

“A Letter From My Students”: Transformative Pedagogy, Borderlands Performance, and the Critical Junctures of Whiteness

Robert Gutierrez-Perez

It is not easy writing this letter. It began as a poem, a long poem. I tried to turn it into an essay but the result was wooded, cold. I have not yet unlearned the esoteric bullshit and pseudo-intellectualizing that school brainwashed into my writing. (Anzaldúa, Reader 26).

Unlike Gloria Anzaldúa in “Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers,” this performance auto/ethnographic¹ report began as a letter that I tried to turn into a performance that I am now transforming into the very form Anzaldúa is critiquing because I am desperately searching for a way to connect with you (the reader). As a performance studies scholar trying to respond to *A Letter from My Students* through research and performance, I could not avoid centering my own positionality in a letter or in a performance because I *am* a teacher with immense privilege and power in the classroom. In essence, the dualistic and binary power dynamics of conquerer-conquered, oppressor-oppressed, and colonizer-colonized are ways of thinking and being under critique within the performance of *A Letter from My Students*. These power dynamics continued in both my letter and performance because my identity as a teacher could not be avoided. However, in considering the commitments of critical

Robert Gutierrez-Perez is a U.S. Southwest borderlands scholar studying performances of power, resistance, and agency through the lens culture and communication. Utilizing a variety of critical qualitative research methods, Gutierrez-Perez explores how gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and/or questioning Chicanos/Xicanos in the U.S. Southwest and Mexico resist multiple systems of oppression through their everyday performances of identity, culture, and history. His other research interests include advocacy and civic engagement in higher education, queer intercultural communication, critical performance studies, and queer of color critique.

¹ Like Bryant Keith Alexander, “I unapologetically locate myself in my fields of study. So, when I do auto/ethnography, I often present the construction with the backslash between “auto” and “ethnography.” I do it as a signifying act to the reader to suggest that the nature of my work, though critically reflecting on the particularity of lived experience, is never just about me, as in the presumed naval gazing effects of the “auto” (100)

communication pedagogy (Fassett and Warren, *Critical*), I am continuing to strive for a pedagogical praxis that transforms the educational system to empower both teachers and learners. How then can I respond to these students in a way that both honors and promotes the agency they created when they resisted my agenda in the classroom? I do not want to shut down students that continue to push back on the power dynamics of schooling because this disciplining process is not empowering for teachers or students (Cooks and Warren). Therefore, this auto/ethnographic report utilizes performative writing to explicate transformative pedagogy and embodied borderlands performance as an ontological and epistemological underpinning to the performance of *A Letter from My Students*. To resist becoming wooded and cold, I respond to *A Letter from My Students* through a *mestizo* body, because, like Anzaldúa, writing and performing this letter deeply implicated my own body as a writer and my pedagogical choices (i.e., trickster and borderlands performance) as a teacher—it was not easy. In fact, it is frightening to place my body on the line and write *sin vergüenza* from a Chicana/o perspective, but perhaps, I must follow my students example and risk everything to highlight the oppressive power dynamics of higher education classrooms.

In a graduate-level course in Critical Communication Pedagogy, I had been exploring the utilization of *naqualismo* (shapeshifting) approaches to pedagogy in higher education classrooms. A *mestizo* (mixed-blood) body “constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 101). In line with this divergent thinking, mestizos, hybrids, and queer interlocutors in academia must constantly shift and code-switch in response to how our racial/ethnic/queer bodies are read and misread (Chavez; Moreman). The *Letter* was created for a weekly writing assignment in this graduate-level pedagogy course in response to feedback that learning about critical thinking as an interactive process involves students and teachers (hooks, *Teaching Critical* 8-9) and that any political action on the side of the oppressed necessitates action *with* the oppressed (Friere 66). In considering this feedback from my instructor and the assigned texts that I should take up the positionality of the student rather than the teacher, the *Letter* took on an embodied, multivocal, and intersectional quality that approached the classroom as a complex and embodied space where chances for resistance and oppression moved fluidly through relations of power and identity. Between 2012-2013, this *Letter* was embodied as a one-man staged performance performed at a regional communication studies conference, at several black box theaters and open mic nights, and at fundraisers across the U.S. Southwest.

