

## MY ACCENT, MYSELF:

### TRANSFORMING LIABILITIES RELATED TO OTHERNESS INTO ASSETS

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#### Abstract

As an international doctoral student, the author is reflecting on her relationships with her privileged status back home as well as her evolving ongoing struggles with her otherness while living, studying, and teaching in the United States. As a racial and cultural hybrid instructor, the author portrays three relevant factors. First, she examines her pedagogy and relationships with the students she teaches. Next, she explores the way her otherness is portrayed in the classroom. Lastly, she investigates the various facets of being a non-U.S. American female scholar in social, public, and academic spaces.

*Keywords:* social justice education, otherness, culture, critical pedagogy, borderlands

The first time I read Paulo Freire's (2000) work was during my bachelor's degree coursework in education back in 2006, when I was still in my motherland, Israel. I read *The Pedagogy of The Oppressed* in Hebrew, and I have been going back to it again and again as a reference to my work. Freire's ideas made me realize that my decision to become an educator was the right one for me. The book made me feel that I belong in the education field. Another book that profoundly influenced me as an undergraduate student was *A Pedagogy of Libera-*

*tion: Dialogues on Transformative Education*, a text that Freire co-authored with Ira Shor (1986).

Both of the books were my first encounter with critical pedagogy praxis and were the first time I read about the connections between oppression and liberatory practices in education. As a student in a feminist critical pedagogy undergraduate program, I started to discover the ways I was educated and socialized within the Israeli education system. Freire taught me that before I can liberate anyone I must work to liberate myself, (Freire, 2000, p. 48) which, as he warns, was painful (p. 49).

The experience of reading Freire's book happened after five years of activism which challenged me to examine my split identity as a woman that is both White and Brown and enjoys privilege by identifying as White, but at the same time represses her Brownness. Although I did not have the power to oppress the Brown side of my family, I did participate in denying this part of my life because of the socialization processes that I was subjected to growing up Israeli in the 70s and 80s (I was born in 1976). Having taught in the United States for the past five years, acknowledging the nature of this self-denial is a big part of my pedagogy nowadays.

I am a product of the pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire, 2000). The Israeli education system oppressed and invalidated my Brownness, much like other public institutions have to people of color in Israel since the establishment of Israel as a state back in 1948. Freire (p. 48) writes,

How can the oppressed, as divided, unauthentic beings, participate in developing the pedagogy of their liberation? Only as they discover themselves to be "hosts" of the oppressor can they contribute to the midwifery of their liberating pedagogy. As long as they live the duality in which *to be* is *to be like*, and *to be like* is *to be the oppressor*, this contribution is impossible. The pedagogy of the oppressed is an instrument for their critical discovery that both they and their oppressors are manifestation of dehumanization.

As a mixed-race educator, I know that my journey towards unlearning the self-denial of my Brownness is a never-ending project. The races that inhabit my body, mind, and spirit are part of who I am personally and professionally.

In this article I do five things. First, I talk about my own privilege back home and its relationship to having a White father. Second, I examine my otherness and my relationship with Americans that began when I moved to the United States in 2009. Third, I discuss my pedagogy and how it influences and shapes my otherness as a non-American. Fourth, I describe my students' reactions when I teach as well as how they react to my pedagogy and my otherness in the classroom. Finally, I show what happens to these students by the end of the semester by describing their journey using their own words paired with my analysis.

In this article, I use my autobiography and my pedagogy as two distinct yet intertwined frameworks to discuss my otherness in the States, more specifically in the classroom as an instructor teaching cultural foundations in education for pre-service teachers. I will use some of my favorite authors that have accompanied my scholarly journey since I first discovered radical feminism and liberatory pedagogy. Their works have changed my life, installing important foundations in my pedagogy and providing a source to keep going back to for comfort and inspiration.

## **TRANSNATIONAL CARIÑO: THE ROOTS OF MY NEPANTLA**

Born to a White father (his parents immigrated to Israel from Poland in 1948 after World War II), I was raised in Israel as Jewish, was formally educated, and was a native speaker of Hebrew, all of which positioned me on a privileged path. After mandatory military service and with only a high school education, I worked for a couple of years in the Israeli hi-tech industry. In the late 1990s, I decided to pursue a writing career and worked as a journalist for almost a decade. The only otherness I experienced was from being a woman. I was aware of my marginalized identity markers without articulating them in academic terms, as I had no knowledge of them before I joined academia.

Although I had developed some critical perspectives during my years as an activist, my White privilege positioned me in the liberal feminist discourse. The books I had access to were pretty limited in certain aspects. The Israeli feminist literature I read in the late 90s and early 2000s was written by middle class Jewish White women that wrote for other middle class Jewish White women. They were not bad books; they were just limited in perspective. I continued to find ways to understand who I was and what my complex identity entails.

