

Mayra Guardiola
Teaching College Composition
Dr. Levernez
November 23, 2017

Relearning the Role of the Radical Teacher in the Age of Trump

Sara Kelm 11/26/2017 10:52 PM
Comment [1]: Love this title!

“The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don’t have any.”
-Alice Walker

“Is it education for the people, by the people, or with the people?”
- Linda Dittmar and Pamela Annas in *Radical Teacher*, vol. 109, 2017.

It seems that with every New Year, I always wish for the same thing: please make the next year better than this year. 2017 was no exception, but I admit, I may have asked for more than I bargained for. Donald Trump, who became the 45th President of the United States in November of 2016, left most of the country with a bad taste in their mouths as they tried to make the most of the new 2017 year, even though uncertainty, sadness, anger, frustration, and disbelief was sitting heavy in their stomachs. 2017 meant a lot to me: I got my heart broken, I fell into a horrible, deep depression, I got help and got out of the horrible and deep depression, but only have taking a Chicano/a Civil Rights class with Dr. Max Krochmal and Dr. Emily Farris. By taking this class, I found a new calling in grassroots community organizing and political by working with local organizations and the Fort Worth branch of the Democratic Socialists of America, which fulfilled me at a time when I was at my lowest. The more I learned, saw, and led on the ground of this work, the more I realized just how apparent the academy needs to make more of an effort to not just talk the talk, but also walk to the walk. How many times did I have to witness those around me, especially at a campus like TCU, talk about systems of power than feed off the exploitation and oppression of others, but not actually doing anything about it? When did we forget that the academy is an apparatus of the machine that keeps those systems of

oppression in place and it's in its best interest to keep theory and praxis separate in order to keep its power in place?

As I continued to work with my local community and saw their fears, their tears, their hope, I grew frustrated and angry that the academy seemed to talk about these issues if it only meant they were able to maintain their power in their academy. What my time in the community taught me was that the academy has some answers, but the people who are on the ground, on the front lines of these contact zones, have some answers too. We learn about power from Foucault in the classroom, but many of us have yet to attend a City Council meeting and actually learned the power of community organizing and direct action? Why, when, and how did the connection between theory and praxis become so severed? Like a image that I saw on Facebook said, "How do you convince people to care about people?" All of these thoughts, questions, and feelings consumed my everyday reality and I began to question my decision to join the academy. I had always wanted to get a doctorate degree, but could I? Would I be able to feel the satisfaction I get from working on the ground, doing tangible change like I get from grassroots organizing? Would I be able to survive and work in an institution that seemed to be all about lip service, and that seemingly provides little support those of us doing resistance work and continues to separate theory from practice? As someone who believes in people, believes that through solidarity real change can happen, how can I continue on with the goal of being a professor when I feel hopeless, unheard, angry, and impatient? For this, I wanted to see if I could find some answers, some words of wisdom, and just some advice on how other radical teachers and scholars been able to not only connect theory to praxis but have been able to survive and thrive through this process, however hard and hurtful it may have been. For this endeavor, I turned to bell hooks and

her work *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994) as well three professors at TCU and see what they have to say on this matter.

Education as the Practice of Freedom: Lessons from bell hooks

I don't know how I hadn't read bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress* but I'm glad I did especially right now while I'm still a new teacher. I knew how important bell hooks was to feminist and black feminism studies but after reading this book, I can definitely say that it was quite therapeutic and revolutionary. She starts *Teaching to Transgress* with a glimpse of her early life as a grade school student living in segregated Kentucky in predominately black schools, stores, and churches and the changes and hardships that came when her town became racially integrated. She talked about how education was a practice of freedom when she reflects back on what she taught by black women teachers before desegregation because they connected the things they learned about with their real lived experiences as black women living in the South. For these reasons, the education she got there was completely taken away when she was forced to integrate into a predominately white schools on the other side of town. Here, she found that education did not go past the classroom, and thus perpetuated a banking-system of learning, wherein the teacher is the focus of the classroom instead of engaging with students to make teaching less dull and more relevant and exciting. Still, she remained hopeful after leaving Kentucky and going to California to attend Stanford for college.

