"It Takes Time"

The Generative Potential of Transgressive Teaching

BY GENEVIEVE WEST

The idea for this essay originated in a first-year writing course, Writing About African American Experience, which I taught as a graduate student. I found myself the "Other," the only white participant in a process writing course, and I was utterly unprepared. I knew I was crossing a border, but had no idea how transgressive—and potentially transformative—my teaching was. Although I had been teaching for five years, nothing in my training prepared me to deal with the racial issues that confronted us. For the first time, I was racially marked, and my identity became a significant factor in the classroom. I did not have a vocabulary for talking about positionality, and without realizing it, I made myself—my race—the center in a classroom I had hoped to decenter.

The student resistance I encountered that semester had a profound impact on me. I understood that as a white African American literature specialist I would encounter accusations of colonization and appropriation, even open hostility. I was prepared for institutional resistance and resistance from colleagues, but I had given little thought to how identity politics would shape my classroom. At the end of a less-than-ideal semester, I surveyed students: I wanted to hear what they had to say. Student comments from this course at Florida State University and those I have taught since at the University of Southern Mississippi lead me to believe that, despite the tensions and fears that often come with crossing established boundaries, such experiences can be positive for students and teachers. Teachers can use the postmodern/feminist concept of positionality and students’ questions of authority to create a generative tension—one that positively uses the friction that racial (or ethnic or gender or sexual preference) difference sometimes produces in the classroom—to enhance learning, and to promote social and political change.

TRANSGRESSING IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

I taught Writing about the African American Experience (AAE) at Florida State University, a large institution with a 79% white student population. Most of my AAE students were from large urban areas, such as Atlanta and Miami. Although all identified themselves as black, they were diverse in other ways: two were from the Caribbean, two were biracial, some from poor neighborhoods or “projects,” others from more privileged communities.

At FSU the first-year writing program allowed advanced TAs to design special topics writing courses that meet the requirements for second-semester first-year writing. AAE was a standard offer-

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ing, although the teacher frequently changed as TAs graduated. My own design for the course grew out of an expressivist pedagogy and a belief that students write best about what they know best: themselves. The general goals included improved reading and writing skills. More specifically, I hoped students would position themselves within (or perhaps outside) the larger discourse on African American life found in our reader, African American Literature, edited by Al Young.

Throughout the semester, students kept exploratory notebooks for responses to assigned readings, presented small group projects (topics included stereotypes in a local drug store flyer and women’s rap music), and wrote autobiographical, personal, and research essays, and self evaluations. Each paper cycle began with readings and a presentation. After discussing each text, students wrote in their notebooks. After a series of five or six entries, students returned to their notebooks to look for ideas they wanted to explore further. It was, in design, just like every other second-semester composition course I had taught, but, to quote Dorris Davenport, “our assumptions were in conflict” (62). Because the course was titled “Writing About African American Experience,” students clearly assumed the instructor would be African American. Faced with a predominately white faculty (presently 86% Caucasian), students believed this course to be the one where they could expect a black teacher. As students walked into class that day, the first sign they read was my race. Makeshia wondered if she were in the wrong class or if the university had assigned the wrong teacher. Lisa’s response was entirely negative: “I felt her being white automatically packages hate, racism, ignorance, and bias on her side, making it impossible for her to read what I read with the same perspective.”

I realize now that we may have been doomed from the first day. I thought that acknowledging our differences would alleviate—rather than enable us to use productively—any racial tensions. In effect, I wanted to see our differences as "benign" without "engaging" them. In the process, I attempted to "bypass power as well as history" (Mohanty 146). The students, however, would not let me off so easily. Shortly after I had introduced
myself and the syllabus, I asked for students’ questions. A male student immediately put his hand in the air. Beginning with the disclaimer that he did not mean to be rude he said, “What do you, a white woman, know about my experience?” From his perspective, the answer was clear: not enough. I tried to reiterate that it was a writing course. I was there as a facilitator for discussion and writing. My expertise was as a writing teacher and as a student of African American literature. I was, however, clearly uncomfortable with the discussion. How often had I talked to people of other races about race or racial issues? Probably only a few times and then on a one-to-one basis. I was in unfamiliar territory.

The discomfort and tension of the first day set the tone for the semester. Although the students turned in great writing, I found myself uneasy, feeling like an outsider, feeling deliberately tested, feeling as if important ideas were left unsaid. When I asked pointed questions, it was clear students had read the assigned material, but they resisted talking about it. Unsure of what to do, I did virtually nothing.