Throughout this performance auto/ethnographic report, I weave scholarship

on whiteness, borderlands theory, and pedagogy to create a response to *A Letter from My Students* that argues for social justice in the classroom as a process not a product. First, by reviewing research on trickster performances and *nagualismo*, I define transformative pedagogy as an ontology for the classroom and an embodied praxis of ambiguity, liminality, chance, and failure. Next, I parse out the multivocality and epistemology of the *Letter* along four critical junctures of whiteness as a privilege, as both/and, as (in)visible, and as a chance to synthesize scholarship on whiteness from cultural studies, rhetoric, and critical communication pedagogy. In the end, I advocate for students and teachers to embrace failure not as a product, but through critical reflexivity and an embodied transformative pedagogy, I advocate for failure as a process of striving for social justice.

Trickster Performance and *Nagualismo* as Transformative Pedagogy

the change, el cambio. The metamorphosis, morph, morphing/Changing into something or someone else. (Anzaldúa, "Llorona Coyolxauhqui" 211)

When informed by trickster performances and *nagualismo*, transformative pedagogy is an ontological and embodied project of ambiguity, liminality, chance, and failure. Like the trickster from indigenous myths and legends from the U.S. Southwest, a *nagual* exists and plays in/with ambiguity and liminality, and as demonstrated in the above poem, a *nagual* is a Náhuatl term for shapeshifter that Chicana feminists have reclaimed to refer to a person who is changing identity (Anzaldúa, "New Mestiza" 211). As a manifold *mestizo*, my identity is located at the crossroads of multiple locations of race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, gender, nationality, and ability, and as such, my teacher identity must shift, morph, or change depending on where I stand and whom I stand with. For instance, I am often afraid and unsure of when and how to reveal my colored queerness in the classroom (Gust and Warren 118; Warren and Fassett 119-120), so I tend to be tactically ambiguous with my sexual identity as a form of resistance to categorical definition. Ambiguity and liminality are mutually constitutive, circular, and inseparable (Salinas 151). Performing shapeshifter embodies continual transition, a moving through different states of liminal and unstable being (Salinas 144). Liminality is often defined as a state "betwixt and between" (Turner qtd. in Fassett & Warren 3); however, a transformative pedagogy defines this liminal state as *nepantla* from the Náhuatl term for in-between space (Anzaldúa, *Reader* 322). *Nepantla* is a state where the (de)construction of identity takes place, and often occurs after experiencing a trauma (i.e., physical, mental, spiritual, emotional), and it is in that in/between state where the vestiges of your old identity have been torn and shredded, and now, through the disorientation and fragmentation, you must put yourself back together again—often, in new ways (see Gutierrez-Perez).

As a *mestizo*-teacher, my identity in the classroom shapeshifts to maintain a

politics of ambiguity and liminality as a praxis meant to upset dominant orders and reshape hostile physical and social environments to make them more habitable for humanity (Salinas 143; Spry 715). In the classroom, I utilize performances of trickster and *nagualismo* as a praxis of co-constructing spaces of *nepantla* to enact a *chance* for transformative pedagogy. For the trickster, praxis is an unstable and unpredictable path in/between theory and practice (Salinas 144), and “Tricksters destabilize dominant orders by actively exploiting ambiguity, by speaking with the double voice of ‘signifying,’ and by playing other sorts of language games” (150). As a liminal entity, the trickster lives in the borderlands (151) betwixt and between the cracks of theory and practice and playfully manipulates chance to create states of *nepantla*. Indeed, it is in failing to enact chance that opens up opportunities for the trickster or *nagual* to thrust a space into a *nepantla* state (151). By highlighting the instability of social orders and borders, tricksters open up possibilities for dialogues on the power of naming and classification (150). For students and teachers, it is often shocking or traumatic to engage in dialogues, activities, and lessons that highlight the socially constructed nature of identity and language, and therein lies the ontological paradox of trickster performances and *nagualismo*: their border crossing cannot be without borders in place (150).