As she kept up her studies at Stanford, at Wisconsin Madison, and finally at University of California Santa Cruz, her frustrations with university institutions and their perpetuation of dominant culture shocked her. Reflecting back on grad school, she states "In graduate school, the classroom became a place I hated, yet a place where I struggled to claim and maintain the right to be an independent thinker. The university and the classroom began to feel more like a prison,

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Comment [2]: Awesome introduction - I think your passion and your story demonstrate the importance and timeliness of this issue. I think you might be able to cut down the long paragraph on page two - there's a lot of information crammed into one paragraph, and it's all good/important, but you say the same thing a few different ways, especially the separation between theory/praxis. You also might be able to get to the tension a bit quicker on page one, jumping to the class you took.

Oh, something else - Trump is in your title, and in the first part of your first paragraph, but he's absent from the rest of page 2. The major tension you seem to identify is the separation between theory and praxis in the academy, which you don't necessarily connect to the age of Trump. Obviously, you don't want to add too much, but I think showing how these two situations parallel and inform each other will help create a bit more cohesion.

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Comment [3]: Where?

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Comment [4]: In what ways?

a place of punishment and confinement rather than a place of promise and possibility" (hooks 4). I felt that her words ringing in my ears because they were nearly the same thoughts I have had in my head since this year. But did she have anything good to say about what the academy offers? Why would she have wanted to stay in this institution called the university when to her it felt like a prison? The answer lies in her nearly life-long mentors, Vietnamese Buddhist Monk Thích Nhát Hạnh, who's concept of "engaged Buddhism" deeply influenced hooks' approach to teaching as seen in her first chapter of *Teaching to Transgress* and Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire who was a leading founder of critical pedagogy. These two educators spoke to hooks' during her lowest times and gave her the means to heal and the tools to continue to resist the system in education.

Even though the education system in all respects has let her down, hooks still saw value in the broken system in that her the means to heal. To elaborate, hooks states "According to [Hanh] 'the practice of a healer, therapist, teacher or any helping professional should be directed toward his or herself first, because if the healer is unhappy, he or she cannot help many people.' In the United States it is rare that anyone talks about teachers in university settings as healers" (hooks 15). If teachers actively tried to teach with engaged pedagogy in mind they will find that it "does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that empowers a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process (hooks 21). For example: you can engage students by allowing them to reflect on their experiences and connections between what they are learning in the classroom. When teaching, it is also vital that the teacher share and reflect on their own experiences, which only empowers the teacher and class as whole. Reflecting on the impact theory had on her life as an academic hooks states that the "lived' experience of critical thinking, of reflection and analysis, became a place where I

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Comment [5]: Crazy important sentence, and it gets a little convoluted with your descriptions of each mentor - maybe break it up, or find a way to offset the mini bios you give each.

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Comment [6]: Missing word? Also, is the system healing her, or the value in the system?

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Comment [7]: Can you more clearly connect reflection to engaged pedagogy?

worked at explaining the hurt and making it go away. Fundamentally, I learned from this experience that theory could be a healing place" (hooks 61). However, hooks states that for engaged pedagogy to be truly effective we need to shift "the way we think, write, [and] speak" depending on the varied communities that is being taught. She states, "the engaged voice must never be fixed and absolute but always changing, always evolving in dialogue with a world beyond itself" (hooks 11). I couldn't help but to notice the similar relationship between audience, content, and the speaker in the Aristotelian model of rhetorical triangle of appeals. Moving on.

Very early on, hooks is quick to show readers just how much Freire's work in critical pedagogy has impacted her life. On Freire's influence on her pedagogy, hooks states "[Freire's] focus on holistic approach to learning and spiritual practice enabled me to overcome years of socialization that had taught me to believe a classroom was diminished if students and professors regarded one another as "whole" human beings, striving not just for knowledge in books, but knowledge about how to live in the world" (hooks 14-15). In pointing out the key to critical pedagogy is putting value on experiences outside of the classroom in the classroom, hooks remarks that it is no easy task because it does require quite of lot of unlearning, learning again, and practice. She goes on to state "progressive, holistic education, [and] 'engaged pedagogy' is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy. For, unlike these two teaching practices, it emphasizes well-being. That means that teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students" (hooks 15). What she means here is that it is also radical to attend to your wounds and hurt that comes with the territory for resistance because you won't be able to help others if their teacher can't help themselves. Granting myself permission to take care of myself is one of the hardest things I've attempted to overcome because I always feel that I can do

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Comment [8]: Ooh, I want to know more about this. (Also, I've read other books by hook but not this one - it's going on the list)

more and am not doing enough. Yet, I will remember hooks' words next time I guilt trip myself into stretching myself so thin that I fail to take care of my own physical and mental well-being.