Much better than I did, students understood the power dynamic in place. I wanted students to explore their lives, but doing so often involved confronting racism. Valerie most strongly articulated the concerns of many: “To me it seemed as though this way of life (black culture) was just sort of entertainment, like an ongoing movie. We just dance around and live and you clap your hands in amazement.” When I read this statement, the reason for student resistance became clear. I had become a voyeur, not a participant, in the classroom.

As one would expect, students’ responses to the class were mixed. Twenty-two (of the twenty-nine) reported strong initial reservations about me and the class, in spite of the fact that I tried to address racial difference the first day. The question of what I knew about their experiences came up most often. Trenée and Latrice wondered if I were teaching the course just to put it on my resume or as an experiment with “lab animals.”

Our racial differences also had various impacts upon the students’ writing and participation in class discussion. Nine said they had restricted their writings and/or class discussions, specifically because of my race. Robin said she did not want to “hurt [my] feelings.” Trudi, too, said she had been “careful in order not to offend the teacher.” As she pointed out, I, after all, was the one giving the grades. Valerie expressed another valid concern: “I felt that you weren’t truly expressing your opinions, so why should I [?]” On the other hand, however, Brenda, Levar, and Trudi all said that, because I was white, they pushed themselves to state opinions more clearly. As Andrea explained, her writing was her “way of letting the white community see [her] personal views.”

In the classroom, rightly or wrongly, I became the white race’s representative. On one occasion I remember the class looking at me and asking what “white people” think. Although the subject we were discussing had long escaped me, the feeling of being conflated with every white person lingers; it made me extremely uncomfortable. And yet, I did not say so. I realize now that we should have talked about generalizations and their consequences. Students’ feeling that I was a voyeur might have been eliminated or diminished had I made my race a safe topic. I was, after all, asking students to do what I would not: to talk and to write about personal experiences. What might have been a generative tension based on our various experiences and perspectives silenced us all.

Students’ final evaluations of me and the course varied. As Makisha and four others students explained, “I thought she was a good teacher considering she was white, but I felt I would have learned more with a black teacher.” None of these students articulated why they would have learned more from a black teacher, so it is unclear why I felt short of their expectations. The remaining twenty-five students made encouraging comments. Marjorie, for example, when asked about her feelings about my race, said “I think the purpose of the this class wasn’t for her to teach me but for the whole class to teach each other.” Dee Dee explained it this way: “Anybody of any race can teach a class, as long as they know what they are doing.” Frederick said, “I believe it was beneficial on my part and on her part. I learned some things about the white culture that I didn’t know before and I’m sure that she did, but visa versa.”

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vance to the course. Only when I first address race are students willing to begin engaging the issue. In my first year at USM, I taught a special-topics course for upper-level undergraduate and graduate students devoted to the Harlem Renaissance and an introductory survey of the African American literary tradition. I surveyed both classes.

In the Harlem Renaissance course, when I asked, "Does anyone have questions or concerns about the fact that I’m a white woman and this is an African American literature class?" I saw faces smile, heads nod "yes," and hands timidly go up. I began by telling them about my educational background and the way I came to teach and love African American literature. In the process, I established race, including my own, as a safe and appropriate topic for class discussion. I was much more comfortable answering their questions than I had been at FSU: I had given serious thought to what I do and why. The change in subject matter was important, too. Our topic was no longer lived experience, but literature. That shift in focus allowed me to claim (and students to grant me) more intellectual authority than I had on the African American experience.

In my survey courses, students are more hesitant to engage racial differences. Even though I have given survey students the same opportunities for questions, they often wait until later in the semester to candidly ask questions. In my first survey course the issue of my whiteness resurfaced when I gave students the opportunity to write me anonymous letters about the course. Darrell, who signed his letter, said he was happy with the course, but wanted to know "why do you do it?" In the next class, I tried explain that I find the literature personally, politically, and culturally relevant to the world we hope to create, that black authors move me and have changed me. I explained that I teach the literature because it must be taught; that American literature survey courses cannot provide students the depth they need and deserve. The most startling answer is: "It's great literature. What's not to love?" Unconsciously, students assume that because I am white, I cannot find African American literature meaningful, powerful, or important, and yet few would hesitate to say that literature by a white author (Shakespeare, Chopin) can be meaningful for African Americans. These texts may not be meaningful to all people in the same way, but they are, nonetheless, meaningful. Only in naming and engaging such unacknowledged assumptions about difference can we begin to break down the barriers they present.