In writing and performing *A Letter from My Students*, I had to take a chance to present how my praxis of trickster/shapeshifter performance failed to address issues of whiteness, performance, and advocacy in the classroom. As a queer writer and teacher and for those considered “transgressive” from the outside, this is the risk we must all be willing to face in order to speak our truth (Moraga 95), and as indigenous tales of tricksters show, “transformative efforts are risky and wrought with potential failure” (Salinas 150). Failure is a necessary critical juncture in the process of advocacy, identity, and transformative pedagogy. Critical junctures “signal urgencies, needs, crises, and yearnings for connection, growth, and new joinings” (Halualani, Mendoza, and Drzewiecka 32). As *mestizas/os*, we stand in the critical juncture where worlds tend to collide, and in attempting to work out a synthesis, we must face failure in our everyday lived experiences in order to create that “third element” from the ambiguity of liminal spaces, which breaks us out of the essentializing trap of binary thinking (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 101-102). However, in order to leave *nepantla*, a practitioner of transformative pedagogy must remain reflexive of ones role in the classroom to access the critical potential of failure, and the opportunity for chance needs to be taken advantage of by a clever trickster willing to move through the pain of transgressing the border between success and failure (Salinas 152). In fact, without action based in critical reflexivity, failure becomes static like a permanent way station on the track of life and loses its chance to remain in process by bravely heading towards new chances and new failures. Therefore, if one wishes to move out of *nepantla* towards further transformation, then one must reimagine

what it means to fail and to succeed.

In taking up a trickster or shapeshifter performative approach to pedagogy, one is called to actively move between the borders rhetorically constructed between success and failure to challenge the educational system. Fassett and Warren reveal three persuasive discourses of success and failure that function to re-secure the hegemonic power of educational institutions. For instance, the strategy of individualism locates educational success and failure solely in the actions of the individual; that is, failure as individual incompetence where the student or teacher fails because she/he locates success without context as if the individual is somehow outside of any institutional or social realm (27). Additionally, if one moves away from individualism and focuses instead on the larger macro structural context, then one falls into the strategic rhetoric of victimization. This occurs when students and teachers talk “about education as a social machine that renders participants passive dupes caught in the continual processes of power” (29). In the strategy of victimization, students and teachers lose their chance for agency and fail because they give up their own power in the co-constructed process of the classroom.

Finally, Fassett and Warren identify the strategy of authenticity, or “(1) a failure to measure up to standards, (2) mythical other’s success, and (3) popular culture as a model” (33). In other words, what is my transformative pedagogy “agenda” being measured against that renders it an inauthentic or failed classroom experience? Is it an imaginary rather than real standard from the dominant culture? For some teachers, their deadlines, papers, and speeches are rigid standards that if not completed as imagined mean that the student or teacher is a failure; however, these constructed standards or educational norms are created by the instructor, and in this example, the measure of success is recast as “outside of that narrated world; they just existed” (34) rather than within the power of the instructor to change and manipulate as he/she desires. In this example, the border between real and imagined standards is revealed as a subjective choice of the instructor rather than some pre-existing norm. Or, is it some “mythical other” standard based on previous classes with previous instructors or students? For instance, a course that evaluates students or teachers based on previous classroom experiences utilizes a rhetoric of authenticity that casts failure within a measurement that neither students or teachers have access to understanding. How can I (as a student) know that you want me to perform like Juan Carlos in your previous course? Why am I (as a teacher) a failure because I am a different person with different life experiences and different expertise than a previous instructor? Comparing students or teachers to a “mythical other” memory casts the prior experience as superior and renders the current classroom locked in a relationship that neither party has an ability to understand (34-35). Or, maybe a transformative pedagogy is a failure because students were not standing on their chairs like in the film *Dead Poet’s Society* (33-36)? Models of educational success

and failure drawn from popular culture creates a border between students and their instructor that a transformative pedagogy attempts to transgress by utilizing chance, ambiguity, failure, and liminality as tools for transformation. Alongside their students, teachers must avoid individualism or victimization while searching beyond standards of authenticity to confront the transformative potential of failure.

In this section, I have defined *nagualismo* and trickster performances as an ambiguous and/or liminal state and as a critical praxis of chance and failure to frame the ontology of *A Letter from My Students* within borderlands theory and Chicana/o studies and to place these performativities into dialogue with critical communication/performance pedagogy. A principle goal of transformative pedagogy is to empower students and teachers to break out of binary-modes of thinking and being by working with and against borders and the strategic rhetorics of success and failure. In the process of trying to create classrooms that empower both teachers and students to acknowledge and advocate for social justice, failure is an inevitable chance that needs to be accepted and productively worked through to remain focused on the goal of transformation. In the following section, I parse out the multivocality and epistemology of the *Letter* along four critical junctures of whiteness as a privilege, as both/and, as (in)visible, and as a chance to synthesize scholarship on whiteness from cultural studies, rhetoric, and critical communication pedagogy.

Transformative Pedagogy or Remembering the Critical Junctures of Whiteness

I write to remember.

I make rite (ceremony) to remember.