Hill-Collins (1990) explains that the formation of social identity concerns the ways that race, gender, and social class are the main forces that produce inequality. From the individual level to the institutional level, we are subjected in one way or another to inequities that give us a unique way to understand the society we belong to, and thus a person's location in society shapes her or his experience.

I enjoyed my privileges, but they came with a cost. For many years, I did not value my Iranian mother's Middle Eastern identity. I never felt ashamed to tell people that I am "half-half," (Sagiv, 2014) which is the commonly used term in Israel for mixed-race children whose parents belong to different ethnicities: one with European white ancestry and the other with North African or Middle Eastern ancestry. Passing as white or having a European last name never seemed like something I should think about. For me, it was just the way things were. I comfortably rejected my mother's Iranian culture, language, and traditions. However, I enjoyed the advantages of having a big, warm Iranian family with every meeting being fun and loud with a lot of good food and music. At the same time, when people would ask about my ethnic background I used to say, humorously, something like "yes, my mom is Iranian, but my dad is Polish, so I'm cool."

Similarly to the United States, Israeli society has bought into the myth of the melting pot. "Mixed marriages" are the fantasy of our own founding fathers who believed that successive generations of children will embody the new Israel, one that merges the Western and Eastern Jewish communities that immigrated to Israel to build a new society. However, the reality we witness is that children like my siblings and I, born to mixed race/ethnicity parents favor Whiteness. Many of us identify as White because that is what we were socialized to identify

with. I remember talking with my sister on the phone more than a year ago, telling her about the course I taught, specifically about a conversation I had with the students about my experience as a non-White instructor in a predominantly White university. To my surprise she asked me, “What do you mean non-White? We are White.”

Growing up in a working class household, we never had the academic jargon to name our oppressors, and we never had deep conversations about the roots and causes of discrimination, racism, and other forms of violence. We could recognize it, and we experienced it, but my upbringing never came with the tools to do what I have been doing in academia for the past decade. I witnessed racism all over but did not know what to do about it or how to fight it. I recall the way the Polish side of my family talked about the Iranian side of my family. The racism was very subtle, very quiet—the whispers, the rolling eyes, the “well, you know how they do not prioritize education as we do. It’s in their mentality.” Growing up I heard countless racist jokes and I internalized every stereotype that targeted non-Whites in Israel, including Muslim Israeli-Arabs. Racism and prejudice were not exclusively in my own family; I witnessed it in school, on TV shows, and during my military service. The message was clear: White European descendants were superior and I was socialized to believe it, to live it, and to act on it.

I started to question my privilege when I was in my early/mid 20s. I discovered feminism and a new world of sisterhood and possibilities was revealed in front of my eyes. At the same time, as a journalist, I was exposed more broadly to politics and got involved in the local activism scene. The personal and the political became intertwined, and I started to question my rejection of my Iranian mother’s Middle Eastern identity and culture. The first book that opened my eyes was *Feminism is for Everybody* by bell hooks (2000). It was my first encounter with radical feminism and feminism specific to women of color. Suddenly, I had a new vocabulary to describe and understand racism, sexism, and classism as well as the connections between the three. It was a devastating, yet liberating experience. I was devastated to learn how I internalized invalidation of my mom’s cultural identity for so long. It was liberating because I was provided with the tools to transform.

After a few years of activism, I decided to pursue a bachelor's degree in education at the age of 29. While maintaining full-time student status, I worked a part-time job at a newspaper. I received scholarships that involved tutoring and volunteering with underserved communities that compensated my hours cut as an employee due to my new commitments as a student. My privileges continued to serve me; I was able to work, study, volunteer, and continue dedicating my time to activism. However, this time I used my privilege for the service of others.

Education has changed me; it has helped me to reclaim my mother's identity as well as weave it into my life in profound ways. I started to take pride in my mother's identity, her mother tongue, her culture, and her traditions. However, it was not an easy journey to go through. A split had occurred. I did not want to reclaim my mother's identity by rejecting my father's. I wanted to learn how to weave both identities together without compromising either of them.

Anzaldúa uses the Aztec word *Nepantla* to describe this middle space, or the "in-between state, that uncertain terrain one crosses when moving from one place to another, when changing from one class, race, or sexual position to another, when traveling from the present identity into a new identity" (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2009, p. 176). Anzaldúa refers to the *Nepantla* as a place where one is caught. One example would be an immigrant that crossed a border and relocated her or his life to a new place and needs to adapt (usually unwillingly) to new language, traditions, and culture. Another would be a person that moves from one status to another, from being a marginalized "starving artist" into an artist that exhibits their work in a mainstream museum (p. 180). These are movements from one space to another, the period of time that it takes for one to adapt to a new status is the *Nepantla* space. We root in one place, and then we need to relocate to a new one and start rooting again. This process "means being in a constant state of displacement - an uncomfortable, even alarming feeling" (p. 243).