At the end my Harlem Renaissance course, twelve students (black and white) reported being initially surprised by the fact that I was white. Beyond their initial surprise, however, students' reactions were very different. Two white students explained that their surprise turned to relief. Gray, a graduate student, explained his response was the result of his own experience with racism: "I took a seminar in the African novel at [an American university] and it was pretty clear that the instructor didn't like white people. So, in some small way, I guess I was relieved." The fear of such an attitude accounted for the relief Becky, an undergraduate, expressed: "I think in the beginning, because I am also white [your being white] made me feel as if I would be less discriminated against by other students who are African American. Silly . . . .

I expected some of them to be resentful to a white girl for taking an African American class." These white students, fairly or unfairly, feared the potential racism of a black instructor and black students in the same way the African American students in my composition class feared my potential racism. Perhaps because black students can statistically expect to be in or have been in this situation more frequently, they more readily overcome such fears, while white students, who have rarely (or never) experienced "minority" status silence themselves.

One black female and one white male reached different conclusions. Jay explained that "it would have been nice to have had an African American teaching the class because she could have brought personal experiences of the race to the interpretations." Dianne expressed a similar concern: "there were times when I was silent out of frustration, frustrated because no matter how hard I tried, the white students and teacher would never understand." Dianne's comment in particular is one I wish I had heard. I have no idea how often she tried to make the whites participants (myself included) understand or if she tried at all, but I would have liked to have had the opportunity to talk about her frustration, to make it a productive tension. Perhaps what she saw as my inability to understand led her to believe that she would have been "better taught by a black teacher," in spite of the fact that I had done "a really good job in teaching."

Comments from several of these same students revealed another way racial difference shaped our classroom. The African Americans students in this class did not report feeling silenced by the teacher or other students, but Dianne's survey made an important distinction: she, on occasion, "chose to be silent" to observe the class and the teacher. In sharp contrast, five of the white students said they did feel silenced by others. Becky "felt [she] lacked the first hand experience [the African American students] had with certain topics." Jenny explained: "I did feel at times that some of my classmates felt they were the only ones who could
explain how authors were feeling." Making race a safe subject for discussion in this class encouraged the African American students to voice their ideas, even when they disagreed with me. But what accounts for the white students silencing themselves? Perhaps, as Jenny's comment above suggests, white students resisted because they believed their own racial identities diminished their authority. As I did in the AAE class, white students sometimes remain silent as they confront their own identities, prejudices and privileges. My hope is that these students, too, will emerge from their silence changed people.

Student comments also suggested another unexpected dynamic. Dianne wrote, "Your being a white woman deters black males from joining the class, it's not your fault and you have no control over it, but it is a fact." I had never considered gender a factor but believe now that gender both lends and denies credibility to my teaching. The experience of a fellow white colleague who was teaching an African American literature course for the first time illustrates my point. What she learned at the end of the less-than-ideal semester was something of a shock. A female student explained, "if you had been a white man, we would have left." Her gender gave her an ounce of credibility with her black female students.

Surveys from my sophomore course said they, too, were surprised to see a white woman teaching the course. Shadera, a black student, took my race as a "challenge." She explained, "I wanted to see not only would she give the class a chance, the class was 5 to 3 African American to Caucasian, but see if we as African Americans would give her a fair chance." Shannon wondered how well I would "know the literature," in essence the same concern Ann du Cille has expressed about the "anybody-can-play-pick-up-game" attitude toward teaching African American literature (603). Their concerns, however, diminished over the course of the semester: both said they would recommend the instructor and the class to friends.

Another issue emerged surrounding my reluctance to say the word nigger when reading from the text. I struggle with this dilemma: I believe language crucial to the text, yet cringe at the thought of saying the word. When the term nigger surfaced early in the Harlem Renaissance class, we talked about its history, its current meanings, and its place in the text. But when reading the word in class, I was uncomfortable. With so many dehumanizing and degrading connotations attached to the word, it felt (and still feels) out of place in what should be an empowering, democratic environment. So in the survey course, I had avoided the word. When reading a passage from the text, I replaced it with a noun (man, woman).

I went on to suggest that "omitting the word brings more negative attention to it and to the fact that you are a white lady." Perhaps in avoiding the word entirely, I was trying to avoid my own culpability, the privileges I have had because I am white in a racist culture. At the end of both courses all of the students said they would recommend the courses to friends. Although my willingness to engage racial difference was partially responsible for the greater success of these courses, the difference in age, racial make-up, and subject matter were also contributing factors. These students were more diverse and the subject of discussion was literature—not personal experience. My ongoing research in African American literature gave me credibility (because of intellectual experience) as a literature teacher that I did not have in a course titled "Writing About African American Experience," where lived experience was the course focus.

