated *or* not celebrated; there's merely a tolerance. You and your "culture" are allowed to exist, but you're not allowed to engage in it, deconstruct it, or remake it. Your culture cannot serve you because it serves as your representation, and your representation/that idea of representation is dictated by the white gaze.

So often I had conversations with students about how they felt represented on campus. My white students were so quick to point out how much the "local culture" was represented. Yet, my Mexican and Mexican American students could not articulate it. So often students thanked me for assigning readings by *unknown authors* like Gloria Anzaldúa and Ana Castillo. There is a significant gap between who is teaching, what they are teaching, how they are teaching, and who they are teaching it to. There is still much more to do, but as an educator, I feel fortunate to live and work with the words of Paris, Alim, Ladson-Billings, and many others, as they and we work to fundamentally reimagine the purpose of education, drawing on culturally sustaining pedagogies to "demand a critical, emancipatory vision of schooling that reframes the object of critique from our [students] to oppressive systems" (Paris & Alim, p. 3).

And so, I leave you with the question we must continue to ask: what are we sustaining in our classrooms and for our students?

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