It is my right to remember. (Moraga, *Xicana* 81)

In the creation of *A Letter From My Students*, I wove an intertextual narrative drawn from research on whiteness studies, personal experiences in the classroom, and qualitative data from course evaluations to move in/between four critical junctures of whiteness. Each persona in the performance was created out of a failure to enact a transformative pedagogy in an imagined classroom space, which I explicate in the following sections below. By utilizing a “dialogic performance” to move through eight personas, including my teacher-self, I interweaved these narratives together with differing voices, experiences, and worldviews, so each persona is questioning, debating, and challenging the others, which is a kind of performance that resists conclusions and is intensely committed to keeping the dialogue between performer-text-witness open and ongoing (Alexander and Warren 329; Conquergood 9-10). In constructing a letter written by an entire class of students to a single teacher practicing transformative pedagogy, this performance utilizes a border aesthetic drawn from

trickster performance and *naqualismo* to highlight the complex and contradictory power dynamics between students and between students and the teacher. In the following, I move through each of the performance personas in the *Letter* to explicate whiteness as a privilege, as both/and, as (in)visible, and as a chance through a transformative pedagogy drawn from an ontology based on trickster/shapeshifter performances.

Whiteness as a Privilege

The invisible omnipresence of 'whiteness' has given it (and many 'white'-raced people) a too-rarely acknowledged position of dominance and power with material socio-cultural effects. (Keating, *Teaching* 65)

In undertaking a performance that attempts to embody whiteness as a privilege in a queer, mestizo body, the challenge is how to mark White privilege when everything about this pseudo-universal category hides its values and epistemology. For instance, after briefly embodying myself as a teacher entering an empty class and finding a letter on a chair, I first transform into a White, male student who is the primary driver of the events within this performance. This was a purposeful move meant to show how whiteness functions as a privilege (Warren, "Whiteness" 186). Given the privileged vocality of whiteness, it made sense that this persona should begin my performance of power and privilege within education spaces. This persona sets the battleground as students against teacher or us versus them without any recognition of the power relations embedded in race, gender, or sexual orientation because "White," "male," and "straight" are taken as natural, as a given, and as non-cultural (Keating, *Teaching* 63; Nakayama and Krizek 300; Warren and Fassett 123). It is the taken-for-granted quality of whiteness that marks the privilege of this social construct.

The privilege of whiteness² is difficult to embody because it is replete with embodied contradictions (Nakayama and Krizek 296-97). In the performance of White, straight, male student, this persona is not marked racially through self-identification. Rather he is marked by his position within the narrative, by his taking up of space without needing to explain why, and by the tone of his presence. The critical juncture within this construct is in how this persona fails to resist the strategy of victimization when he notes his lack of agency as a student:

² John T. Warren reviews four general themes of whiteness studies research: (1) as a method of social critique and a push for antiracist social practice ("Whiteness" 187); (2) as "a lens for reading, critiquing, or deconstructing multiple kinds of texts, most specifically literary, scholarly, or cinematic sources" (187); (3) as a rhetorically discursive space and how it operates rhetorically as a privileged place of power (187); and, (4) "as a performance which works to constitute and continually reconstitute itself through everyday embodiments and practices" (187)

“I see your agenda, and if I don’t follow it, then you will give me an ‘F.’” By attempting to speak for everyone and by speaking first, he fails to recognize or acknowledge the privileges inherent to “speaking back” to power. Additionally, the centering of the *Letter* on his needs, his desires, and his failure to understand outside the realm of his experience focuses on his privileged positionality rather than on the greater learning community. However, just as his message is more than just words on a page, this persona remains more than just a White, straight, male body.

A transformative pedagogy must practice compassion and acknowledge a critical standpoint that considers how the intersection of race, sex, and class are a tough positionality to understand and maintain (hooks, *Teaching* 43), which is what this persona is communicating through a message of failure. In teaching about privilege as an intersectional performance, this persona expresses how he is both oppressed and privileged in his performance of whiteness because race, sex, class, and more are working synchronically to create this moment, and within these contradictions lies the rhetorical power of whiteness to erase the very real, material realities of White privilege. For example, as a queer, mestizo male body, I drew on my own everyday performances of male privilege to help embody a persona who benefits from White privilege, because as a man, I am connected to this persona in how I take up space as a teacher or in how my direct communication-style as an interlocutor is marked as normal. I am given the privilege to speak, to dominate space, and to dress the way I want (to a degree) because my everyday performance of male gives me unearned and unasked for privileges to assert myself onto those around me. Although I inhabit a mestizo body that marks me as not White, I am able to embody whiteness as a privilege because it is an intersectional concept that refracts and reframes like a prism as it crosses along other identity constructs.