Teaching to Transgress: Practical Advice on Making the Classroom as Site of Resistance

After reading about hook's thoughts on her experiences in education as a child to college and even into being a teacher, I wanted to know exactly how to enact a holistic, democratic, feminist, and anti-racist classroom. I wanted to know the extent through which I have been practicing a holistic, democratic, anti-racist, feminist, and engaged pedagogy for the past three months while I've been an instructor. The biggest takeaway from *Teaching to Transgress* was in order to make education a wondrous act of freedom, it is vital that the teachers remove themselves from the center of attention in the classroom and "must genuinely value everyone's presence. There must be an ongoing recognition that everyone influences the classroom dynamic, that everyone contributes" (hooks 9). From here, hooks offers some practical suggestions on how to build community and recognize value in each person's voice in the classroom. One such suggestion is that she requires "students to keep journals where they will often write paragraphs during class which they read to one another" (hooks 40). An example of an instance where they'd write paragraphs is when hooks tells that she would tell students to write their earliest racial memory when discussing Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and then have them each read their paragraph out loud (84). These were just some of the notable examples that I found, however the whole book is filled with practical instruction on how to teach to transgress.

But are there radical teachers that aim to teach in order to transgress, twenty-three years later? I have my own thoughts on this matter, however I wanted to find out how other professors, particularly professors at my home institution, approach teaching views that might seem radical

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Comment [9]: Yessssss! For this section, I'd recommend maybe grouping information by theme a little clearer. For instance, in your third paragraph you talk about teachers needing to heal themselves, which you come back to at the end of this section. That may help you cut down a bit and keep you from repeating yourself. You also might be able to cut down a little of the hooks bio, though I really liked knowing that. Also, just watch for missing words that make sentences less clear.

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Comment [10]: I love this – does she talk about how this works? What the impact is?

to the particular student culture and body that attends TCU. Enter Dr. Hanan Hammad, Associate Professor in the History Department and Director of the Middle Eastern Studies program at TCU. Having lived most of her adult life in Egypt and later immigrating to the United States for grad school with her husband and children, Dr. Hammad offers her experiences when teaching Middle Eastern studies at TCU. After being posed this question, she begins to say even there is always tension in the air due to the nature of the subject, she does make it clear that there are two rules in her class: there cannot be any anti-Semitism and there cannot be any Islamophobic language in the class (Hammad). Even though I didn't have a chance to see her in action and attend one of her classes, she did tell me that she tries to be open-minded to her student's views and asks them to do the same.

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Comment [11]: Remind us what subject?

For Dr. Rima Abunsasser, Instructor in both the English and Middle Eastern Studies program, she notes that it is also really important that teachers leverage the power they have to expose students to different realities and perspectives from their peers to anyone around them in order for them to find value in their realities too. After all, she tells me, "If TCU's mission is to create global leaders, then the only way to create global leaders without being global colonizers is to give them the different tools to gain different perspectives and insights into different realities and experiences that they aren't familiar with" (Abunasser). Not only does she actively try to make her classroom as engaged as possible, but she also makes clear connections in her own life, teaching, and scholarship by working with organizations that work for women and human rights outside of the academy. She also tries to work with organizations that stray away from the salvation narrative and instead works to empower people rather than saving them. In fact, in December 2017, she will be traveling to Jordan to work with a NGO based in DFW to assess the various pop-up education camps within the refugee camps in Jordan. Thus,

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Comment [12]: Does she say how she does this?

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Comment [13]: This gets a little confusing for me.

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Comment [14]: In what ways?

disseminating knowledge from the discipline helps her to help in the real world and see how her power as a academic and teacher can impact the very communities we talk, read, and write about in the classroom.