In my case, I have been experiencing this in-betweenness since childhood but in a very minor way: the socialization I was subjected to taught me not to value my interracial status but to associate with the White part of my identity as much as possible, so I could continue

enjoying the privileges that come along with it. The Iranian side I inherited from my mother became an exotic part of me, whether the food, the music, the dark eyes, or the long eyelashes. There was no doubt in my childhood and teenage years that I got the exotic look from my Brown mother; however, my brain was considered a gift from my White father.

In retrospect, I understand now that my childhood and teenage years were subjected to the harmful melting pot ideology. The belief that the melting pot would produce generations of children that will celebrate their cultural diversity was (and still is) a big fat lie. The ideal Israeli is a privileged one, visible through a White European ancestor. My not-quite-White skin was a constant reminder that I should strive to be perceived as White as much as possible. I internalized racism and prejudice, rejected my Brown heritage, and lived with a split where one side of me constantly rejected the other one.

It took me a while to reconcile the split and to realize that I cannot be both. I am, in fact, a hybrid—not Polish or Iranian, but Polish-Iranian (or Iranian-Polish). The hyphen was a divider that stressed the half-half idea. Now I look at the hyphen as a connector that produced a new entity, as Anzaldúa (1987) writes, “la mestiza creates a new consciousness” (p. 80),

The work of mestiza consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended. The answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts.

I am something new; I am like dough. Once we start mixing the oil and the sugar with the flour and start kneading all the ingredients together, we get something new. The ingredients cannot be separated. We cannot say, “oh, I should reduce some of the sugar.” The sugar cannot be found, although it is there and can be tasted in the end product. The hybrid me is like that dough. However, I am not a finished product

(Freire, 2000, p. 84), nor will I ever be, especially since I have been living in the United States for the last seven years.

## **A WHOLE OTHER OTHERNESS**

My identity complex took yet another turn in the summer of 2009 when I decided to come to the United States for a master's program. The immigration experience was itself a whole new *Nepantla* realm to be explored and experienced. Like most immigrants around the world away from their motherland, native language, culture, and traditions, I struggled to find my place and to validate my existence.

From the moment I arrived at O'Hare Airport in Chicago, IL in August of 2009 I was the other. My connecting flight got delayed and the conversation with the airline representative in the airport was one of my first face-to-face encounters with an American. The airline representative was kind; she talked very slowly and made sure I knew which gate I should go to. Then, after arriving at my final destination I learned that it was not an exception. The moment they heard my accent, some people started to speak very slowly and used hand gestures to make sure I understood what they were saying. I was talked to like there was something wrong with my ability to hear or to understand.

However, even in the States, I have been a privileged other; I was a documented immigrant with a student visa and a scholarship recipient who was going to grad school. At first, I was too excited about my new life to be bothered with the way some people treated me. Most of the time, I felt respected. I made some new friends, immersed myself in the American culture, and fully experienced the infamous culture shock.

It took a few months until I started to experience a deeper sense of otherness. My accent sometimes made people laugh and mock me. When I mispronounced words or terms and misused American slang or idioms, some well-intentioned people felt the need to correct me, often in public, without my request or consent. Well-intentioned people introduced me to their friends by saying, "This is my new friend Revi. She is from Israel."

Many people called me Revi, because Revital, רויטל in Hebrew, is not a common name (not even in Israel). They used a shortened ver-



sion of my name because it was easier, as some of them explained. One of my colleagues said to me when we were introduced, “Well, I’m just gonna call you Revi. Your name is too damn difficult to be pronounced!”

And I let them. I let them because I wanted to be accepted. After a while, when introducing myself, I would say, “Hi, my name is Revital, but you can call me Revi.” I participated in my own oppression. Like many other immigrants, I internalized the expectations of others to make Americans comfortable. In the States, Jorge becomes George; Malik becomes Michael. I was not an exception, and Revital quickly became Revi.

One day, in a heated discussion with one of my colleagues about names and their importance, he asked for my opinion, and I burst into tears. In my head, I was screaming in Hebrew: קוראים לי רויטל. השם שלי. הוא רויטל. לא רוי. רויטל. “My name is Revital,” I said to my colleague, sobbing. “Not Revi.” From that day on, I insisted that people call me Revital. I asked them to make an effort. As Anzaldúa (1987) writes, “I had to leave home so I could find myself, find my own intrinsic nature buried under the personality that had been imposed on me” (p. 16). Only a few are allowed to call me Revi; they appreciate my name and they respect my culture, and they call me Revi as an endearment, just like when my grandmother calls me Tali. The friends that call me Revi also know how to pronounce the beautiful name my mother gave me at birth.