As taken-for-granted, whiteness functions as a privilege in everyday performances of identity, and given the intersectional quality of privilege, whiteness is implicated in multiple forms of oppression like patriarchy and heteronormativity. This critical juncture of whiteness has material consequences for those who do not fit into the borders of this socially-constructed phenomenon. AnaLouise Keating poignantly writes that “‘whiteness’ functions as the unacknowledged standard against which all so-called ‘minorities’ are measured, found lacking, and marked as deviations from this (unmarked) ‘white’ norm” (66), yet through the lens of performance, whiteness is viewed as a repetition, a reformulation of a pattern that works to reproduce race performatively, so this performance persona is about White bodies and not about White bodies. As Warren reminds us, this persona “is white-appearing (and that is powerful cultural capital in this environment to be sure), but to just look at that materiality, that body, outside a historical context is to forget the process that has made this white body possible” (Warren, “It really isn’t about you” 448). Addressing whiteness as a privilege

through lectures, readings, performances, or assignments is a chance to confront the ambiguous and contradictory nature of whiteness, and for transformative pedagogy, the failure to understand one's privilege whether white, male, or straight is an opportunity to strive towards social justice. It is the contradictory both/and nature of whiteness that makes confronting whiteness as a privilege a critical juncture for a transformative pedagogy.

Whiteness as a Both/And

In my classroom moments, I asked students to engage in whiteness, to begin their own journey in recovering the past and seeing their actions in light of what has preceded them.
(Warren, "It really isn't about you" 449).

The research on "whiteness as a performance" views White identity as constituted through a stylized repetition of acts, as process-oriented, and as embedded in complex cultural, political, and historical contexts. For example, in the *Letter*, I embody a White female persona caught in the troublesome "both/and" of whiteness and White bodies. In the macro, this woman is in "a system that is beyond her individual control, she is caught up in the machine--she is swept up in the flow. The point is that as part of the machine--she gets benefits. In the end, whiteness is both about her and not about her--it is the both/and that makes this tough" (Warren, "It really isn't about you" 451). The ambiguous, contested, and contextual nature of this "both/and" quality of whiteness performance and its relationship to white bodies is a critical juncture that enables a chance for transformative pedagogy to highlight the porous border between the personal and the political.

It is a conflict between the micro and the macro or the individual and the structure that is causing a critical juncture for this persona. In the micro, this student has become obsessed with her own intentions and marks the performance as being about her (and other white students) actions. This is an invocation of the strategy of individualism where this female persona fails to understand how her actions are in fact reinforcing power structures rather than transgressing them. She (and other white students) cannot see past their individual actions, and instead of thinking reflexively, they view the pedagogy of the instructor as a failure or as oppressive. Given the ambiguous nature of trickster/shapeshifting performance, the student is confused, disoriented, and fragmented, which is an inherent quality of *nepantla* states, and the failure to reflect holistically creates a static identity unwilling to move beyond the individual. As Keating writes, "there is nothing wrong with viewing oneself as an individual," but "the problem arises because they do not see non-'white' people as individuals but instead view them as racially marked and therefore members of specific racialized groups" (*Teaching* 65). The strategic rhetoric of whiteness allows this

persona to invoke race and all its societal baggage without connecting this invocation to her own everyday communicative choices.

When my female persona refers to how she and other White students like studying culture because they “don’t really have a culture,” she is defining White in negative definitions as opposed to a positive definition (Nakayama and Krizek 299). By referring to only those White students that talked to marginalized students, the unstated, silenced implication is that White means not having any blood lines to mark it as unpure. Although her intentions in the micro appear sincere, she fails to move out of the strategy of individualism by centering the conversation on her own white guilt--it is all about her. She gets caught up in the macro machine because she fails to critically reflect on the both/and quality of whiteness. Through trickster/shapeshifter performances, she is seeing herself for possibly the first time as one who has privilege or as one that has the ability to oppress, and although she stops to “help a Mexican or a Black on the way to class,” she has refused the chance to work through failure critically by reflecting on the micro and the macro simultaneously. In other words, she is aware of the values of enacting a transformative pedagogy in the classroom to address whiteness, performance, and advocacy, but she is caught up in the embodied implications of structural inequity within her own everyday, mundane performances of identity. She is trying to address social justice issues and hold onto her White privilege at the same time.