As for Dr. Max Krochmal, Associate Professor in the History Department and Director of Comparative Race and Ethnic Studies, he self-described that his teaching style is very much like his most favorite classes in undergrad, the “punch-you-in-the-face” kind. He is boldy unapologetic when it comes to addressing histories that simply did not occur or is just myth. What is interesting about Dr. Krochmal is his working class, Jewish family background, which deeply informed his teaching. More than Dr. Hammad or Dr. Abunasser, Dr. Krochmal actively tries to integrate his life, whether it be research, teaching, service, or community organizing, so that they build off each other and ease the physical and emotional burden doing resistance and radical work. For example, in Dr. Krochmal’s Chicano/a Civil Rights class I took earlier this year in Spring 2017, we learned the radical ways Chicanos in Texas and California worked together in order to improve their own lives and the people in their community. So one of our projects was to become voter deputies (if we were able), and to coordinate with high schools in Fort Worth with high Latinx populations in order to register students to vote if they were eligible. Not only were we trying to help with the low Latinx voter turnouts in recent years since of the Texas Voter I.D. laws, but there would be an election that May 2017 for local elections, which we learned can be truly revolutionary and vital in resisting oppressive policies. In this sense instead of being stretched thing and doing it all himself, he utilized his students so that they would be able to help the community, and the community in turn taught them about community organizing, attending council meetings, know local policies that affect them and much more. In

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Comment [15]: Did she talk about how her work outside the classroom impacted her teaching?

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Comment [16]: How so?

this sense, I would say Dr. Krochmal knocks it out of the park when it comes to engaged pedagogies and a good way to empower students and see tangible change in their efforts.

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Comment [17]: Awesome. Since you have the most experience with Dr. Krochmal, that paragraph was the most clear. I had a few questions about the other instructors, mostly in regards to your initial question at the beginning. I keep asking for you to expand, and I know you're trying to do the opposite, so pick and choose what you can do.

Words of Solidarity and Support from those Who have “Been There, Done That”

So let's say I try my best to make the classroom as democratic as possible, but what do you do when you have students or even colleagues who are resistant? How do you cope with this on top of everything else that seems to be against you? To this end, hooks also offers some words of determination and reassurance. She states, “To commit ourselves to the work of transforming the academy so that it will be a place where cultural diversity informs every aspect of our learning, we must celebrate struggle and sacrifice. We cannot be easily discouraged. We cannot despair when there is conflict. Our solidarity must be affirmed by shared belief in a spirit of intellectual openness that celebrates diversity, welcomes dissent, and rejoices in collective dedication to truth” (hooks 33). As a people person, I get discouraged and feel hopelessness in conflict, dissent, and resistance to what I am saying, yet hooks’ reminds me that education, yes even the lessons of coping and responding to dissent, is indeed freedom if I perceive it as a chance to learn. For Dr. Hammad, she told me that more often times than not, there a students who will voice their concerns to dissent, which focuses the power away from Dr. Hammad and instead empowers her own students. She gives the rather disturbing example of having an Israeli American in her classroom in her first year at TCU, and when she was talking about the displacement and terrorization of the Palestinians, this student proceeded to e-mail the entire class and tell the class not to listen to Dr. Hammad because she was Egyptian and is biased in this matter. What he didn’t know, is that the class course site makes it easy to e-mail the class, and interestingly enough the teacher is automatically included. This resistance was shocking to

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Comment [18]: Could you clarify this? This sentence seems important!

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Comment [19]: Whoa.

Dr. Hammad, who has never had her authority challenged in such a way before. Fortunately, the other students in the class replayed to all and defended Dr. Hammad. In the end, Dr. Hammad told me that she was able to cope with this incident and others by learning from the incident and acknowledge that for the majority of the student body, they are receptive and are eager to learn. There are a few students who will dissent and then some, and there are students who will stand up for what they believe is right, usually against the dissenter. Equally important is to find a group of people who are like-minded, who supports and reassures you in your work, and who you can be completely yourself and feel comfortable venting to them.