**CONCLUSIONS**

I describe what I do as transgressive teaching, bell hooks uses the term in *Teaching to Transgress*, where she describes transgressing as "movement beyond established boundaries" (7). In transgressing it is possible, she argues, to "know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions." Part of what makes my teaching transgressive is my race and the fact that I teach in Mississippi; my teaching African American literature transgresses traditional social and academic boundaries. Thus, it requires students, black and white, to re-envision teachers, the classroom and themselves. They have to re-think authority in the classroom; no longer is the teacher always the one with the answer. More importantly, the act of transgressing, hooks argues, "makes education the practice of freedom" (12), and it is this liberatory potential that sustains my commitment to transgressing. Not only do I want students to develop a knowledge of and a life-long appreciation for African American literature, but I also want the class to be a site for personal and political transformation.

I want the literature to stimulate social and political change by engaging students to make personal connections between the issues (racial identity, power, prejud-
dice, gender, history — the list could go on and on) the literature treats and their own lives. Literature is not merely an academic subject. For black and white students the literature acts as a reservoir to draw from in reconstituting their identities. They discover role models and situations within African American intellectual and cultural discourse. In group projects and class discussions they build alliances that cross racial boundaries, as does black students' trust in me. They also find in the literature a basis from which to fight and dismantle racism. A white student once told me that she had been reared in a racist home, but had always disagreed with her parents' values. My class, she said, gave her concrete "proof" she was right. White students who return to my classes often recount criticism from parents and friends because they take classes about "black people," and yet these belittled students come back. Their return gives me hope.

I also push students to engage the concept of race. To what does the word actually refer and why? To what extent is race a construction that can empower or limit? I want students to reexamine what most think of as a "given" and their conscious and unconscious assumptions based on race. In what ways does race as a sign intersect other identity signifiers such as gender, age, class, or sexual preference? In class, students often reveal biases that are still, particularly in the rural South, "socially acceptable," such as sexism and homophobia. I challenge students to interrogate these prejudices, as well as racial prejudice. I want them to think critically and to see the interlocking nature of systems of oppression. While most can only begin evolving in a one-semester course, they do, at least, begin journeying towards prejudice-free selves and a prejudice-free culture.

If students see me talking about the difficult topic of race in a racially mixed environment, then we begin to establish a foundation of trust and credibility that is crucial to success in the classroom. In order to establish trust, I believe transgressive teachers have to be willing to reveal ourselves. While Cheryl Johnson records her decision to resist sharing the personal with students in African American literature classes (134-136), they read her body differently than they do mine. Because she is African American, the sign of race (rightly or wrongly) gives her an instant experiential credibility that I do not have, and the only way I have found to earn that credibility is to peel away the professional masks we often hide behind.

I did not want my race to matter, but it does. The reality is that at least on the first day everybody in my African American literature courses thinks about race: students read my race as well as the racial makeup of the class. Regardless of whether I want to decenter the classroom, I am the model. When I make my race the first text open for discussion, students are more likely to feel comfortable approaching the subject themselves. I encourage students to interrogate "whiteness," as they struggle with artistic renderings of "blackness," and inseparable from any exploration of whiteness is an understanding of white privilege. Seeing privilege is as important as seeing prejudice. The literature itself often opens doors for an exploration of positionality. Toni Morrison's short story "Recitatif," for example, invariably invites students to discuss their positionality and their (often unconscious) reliance on racial stereotypes of black and white women.

As transgressive teachers we must also be willing to establish credibility. In thinking about the writing course with which I began this essay, it seems clear that I lacked the initial credibility to teach the course, and I did nothing to earn that credibility. Now my research and past teaching of African American literature give me enough initial credibility in the literature classroom that most students are willing to take a "wait-and-see" attitude. The danger is becoming complacent. It is tempting to unconsciously assume that because we, as teachers, have dealt with the impact of racial difference that students have done so, too. Each semester transgressive teachers must begin anew.

But perhaps the most important advice I can share came from Frederick in my composition course: "Don't expect total cooperation and support at the beginning, it takes time." Decisions to transgress in the classroom may be prompted by administrative requests or by personal interests, but, regardless, the experience should be a positive one for students and teachers—and it can be. For me, it is immensely rewarding to see students, black and white, who want to read, to see them discover authors they did not know existed, to see them discover themselves and each other. But the bottom line is this: transgressive teachers cannot expect to be immediately comfortable or successful. To quote philosopher I know, "it takes time."

**Works Cited**