Whiteness as (In)Visible

Whiteness is only marked in reverse. (Nakayama and Krizek 299).

By focusing on the rhetorical construction of whiteness, scholars attempt to understand the visible and invisible nature of whiteness that eludes analysis yet exerts influence over our everyday lives (Nakayama and Krizek 293; Warren, “Whiteness” 193). In my persona of “person of color,” I struggled with how to show whiteness enacted in and by brown bodies, because in introducing a Spanish-speaking student within the performance, I would be calling out the (in)visibility of whiteness not only in prior personas but also in my own failed pedagogical practices. Whiteness as an assemblage of contradictions slithers through challenges to its space through the multiplicity of its contradictions and the dynamism of being both universal and particular (Nakayama and Krizek 302-303). Rhetorical research focused on the strategic and tactical³ power grant-

³ By strategies and tactics, I am referring to the definitions drawn from Michel de Certeau that refer to a strategy as “the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated” and “by contrast with a strategy...a tactic is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus” (de Certeau qtd. in Na-

ed temporarily to people who claim, are forced, or are given this social, cultural, and institutional identifier do not claim an essentialized white subject (Warren, "Whiteness" 193). Like in the White male opening persona and the White female persona from the previous sections, whiteness as a source of identity and difference becomes (in)visible through an ability to be many things at once, to be everything and nothing, and to be always present and always absent (Nakayama and Krizek 302; Warren, "Bodily Excess" 93). The visible and invisible nature of whiteness is a critical juncture in transformative pedagogy that offers a chance to acknowledge whiteness because students and instructors need to "see" white privilege before they can start working through failure in the micro and macro towards social justice.

For instance, the invocation of science (or White as a stable racial identity) privileges the eurocentric traditions of reason, objectivity, and masculinity as opposed to emotion, subjectivity, and femininity. When my person of color persona proclaims himself as standing in for the people of color in the classroom, he acknowledges that students of color stand in a tenuous coalition with their fellow White students, and by making visible the white bodies in the material performance space and the imaginary space of the classroom, this persona inevitably feeds into this invocation of science. In other words, the conflation of whiteness with the label of science masks the fact that race is socially-constructed, and by utilizing privileged cultural currency to propagate a rational stable image of identity (Nakayama and Krizek 300), the paradox of being part of the dominant/oppressor class (Freire 59) and enacting a politics of skin (Alexander and Warren 335) drives this persona to perform strategies that allow the macro structure of whiteness to remain invisible and unexamined. This student of color wants to call out whiteness, but given its strategic rhetorical construction, the persona inevitably must utilize the language of whiteness (i.e., English) to make space for the marginalized bodies in the classroom. Although these students are made marginalized by other students and the instructor, this persona fails to truly interrogate whiteness because he has also fallen into the trap of essentializing racial identity, and therefore, he plunges the classroom space into the strategic rhetoric that only further marks his body as different and marks whiteness as invisible.

Whiteness Studies as a Chance

kayama & Krizek, 295). In other words, Deanna L Fassett and John T. Warren summarize: "Strategies depend on the stability, the commonplace location from which to act; tactics rely on the resistant tremors that engagements with those structures might breed" ("You Get Pushed Back" 24).

Rather than making the center bigger, including more voices and more cultures, whiteness studies demands a critical examination of the center in the hope that the center will fall apart. (Warren, "Whiteness" 197).

There are several risks to researching whiteness and for bringing whiteness studies into the classroom towards the goals of transformative pedagogy; however, there are several chances for social justice if one succeeds or fails. For instance, many scholars worry that studying whiteness only focuses more resources onto the already powerful center and may serve to strengthen the privileges already afforded by this identifier (Keating, *Teaching* 63; Warren, "Whiteness" 199). In my performance, there is an equal number of "White" personas and "Person of Color" personas, but the majority of the performance time is taken up by the White students. Utilizing humor, I performed a White male student that learned about the importance of speaking out against oppressive power structures, yet he is missing some critical piece in his thinking or doesn't quite yet know how to use or hear his voice. Inevitably, he fails to locate his voice and even forgets his prepared quote, which is all this student really had to say anyway, and his angry and violent tirade is seen for what it truly is—empty words. This is an example of a trickster performance that utilizes humor to open up more meaningful space for dialogue in serious situations (Salinas 146, 151). This performance suggests that if we ignore whiteness studies, then a transformative pedagogy gives up on a chance to deconstruct the center. In the end, this student is so close to becoming an ally for transformative politics but needs more skills, more reflexivity, or more time before he can become a stronger advocate for social justice; in short, he needed to fail to learn more about the privileges of whiteness and the difficulties inherent to navigating the both/and quality and the (in)visible nature of whiteness.