On the subject of coping with the meticulous and straining work as an educator and scholar, for Dr. Abunasser, the key is to see self-care as a radical act. See, for women of color in the academy especially, the work they do is nearly always erased because it is invisible labor. For example, you are often tasked with attending all the service projects involving diversity. In Dr. Abunasser's case, she has to prepare for her class, to see advisees for the Middle Eastern Studies program, she has to coordinate with outside scholars to come visit the campus, attend a movie screening, attend meetings, and don't forget working on her own writing. Needless to say, it is "really hard to separate work from your personal life, and when you make an active attempt to, you exhausted yourself, leaving time to do little for your own health and well-being" (Abunasser). In this way, self-care is a radical and you have to actively work to not feel guilty and give yourself permission to take care of yourself so that you can continue your activist work. Similarly and perhaps even more so, Dr. Krochmal's pedagogy is undeniably engaged, as he brings the issues on the outside the class and makes it into a teaching and learning moment inside the classroom. However like Dr. Hammad and Dr. Abunasser, he is sure to set some boundaries for himself so that he continues to do the work that he needs and wants to do. He does his best to

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Comment [20]: I wonder about troubling this term – in many ways you are dissenting against the apathy/hegemony of the academy. But also students dissent against ideas that are new, or challenging, or contradict unchallenged ideas. I don't know, it's probably something you can't go into here, but normally, in the academy, we think of dissent as positive (at least in THEORY; in practice, like you're talking about...not so much).

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Comment [21]: This seems repeated from above – can you condense, perhaps?

not work during the evening and the weekends, so that he can spend time with his kids and wife. Friday nights are especially dedicated to hanging out with a group of friends, where he can authentically be himself and vent his frustrations without recourse or judgment. All in all, it seems that there are ways to cope with the demands of being a radical teacher in the academy.

“No Trump! No KKK! No Fascist USA!” Radical Teaching in the Age of Trumpism

The number one reason why I pursued to find out if it was possible to dedicate my life to be a radical teacher, knowing how much I empathize and feel the hurt and pain of injustices, is because I wanted to know what I can do right now in the classroom to bridge the issues outside the classroom inside the classroom. What this leads to however, is that in my desperation and determination to help marginalized communities, is dissatisfaction when I don’t see immediate results. I’m passionate, fiery, and ready to mobilize, yet it isn’t happening fast enough, which makes me frustrated even more. To this end, Dr. Krochmal faces a similar situation as me when it comes to working in the academy. He told me that if he focused on just community organizing, he felt like he needed the intellectual stimulation that he got from being in the academy. Yet when he focused only on his intellectual work, he felt that he could be more impactful and do meaningful change if he focuses on community organizing. So what is radical teacher to do, especially in the Age of Trump, where even at the academy tensions are running high and the stakes are higher now than the years before? This is where hooks’ words save me again as she states

In the transformed classroom there is often a much greater need to explain philosophy, strategy, intent than in the ‘norm’ setting. I have found through the years that many of students who bitch endlessly while they are taking my classes contact me at a later date to talk about how much the experience meant to them,

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Comment [22]: What isn't?

how much they learned. In my professional role I had to surrender my need for immediate affirmation of successful teaching (even though some regard is immediate) and accept that students may not appreciate the value of a certain standpoint on a process straightforward...Moving awareness from the need for immediate affirmation was crucial to my growth as a teacher (hooks 42).

I quote at length here because like hooks, because Dr. Krochmal told me the same thing by saying that often times, the seeds he planted in the minds of students years ago tend to show their bloom years afterward, and that's revolutionary and transgressive as well. I know now that the first thing I need to work at his to change my view of what education and what is activism. Education is valuing peoples realities and experiences as legitimate bodies of knowledge worth studying. Taking care of yourself is activism. And acknowledging that the work you do today is worth it regardless if it's acknowledged, and even if you won't see the changes overnight and even in your lifetime. You have to legitimize and give yourself the power to see your work as radical and a form of resistance so that you feel that you are doing enough all while tending to your physical and mental well-being.

Another big lesson that I learned is that there are no safe spaces in the academy, and just like the real world, there are dissenters everywhere. As I mentioned before, hooks is very skeptical about the notion of "safe" classrooms because to her, the classroom is always political and never neutral. In my inexperience in academia, I felt that I needed to be hear, more supported, and more reassured from my institution. But what I learned from all of the professors I interviewed is that there are dissenters everywhere and at every institution, department, program, peers and colleagues. While they didn't state so, I think I have been naïve to think that there wouldn't be resistance and dissent from the very institution that is teaching me modes of

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Comment [23]: In this paragraph you seem to be talking about two different kinds of results – social results and student results. How can you either bring them together, or make a distinction between them?