This year I will start my eighth year in the States, and although I am much more familiar with American culture and I am very fluent in English, the moment I open my mouth in social or public spaces, I am the other. My accent is part of me, and it will always be. I am the embodiment of otherness, no matter how many years I stay in the United States or how well my English becomes. I turned again and again to Anzaldúa’s (1987, p. 195) words. Her poetry resonates with me,

To survive the Borderlands  
 You must live *sin fronteras*  
 Be a crossroads.

It is not an easy thing to be a crossroad, beyond borderlands, always on the way to somewhere, always becoming (Freire, 2000; p. 72). This is especially true when it happens away from my immediate support system, without my family and my Israeli friends, without my language and culture surrounding me. My pedagogy is shaped by who I am and by my experiences. Immigrating to the United States has changed me, and my pedagogy is constantly changing with me. Like Anzaldúa, I am making my own place, my own culture, “with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture” (1987, p. 22). I keep doing my best to reconcile my own splits; however, there are moments (sometimes they last for days) where I feel balanced with a sense of peacefulness. Education provides me with that sense of peacefulness, a sense of center. I build my home around that center, like Anzaldúa (p. 51) writes, “And suddenly I feel everything rushing to a center, a nucleus. All the lost pieces of myself come flying from the deserts and the mountains and the valleys, magnetize toward that center. *Completa.*”

As I have developed a new mestiza consciousness, I have started to reclaim the sense of double-belonging that has tripled since I arrived in the United States. My experience in the United States has challenged me once again, and I have discovered that I no longer have a country: I am an Israeli that lives in the United States, and when I visit Israel I do not always feel like I belong there. Every visit, I feel less and less like I belong to my motherland. Israel has changed, but so have I. I embrace my *Nepantla*, and “I am in all cultures at the same time” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 77). I carry a complex identity, and with this identity I enter the classroom to teach social justice issues in the American educational system.

## **OTHERNESS IN THE CLASSROOM**

Otherness, in relation to identity, has been discussed and analyzed by many scholars, from Hegel’s work on the self and the other (Dias, 2013), to Lévinas’ social identity and who one is in relation to the other (Drabinski, 2012). Xie (2000) looks at the experience of otherness as “a matrix of counterhegemonic agency” (p. 1) and reminds us of how, historically, the Western world needs to “represent otherness as evil” in order to colonize indigenous natives. Xie (p. 8) writes that,

Such historical experience of cultural otherness calls for an enabling reconception of radical difference. If difference has been violated and marginalized as inferior, then now it must be reinstated and recuperated as a counterhegemonic strategy, a way of mobilizing, activating discursive agency or energy.

Otherness, in relation to pedagogy and classroom practices, is also broadly discussed among scholars, many of whom carry an otherness identity, whether they are people of color, have a disability, are part of the LGBTQA community, or have a nationality different from the country they live in. The work of other scholars is very important because it “illuminates the complexities involved in gaining membership into the culture of teaching and developing a professional identity” (Vélez-Rendón, 2010, p. 635). Reading about queer pedagogy (Britzman, 1995; Fox, 2013; Schippert, 2006; Zacko-Smith & Smith, 2010), culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billing, 2014, Mitchell & Rosiek, 2006), hip-hop pedagogy (Love, 2012; Stovall, 2006; Tafari, 2012), and Chicana/Latina pedagogy (Prieto & Villenas, 2012; Pulido, 2009), equipped me with powerful tools to master the skills of unpacking social phenomena and understanding what I have been experiencing since the first time I read Paulo Freire and bell hooks many years ago. These tools also allow me to continue the journey to become a critically informed educator and to make a change in the world, one community at a time, one student at a time.

As a doctoral student, I have the great privilege of teaching pre-service teachers. I teach a semester-long course that is designed to educate pre-service teachers on social justice issues that concern the education system and themselves as not only educators, but also community members, citizens, and participants in their society. The course’s curriculum leads the students through an exploration that acknowledges where they stand in regards to their own identities and opinions while leading them through a variety of topics I introduce to them throughout the semester, such as community membership, cultural identity, bilingual education, racism, ableism, sexism, and gender and sexuality inequities. The students I have been teaching are predominantly White, Christian, and born and raised in the United States, so the vast majority of them are monolingual, English-only speakers.

My first year of teaching in the United States back in 2010, while I was earning my master's, was a weekly struggle that felt like a fist fight. I co-taught a course about cultural diversity in schools for two semesters with an older White male in his early 60s. I was asked to teach the units about Whiteness and racism, patriarchy, gender, and sexuality. I developed lesson plans and classroom activities as well as facilitated classroom discussions about controversial topics such as sex education, teen pregnancy, and the intersection of poverty, as well as gender inequities and academic achievements. We also discussed institutionalized racism and its effects on marginalized students and communities. Given the controversial topics addressed in the classroom, I experienced resistance. Students got upset with me. How dare I, a non-American, non-Christian, not-quite-White foreigner with an accent tell them what is wrong with their society.