Transformative pedagogy is a chance to center the intersectional experiences of the marginalized student and acknowledges feminist, queer, and indigenous bodies and knowledge. In confronting whiteness in the classroom, many teachers and students claim that such a space should be a "safe" place, which "usually translates to mean that the professor lectures to a group of quiet students who respond only when they are called on" (hooks, *Teaching* 39). However, those teachers fail to acknowledge that the classroom space has never been safe for everyone. In my performance, there are several invisible students that are silenced when others have spoken up for them. In creating a performance where every single student joins in a revolution of the classroom, it became clear that some of these silent students would only join this letter if they could voice their concerns directly. For instance, I often share my queer positionality with my students, and although "I understand the complicated nature of naming, of staking a claim and feeling the careful eye of scrutiny, of evaluation, of establishing proof" (Gust and Warren 117). I do this because there is always another queer body hidden within the classroom. For me, graduate school was when I first ex-

perienced a classroom instructed by an openly queer scholar, and this absence of positive queer role models throughout my educational career has affected my self-esteem and self-confidence. I've often questioned my self-worth as a student, teacher, and scholar, so by making myself vulnerable to the emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical trauma of swimming against the heteronormative current, a transformative pedagogy offers a chance to move the center of a space onto marginalized experiences. However, like my students critique, a transformative pedagogy is not always capable of empowering all voices in a classroom, nor is it an antidote for student resistance to a social justice agenda. Drawing on borderlands theory and critical (communication/performance) pedagogy, a transformative pedagogy is a chance to acknowledge a process of striving for social justice that must be pursued and (re)performed regardless of failure, and the possibility for a different performance in the classroom is the potential chance for transformation.

In my performance, the narrative comes to a climax when the body of the "Teacher" is possessed by an Earth deity who literally lies underneath all the students and teacher and calls on the history and politics of colonization and land exploitation to critique the entire system of education. This persona advocates for a pedagogy of the land that focuses on how we are implicated in the violent history of the land, the theft of land from indigenous communities, and the socially-constructed nature of owning land (Pendleton Jiménez 220-221). Transformative pedagogy is a project informed by critically theories of education, but it is fundamentally rooted in indigenous knowledge and praxis that actively cultivates a praxis for collective agency, that interrogates both democracy and indigenous sovereignty, and that is grounded in hope (Grande 250). Inevitably, the Earth persona must shake her belly to remind the students and teacher of their place in the world, and this female deity is the final earthquake that destroys the identity of the teacher and thrusts this educator into that traumatic in/between state of *nepantla*. Drawing on Chicana/o studies and Red pedagogy, a transformative pedagogy is a chance to honor the land and remember indigenous knowledge by challenging whiteness as a decolonial project that "makes no claim to political neutrality but rather engages a method of analysis and social inquiry that troubles the capitalist-imperialist aims of unfettered competition, accumulation and exploitation" (Grande 250). Although there are risks to addressing whiteness in the classroom, the opportunity to center feminist, queer, and indigenous bodies and knowledges is a chance to break apart the center and move teachers and students into more empowered states of being in the classroom space.

"A Letter to My Students"

"You must understand that when anybody, bruja or curandera, priest or sinner, tampers with the fate of a [(wo)]man that sometimes a chain of events is set into motion over

which no one will have ultimate control. You must be willing to accept this responsibility” (Anaya 85). Can you not see how I have already blessed you with the great power to shapeshift? But, many students want to deal with whiteness, woman-of-color feminism, and advocacy in atmospheres of comfort and want to feel safe always. For example, in a classroom discussion in one of my graduate-level courses, one of my colleagues explicitly stated that “this is all new to me and I really need a safe space right now.” Mother Earth, can she feel safe? Dupe, that is not my indigenous name! I am Coatlicue, the serpent skirted goddess of creation and destruction, and you think I am here to simply offer products from my body to painlessly heal all maladies of body, mind, and spirit? Interventions by a curandera do not stop processes of power but merely shift power into different paths and therefore new processes for people to maneuver. Lament for a curandera if you wish, but a curandera does not have the ability that you seek. It is a process not a product! (Gutierrez-Perez, A Letter to My Students)