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Comment [24]: Do you talk about this before? Did I just miss it?

resistance. While I know I need to push and challenge pedagogical norms in the academy to resist and unlearn lessons that perpetuate the white dominance in the academy, I also need to learn that this is the way the world works right now, and I need to see dissent and resistance to my views as a teaching moment on how better to appeal to those who I wish to teach.

After these reflections, however, I still felt that while I found some healing and knowledge of critical, feminist, and engaged pedagogies, I have no idea how this looks like in practice besides what hooks' provides in *Teaching to Transgress*. Enter *Radical Teacher: A Socialist, Feminist, and Anti-Racist Journal on the Theory and Practice of Teaching*, a peer-reviewed, digital journal. The scope of the journal is that it examines the root causes of inequality and promotes progressive social change by publishing "articles on classroom practices and curriculum, as well as on education issues related to gender and sexuality, disability, culture, globalization, privatization, race, class, and other similar topics. It primarily publishes articles, book reviews, notes, and most recently, a poetry section in all of their issues. To give you some history of the journal, *Radical Teacher* was founded in 1975 and "serves the community of educators who are working for democratic process, peace, and justice" ("About"). So far, it seems like this journal speaks to both the Democratic Socialist and English Teacher in me. Let's see how the actual content holds up. Their introduction to the most recent issue of *Radical Teacher* called "Toward Public Pedagogies: Teaching Outside Traditional Classrooms," Linda Dittmar and Pamela Annas provides not only echo and use the same vocabulary hooks used in describing critical, feminist, anti-racist, and engaged pedagogies, but they also state that "[These essays in this issue] point us "toward" thinking about public pedagogy and about a teaching that exposes the power and politics at work within culture. Is this activism in itself? Will it lead to activism? Most immediately, these articles invite us to think about our own teaching, inside as

well as outside of conventional institutions, with an eye for the renegade possibilities that can in fact occur in any place where teaching and learning aim to embody transformative praxes.

(Dittmar and Annas 2). This is great, this is revolutionary, this journal is a new kind of therapy, these scholars are my mentors, and this journal provides the tools I will need to continue on carrying the torch of education as freedom for the years to come. Knowing that I have such a valuable resource, and that is recognized as such from the academy, gives me hope and motivation to think more about teaching and making the class a site of resistance in the Age of Trumpism. Incidentally, this is the title of the upcoming issue for *Radical Teacher*, so I hope to use this discovery to read more about critical pedagogies and engaged pedagogies, and see how graduate students can leverage their position as both students and teachers to bring about meaningful change in their respective institutions, the academy at large, and their community outside of campus.

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Comment [25]: This is awesome! I had never heard of this journal..

Author's Note:

I was really skeptical about the Discovery Essay because I have never done this work outside of having to do it for class. I usually discover something because I wish to respond to it, and I hardly write for the sake of discovering something. However, after doing the assignment, I can see its value because it really did help with my discovery and especially in synthesizing the information. Because I was forced to organize the information in certain sections, I was forced to draw conclusions about the sources themselves and what they say as a whole. I probably will incorporate the writing aspect of my discovery more into my research practices for sure.

It wasn't terribly hard to write and the only issue I had is that the assignment states that it needs to be conference paper-length but I obviously went over. I hope I can keep the extra pages because I feel like I needed the room to really finish out my discovery. If the length is a big issue, any advice on what you think is repetitive and unnecessary is much appreciated!

Mayra, I feel like I want to just put the praise hands emoji repeatedly at the end of this. It sounds like you did some really great reflecting, challenging, researching, and discovering. So, I wrote some long notes throughout – apologies for the length, but I was thinking through things as I

wrote. I do think there are places you could condense, particularly in places where you come back to a concept that you already mentioned (such as self-care, which you come back to a few times). A slight reorganizing/shifting may help you cut down and see where you're repeating yourself. Also, a few places I asked for clarification, and I know you don't want to make this any longer, but you may have room if you find places you repeat. Great job, you are awesome, and I can't wait to read *Teaching to Transgress*.

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