It was my first time teaching a college level course in the United States, and I felt like it was me against them every time I entered the classroom. Some of the students were not happy with my presence in the class. I pushed; they pushed harder. It took me a while to realize that the prejudice that some of the students held against people of color also targeted me as their instructor. I became, as Shome (1999, p. 120) accurately describes, the other the moment I entered the classroom:

... [M]y body gets marked as a site of “foreign” difference. My body becomes a site of struggle, a constantly marked racial signifier, in ways that is was not in India because of the absence of “white eyes” and white bodies there.

I was not ready to quit, so I kept reading books and articles about better practices to teach about racism, whiteness, and privilege without experiencing the classroom as a battlefield. The turning point was in the summer of 2011. I participated in a short summer class with Dr. Donaldo Macedo and Dr. Rudolfo Chavez-Chavez, and I had the wonderful opportunity to spend a week with Mrs. Jane Elliott in her residence in Iowa to participate in the “Blue-Eyes Brown-Eyes” (Peters, 1987) workshop. These two experiences opened my eyes to different pedagogical styles. From Drs. Macedo and Chavez-Chavez, I learned how to keep my heart open with compassion and a lot of patience. Macedo reminded me that change takes time and I will not always

be there to witness it. He also taught me how to deal with resistance by simply continuing to ask questions that reveal the contradiction in what students say. Chavez-Chavez was the embodiment of love and compassion. It was a wonderful reminder for me to always practice these two qualities, even with the most challenging students I teach. The most important lesson I learned from Jane Elliott was to redefine my goals as an educator. She taught me that the work of an educator is not to change students, but to challenge them.

A lot of soul-searching and questioning my pedagogical tools and practices led me to understand that just being me in a classroom challenges many of the students I teach. After meeting brilliant scholars and reading all the wonderful authors that challenged me with their ideas and often brilliant writing, one thing occurred to me: I am my pedagogy. My presence in the classroom is in itself an interruption to the hegemony that we witness and experience in the American colleges and universities. The American education system, just like the one in Israel (and for that matter, almost anywhere in the world), represents and perpetuates the inequities in the society where it is situated. I feel it is my duty to puncture students' realities and provide the best practices for them to understand how the mechanism of oppression functions everywhere, all the time. I teach them to pay attention and to analyze the inequitable practices they encounter every day in their neighborhoods, in their classrooms, in their communities, and in their relationships. Using Freire's problem-posing (2000), I facilitated classroom discussions that provided students the tools to examine their experiences as the products of the education system. In Freire's (p. 83) words,

In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation.

It is not an easy position for me to be "that person" that asks them to question and analyze the life they are so very used to living. Applebaum (2003) writes about justifying censorship of certain voices in a classroom and asks a very important question: "Is it justified to use power to interrupt power?" (p. 153). She writes about dealing with a

student that expressed homophobic remarks that were rooted in her religious beliefs. The student, a White Christian, accused Applebaum of trying “to silence her and anyone who holds the view that homosexuality is morally wrong” (p. 152).

I find myself pondering the question about using power to interrupt power all the time. I think about it when I write the course syllabus or prepare lesson plans and when I am engaged in dialogues with the students every week (whether formally in feedback on their writing assignments or during in-class discussions, or informally before or after class with individual students). I keep questioning and developing the best practices for using my authority as the instructor who is a non-American, the outsider. I cannot ignore the power dynamics that this situation produces. As an outsider, my authority is always being questioned, and I am well aware of my marginalized voice. However, when I enter the classroom, I am the one with the power. I developed the syllabus, and I decided which articles to assign for reading and which documentaries we watched. I always need to find the right balance and be careful not to upset the students too much, especially when I discuss sensitive issues such as Whiteness and racism. If I push too hard, the students just shut down and refuse to even entertain the idea that they hold prejudice that will influence their practices as teachers. The most intense resistance I experience in the semester occurs in the Whiteness and racism unit. As a result, one of my strategies is to share as much as I feel comfortable with regarding my personal experience as the other in American society. My professional identity cannot be separated from my cultural identity. By sharing my own experience and analyzing other people of color’s experiences in the United States, the students get to know otherness perspectives and reality. Through these perspectives they discover their own prejudice and analyze its origins.