Before undertaking this auto/ethnographic report, I attempted to respond to the *Letter from My Students* through a performance entitled *A Letter to My Students*. In this response letter, I created a performance narrative where the teacher persona responds to the student revolution by failing to transform from a process-oriented ontology (*nagualismo*) to a product-oriented one (*curanderismo*) in order to join the resistance that his students started. He yearned for a way to heal the maladies and ills of his students for them, and he desperately was searching for a new ontology to the classroom that could satisfy everyone. In the borderland cultures between the U.S. and Mexico, a curandera is a folk-healer or shaman that cures physical and spiritual illness with herbs and magic. However, another way to see the curandera is as a historian (Morales). As an historian, the curandera’s body archives the repertoires of her people and culture through storytelling. But “storytelling is not neutral. Curandera historians make this explicit, openly naming our partisanship, our intent to influence how people think” (Morales 25). As my teacher persona discovered in *A Letter to My Students*, a curandera is not a product-oriented ontology, and in trying to archive the histories of his students for them, he fails because he is not allowing his students to fail and be reflexive. Additionally, he was not allowing himself to accept and be reflexive of his own failures as a teacher. To be clear, I am *not* claiming an identity as a nagual or a curandera, but these well-researched indigenous symbols and images (Anzaldúa; Caputi; Keating, *Transformation*; Lara; Pineau; Moraga; Morales; Salinas; Vásquez, *Zaytoun*) are useful metaphors to replace the old and dead metaphors that are no longer working to transform classroom spaces (Anzaldúa, *Reader*). In reconsidering our metaphors, students and teachers are empowered to embrace failure not as a product, but as a process of critical reflexivity, embodied transformative pedagogy, and striving for justice.

A transformative pedagogy must be open to failure because confronting whiteness as a privilege, as both/and, and as (in)visible is always already embedded in politics, ambiguity, and contradictions. So failure is an inevitable

truth to social justice work. A transformative pedagogy does not advocate for a teacher-actor that reduces a transformative agenda to style or passive theatre. Nor does it advocate for a teacher-artist that imposes structure and borders onto creativity (Pineau; Warren, "Whiteness" 195). Rather, as a teacher-performer engaging the classroom with educational poetics, play, process, and power, a transformative pedagogy acknowledges that identity is a complex matrix of multiple and always overlapping selves performing in relationship to the context and communities in which they are emerged (Pineau 29). By purposely performing a praxis of ambiguity, liminality, chance, and failure, a teacher-performer remains flexible to create and utilize liminal spaces to stay "relevant and influential by reinventing [oneself] in different ways to meet new and expanding contexts" (Salinas 155). Although using poetics to play with the power and processual nature of borders and liminal states can often fail (Salinas 151), a transformative pedagogy understands that there is a chance for transformation in failure because the imagining of new performances and ways to interact with the classroom space plays a role in the reflexive process of putting our scattered and traumatized identities back together after confronting oppressive power structures, such as whiteness.

In the end, a transformative pedagogy uses the chance of failure to keep moving, shifting, and striving towards social justice. Through the performance of *A Letter from My Students*, I have confronted my fears associated with enacting a transformative pedagogy in the classroom. Embodying and analyzing my failures as a teacher meant placing my own mestizo body on the line and holding myself accountable to a praxis of ambiguity, liminality, chance, and failure. Additionally, it is humbling to accept and share that my performance of *A Letter to My Students* was a failure. As a performance created and performed alongside *A Letter from My Students*, I received yet ignored critical advice from mentors and colleagues that suggested changes or that critiqued the response as reestablishing problematic power binaries between teacher and student. A part of my failure lies in creating a response that took a position of individual responsibility without taking into account the larger systems of power at work within higher education classrooms, such as the critical junctures of whiteness. In trying to confront my pedagogical fears, I (re)created through a navel-gazing performance just another teacher trying to regain control of his classroom rather than a teacher joining a revolution of higher education spaces. However, in this failure, I have remembered that addressing whiteness, performance, and advocacy in higher education is a chance to transform spaces through a process of reflexivity and critical thinking. Reframing failure as a process over product can help move us toward a vision of transforming the educational system for everyone. By doing so, teachers and students alike through the recognition and playful manipulation of ambiguity, liminality, chance, and the ever present potential of

productive destruction can embrace the best of what education can and should be.

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