I will be the first to admit that it took me a while to balance my in-your-face-on-fire pedagogy. I had to contain myself and to be reminded that undoing prejudice and ignorance takes time, just like it took me several years to embrace my Iranian identity and to understand the ways I was socialized to value my White father more than my Brown mother. Boler (2004) writes, “education is not effective if it is combative and alienating” (p. 119). In another article, Boler (1999) reminds

us that, “one is challenged to invite the other, with compassion and fortitude, to learn to see things differently, no matter how perilous the course for all involved” (p. 176).

Shome (1999) and Chacon (2006) got me thinking and made me more sensitive and aware of the American White gaze and how I will be perceived in the classroom. Chacon (2006) writes about the “three diverse modes” of the gaze: the imperial, the male, and the tourist. She discusses how the students’ gaze reflects their needs, values, and emotions and “are mapped onto the body of the teacher” (p. 381). She also suggests that White guilt causes some of the students to,

push back [...] they felt a need to proclaim themselves innocent. Part of the proclamation included minimizing historical events and in some cases denying that racism or language exclusion had occurred. The resistance of some students was acute and accompanied by strong hostility (p. 383).

Patriarchy has taught us to question female authority and it is reflected in the classroom as well. Add to that the female instructor’s race, nationality, and religion, and we get a living example of deficit. I realized that I would never get the same credit as White, Christian, male professors do. That is why, in the last couple of years, I address my otherness as part of my introduction in the first day of class. I share where I come from, my parents’ cultural backgrounds, my native language, my nationality, and my international student status in the United States. I tell the students that studies show many of them are not going to give me much credit because of all the identity markers I carry with me. I then add that I hope they will prove the research wrong. Therefore, a challenge has been set and the students have a semester-long opportunity to wrestle with their own prejudices that they might not have known they held against me and people that sound or look like me. My accent, I add, does not come with an apology, nor the times when I ask them to assist me to spell a word or a term when I write on the whiteboard and get stuck. With that, I give them a first-hand experience in dealing with a non-native English speaker, specifically an immigrant with an accent. I encourage them to use me to learn what it means to work with *the other*. I become my own pedagogy.



One of the foundations of my pedagogy is to provide the students with as many perspectives as possible about what it means to live a marginalized life. By providing personal examples, students that belong to marginalized groups (Black/African-Americans, Latinas, Native American, immigrant students, LGBTQA students, and students with visible or invisible disabilities) usually start to open up early in the semester and discuss real life issues that, in many cases, they would not feel safe to discuss because they fear being judged or dismissed. By sharing stories and letting the students get to know me beyond my role as the course's instructor, we practice humanization. In Freire's (1998) words, "I cannot be a teacher without exposing who I am. Without revealing, either reluctantly or with simplicity, the way I relate to the world, how I think politically" (p. 87-88). Part of my otherness, although always present in the classroom, fades a little bit every time we make a connection; the students can see the human within me, and walls of prejudice start to crack.

Vulnerability is another practice that I model in the classroom as an instructor. It helps us to become closer and make a connection (Brown, 2010). Brown defines connection as "*the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship*" (originally Italicized; p. 19). As Brown explains, when there is a sense of connection and a person feels seen, heard, and valued, there is a sense of belonging and a community starts to emerge. Students then feel more confident about sharing and making genuine connections between the readings and their lived experiences. The more connected we become, the more we dare to unpack controversial topics while maintaining a dialogue. The safer the students feel, the more open they will be to new perspectives. Throughout the semester, they read many short stories written by people of color from all around the world. The students appreciate the non-academic readings that provide them with opportunities to explore narratives of marginalized individuals and communities. When a connection is established in the classroom, their hearts are opened up to getting to know *the others*.



After we begin to establish a sense of community in the classroom in the first two weeks of the semester, we move to discussing what it means to be an educator, and we spend another two weeks on that subject. Only then do we begin to unpack identity and socialization. In the third unit we talk about cultural identity and we look at it through the lenses of the history of the Native Americans. We continue to examine different marginalized groups in the society and how mechanisms of oppression function, specifically in the school system. We discuss immigration and bilingual education, people with disabilities, and ableism; then we move forward to look at race, racism, and white privilege. The next units discuss gender and sexism and sexuality and sex education.

The topics that discuss *the other* are not only based on the foundation of understanding community membership and the vocation of education. I use the understanding we develop about connection and community to understand the ways we, as a society, are disconnected, how prejudices, discrimination, and practices of oppression contribute to that sense of disconnection, and how they atomize our communities. The vocation of educators, as I envision it and emphasize this idea each week, is to reconcile those disconnections and to learn together how to foster communities where students' identities are accepted, validated, and celebrated. In the duration of the course, we go back and forth to the first two units. All the course's materials (articles, books, short stories, poems, documentaries, Youtube video clips, and TED talks) and activities provide broad multinational and multicultural perspectives on education.

## **HEBREW IN THE CLASSROOM, OY! OR: WHAT HAVE THE STUDENTS LEARNED?**

In this section, I will discuss three units in the course: Cultural Identity, Bilingual Education, and Race, Racism, and Whiteness. These units (out of eight throughout the semester) are connected and structured in a way that each unit informs the next one. In the Cultural Identity unit, we explore our identity markers and categories and how socialization informs the way our identities are formed. I focus on Native American boarding schools, how the horrific and violent practices that were forced on them stripped them of their native identity, and

how these practices not only violated their human rights and cultural rights, but also affected their relationship with future generations. We specifically look at how their trauma was passed along to their children and caused an emotional disconnect between generations.

The Bilingual Education unit discusses the stereotypes we have toward bilingual people, immigrants, and ESL/ELL students. In this unit, we take a look at the assumptions we make about the academic abilities of immigrant students and ways to work with immigrant families.

The Race, Racism and Whiteness unit discusses inequities in society that are rooted in institutionalized racism, Islamophobia, and Xenophobia. In this unit, we read short stories (*Recitatif* by Toni Morrison, 1938; and *Sweet Potato Pie* by Eugenia Collier, 1972) and watch Tim Wise's documentary *White Like Me* (2013) as well as *Vocabulary of Change* (2012), a conversation between Angela Davis and Tim Wise about institutionalized racism and discrimination in the United States.

In the Bilingual Education unit, I facilitate an activity that I have developed especially for this course. Before I facilitate this activity, we watch the documentary *Speaking in Tongues* (2010) that tells the story of bilingual education and immersion programs in San Francisco, CA. After we watch the movie, I provide the students with big sheets of white butcher paper and I start talking to them in Hebrew. They always seem puzzled and disoriented. I ask them, using hand gestures, to move the desks and chairs and sit in four groups. By the third or fourth time providing the instructions, someone usually decodes my request and explains to everybody else to start moving and to sit in groups. Then, I give them more instructions—still in Hebrew—on what to draw: a house (with windows and door), a tree, flowers, clouds, a sun, birds, a dog, a cat, a mouse, a butterfly, a turtle, and so on. I repeat the words, use a lot of body language and hand gestures, pointing to objects inside the classroom and outside of it. The students giggle a lot, assist each other in decoding what I ask them to draw, and at the same time they have a great opportunity to do some art in the class, to collaborate in group work and to continue deepening a sense of community. This activity takes about twenty-thirty minutes, and by the end of it, we have four beautiful, colorful drawings.

One of my goals in this activity is to demonstrate how difficult it is to be immersed in a foreign language that immigrants must acquire quickly. In the post-activity debriefing, we discuss the experiences of students in K-12 schools that arrive to the United States and their struggles with how difficult it is for them when they are so often denied opportunities to speak their native language (in this unit, I use the work of Anzaldúa, 1987; Tam, 1990; and Yuen-Quam, 2004). This activity can be overwhelming to some of the students, but it gives them a chance to gain a new perspective, not only about immigrants in general, but also about me as their instructor. Listening to a foreign language and feeling lost for twenty-thirty minutes was one of the most powerful experiences during the semester for some of the students. As one of the students wrote in her reflection,

... we all looked at each other in horror [...] She saw that we seemed confused, and explained to us (still in Hebrew) about what kind of things to draw while motioning to them around the room. [...] I then began to catch on to why she was doing that. [...] I began to think, ‘how can children with no knowledge of English be expected to get anything accomplished in a classroom like this?’ We were all confused, and we could not perform that task she had given us because none of us understood anything she was saying. I could never imagine learning math or history in this fashion. And yet, this is exactly what we are expecting of children every day!

I do not expect that after a couple of classroom discussions about the importance of bilingual education they will enroll in a foreign language course and become ELL teachers. I do know that after introducing them to the advantages of bilingual education, some of them have developed critical perspectives about the struggles of immigrant families and students; so, when they read a news story about the English-only movement, they will hopefully have the ability to reject ideas that promote cultural oppression. When they get their own classroom, they will hopefully treat their bilingual students with more respect and understanding and perhaps be curious and research their bilingual students’ cultural and linguistic richness so they can incorporate it in their curriculum.

The students' assignments in the course were to write 4-8 analytical reflection papers and a final paper where they were asked to reflect on what they had learned in the course, how they are going to apply it as teachers, and what their personal and professional commitments are to social justice. In her final paper, Sophia (all the names in this paper are pseudonyms), a young Latina, stated that,

I learned that being Hispanic isn't just something I am but it is a part of who I am, and how I interact with others [...]. I learned to become more color sensitive rather than color blind. I learned to look at how I interact with others.

She also added that paying attention to her students' identities is one of her main goals as a future teacher and connected the practice of paying attention to promoting social justice in her profession.

Lucia, another Latina student, wrote in her final paper, "I know we're not equal but we've made it clear that everyone deserves to be treated with respect and with fairness, and this is something I will strive for in my classroom." Many students stated that they started off with little knowledge about what social justice is and felt that social change was impossible. However, they felt that the exposure to not only what is wrong in society, but also what is possible and available for them to do, was very helpful and made them realize that they do have the power to create change. One student stated that,

Before this class I had this feeling that there was nothing we could really do about society, about government, about social justice. But now I know this is wrong. We can make a difference, even just voting makes a difference [...] education is the best way to lead you out of ignorance. Knowledge is power.

I believe that providing the students with multiple perspectives and examples of social change movements as well as their accomplishments has instilled some hope in their hearts and minds. Leslie wrote, "I used to go through life oblivious to much of the racism and sexism around me [...] Now I am more aware and better prepared to make a difference in the society." When explaining what social justice means to her, she wrote that "it means being very aware of your privileges and intersections of oppression and knowing how to use that informa-

tion responsibly.” As a White female, she expressed the importance of responsibility to “genuinely connect” with her students of color “on whatever levels I can and to fight for their rights and needs when I see they are not being met.” She also made a professional commitment to “fight prejudices” and stated that she will,

engage [the students] in ways that respect their cultures and backgrounds. I am making a promise to myself to be mindful of every interaction I have with my students so that I can teach them by example to be compassionate, respectful, critical, and loving.

Regarding her experience in the course, she asserted, “I learned so much about who I am and what I want to stand for. I am not so afraid of discussing what I believe in because I have found my passion again.”

A vast majority of the dozens of students I have been teaching in the past couple of years understand the importance of representation. Representation came up frequently in the students’ writing throughout the semester. Annie wrote,

[I] will incorporate heroes of all nationalities into my classroom readings and discussions so Black, Latino, Chinese and other students will have the opportunity to identify themselves with the material and with people who are like them that made a positive impact in the world.

Anika, who immigrated to the United States with her family from Southeast Asia when she was a baby, wrote, “I learned that no one is born racist, but instead we are taught to be one; since it’s a learned skill it shouldn’t be hard to prevent it from spreading in the classroom.”

The students also provided profound and thoughtful reflections regarding the ways White people perceive themselves as benefiting from the history of the United States (the genocide of Native Americans and the enslavement of Africans). In this unit’s main activity, I ask them to list the advantages and disadvantages of being White in America. It was easy for them to articulate advantages, especially after reading McIntosh (1990) and a couple of short stories that portray the life of

non-White girls (Ensler, 2010; Heker, 1986). However, as expected, they struggled with finding disadvantages. In her reflection papers, Jenny wrote,

No one had ever before asked me to list what were the advantages and disadvantages of being my race. To me, one of the biggest disadvantages of being white is the lack of connection with my race. There is no further explanation of my race or connection to other people of my race. [...] it is difficult for me to feel connected to other white people. I have no real connection to my heritage or where my family comes from. I can only go back as far as my great grandparents in my family tree [...] I do not have a strong connection to who we are or where we come from. All I have ever known of my family is our history in our state.

As an instructor, I could not ask for better responses from the students I have been teaching. Their clear voices, as expressed in the classroom and in their writing, have shown me the importance of challenging their minds and the importance of being patient with them. Their transformation occurred when they were ready for it—when they allowed themselves to practice vulnerability and to try on new perspectives in order to learn something new.

The spaces that the students and I opened up in the classroom also allowed us all to generate new understanding and knowledge regarding whiteness, racism, and privilege, and what the costs that are automatically attached to one's cultural identity are when one belongs to a marginalized group. The discussions we shared were uncomfortable yet transformative for many of them. Instead of an ideological fist fight, I practice a Freirian dialogue. Freire urges us to maintain a dialogue “[that] represents a powerful and transformative political process of interaction between people” (Darder, 2002, p. 103) and to recognize the voices students bring to the classroom (p. 106). The students provided valuable evidence that I was on the right track in establishing a meaningful dialogue with them.

This dialogue, just like my journey as an educator, will never end. I have learned how to incorporate my identity markers and categories in a meaningful way in the course I love teaching. The students learn so

much about themselves, but they also teach me so much about myself. I am not done. I have not arrived. I keep on exploring new ways to engage the students in understanding what it means to be an educator and to realize their responsibilities as community members and leaders. I keep on questioning, reshaping, and rewriting the syllabus each semester. I allow myself to be vulnerable and step into uncertainty by trying new things each semester, as I personally and professionally develop and grow throughout my journey as a doctoral student. Throughout this wonderful and rewarding journey, my otherness becomes a tool and an asset, rather than an obstacle. The fist fight transformed into a delicate dance, and as many of my friends will tell you, I love dancing.

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