

The Calculus of Erasure

[Response to “*This is a Performance about Voice*”: *A Pledge for Racialized Pedagogies*]

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Erasure is the name of the game here, in our post-Enlightenment educational institutions. It is, as Derrida tells us, an “economy of erasure” (91) that erases the particularities of both teachers and students. Charles Bingham, in his essay, “Derrida on Teaching,” delves into the complexities of this economy. His thoughts help frame my own response, to these performances of identity, presence, race, and absence.

The economy of erasure has, at its heart, the impossible imperative to erase the teacher from the educational interaction in order to clearly transmit knowledge. Bingham writes:

In order for content to become apparent to the student, the teacher-as-signifier must become a clear window onto content. The teacher must enable the student to see content clearly. The teacher-as-signifier must be erased so that the content-as-signified can come into view in and of itself. (19-20)

But teaching is representational work, one that is inclined to all the “slipperiness” Derrida sees in *différance*. Bingham sees that same slipperiness between the “teacher-as-signifier” and the “content-as-signified.” A teacher can never completely erase her/himself from this enterprise. He or she selects and emphasizes content. The content cannot be separated from its immediate contexts, least of all, the context of the teacher, including visible markers of racial identities or an apparent lack thereof.

It’s no mistake that these performers begin their narratives as students. It is our first experience of teaching. And students also figure into this “calculus of erasure” (22). Bingham suggests that students are also placed under erasure. The narratives of Richie, Cornelius, Elena, and David, illuminate the erasure of the student body, corporate and corporeal, that begins any process of becoming a teacher.

Student Performance Evaluation I:

Your first assignment, Richie, Cornelius, Elena, and David, was to become **empty receptacles** of classroom content. You were asked to remove your marked bodies, your histories, your experiences from classroom interaction. Each of you failed to perform this task to greater and lesser degrees:

- A. Cornelius: Please do not talk about your personal experiences so much in class. These experiences fill you, make you an unfit recipient of knowledge. Feel the pinch; let it siphon your resistance so that you will be small enough to fit behind the desk. Sit quietly. Listen and recite. Do not incite your

neighbors. If your behavior does not change, I will have to place a note in your permanent record.

- B. Elena: Your performance lacks credibility. The details of your “journey” to “finding your voice” take the audience’s focus away from the content and place it on you. *Your* voice is distinctive and dramatic. One of the project requirements is the use of the impersonal, objective voice. “Finding *your* voice” is only a barrier to completing the Erasure Project.
- C. Richie: your teachers are not “White.” They are teachers. Inserting bodies-theirs or yours-into this presentation is simply a distraction. More importantly, you have failed to use any of the course concepts. “Whiteness,” “Asianness,” and “absence” are ideas foreign to this course.
- D. David: You shouldn’t write your secret name, your secret body onto the projects of hegemonic power. Erase the name that makes your racialized body present. Remember, it’s easier to read the assignment if it’s printed on white paper.

Overall, please read the directions with greater care. It is important that you learn how to absent yourself from a classroom early on. Without this crucial skill, future teachers may find that classrooms become contested, conflicted spaces. Your revisions are due immediately.

As students, we quickly learn to discipline our bodies. The ideal student body is still, silent, and invisible. Richie, Cornelius, Elena, and David’s student narratives demonstrate Derrida’s formula for creating absent student bodies from erased teaching bodies: “a body reducing a body to nothing but a body or a nonbody” (80).

As teachers, it is easy to participate in this economy: because it is habitual, because we come to knowledge mostly through teachers working to present content as “separate and independent from the teacher” (Bingham 21). All of this erasure serves to discipline all the bodies present in the classroom. The payoff is knowledge that appears lucid: rational, easily understood, and shining. The payment is oneself.

Bingham is right; it’s a quandary:

The paradox of being a teacher, then, is that I must want myself to go away. By honoring my content, I dishonor myself as a teacher. By honoring myself as a teacher rather than honoring my content, I cease to exist as a teacher since a teacher is not a teacher without something to teach. (21)

So a teacher cannot be a teacher without erasing oneself as a teacher.

Instructor Performance Evaluation:

As teachers, the demands of erasure change, from the demands of emptiness to the demands of **transparency**. Professors Esquibel, Hanley-Tejeda, Fair, and Hao are clearly thoughtful educators; however, their abilities to successfully “get out of the way” so that students can focus on content is questionable. I am concerned for my younger colleagues, not only because they possess visibly different, racialized bodies

which interfere with the perfect translucence for which any good teacher should strive, but also because they seem to desire the presence of their bodies in the classroom. Their visibility, particularity, and opacity in the classroom are of great concern.

- A. Professor Esquibel states that her “body in the classroom cannot hide.” And students clearly resist and resent that visibility, those particularities of her body through which they must see the content, the classroom, themselves. She is blocking their view of the right answers. Her body is not on the test.
- B. Professor Hanley-Tejeda’s “white chalk outline” is a clever and innovative way to achieve our diversity teaching goals: he “passes” as a white, transparent teacher who gets to speak about race because it appears that there’s nothing at stake for him here. However, his desire to show students the complications of racial identity through his name, his body, and his history, are causes for concern.
- C. Professor Fair is engaged in questionable classroom practices. He appears to be offering his spicy, salty soul food as food for the soul. This discussion of spiritual nourishment seems out of place in a higher education context. We are in the business of learning, not learning about Professor Fair’s soul.
- D. Professor Hao is clearly offering his students food, history, language and ritual unrelated to the student learning objectives established by the Educational Achievement Committee. Furthermore, Professor Hao seems to be paying particular attention to his Asian and Asian-American students. He does not offer experiences centered around traditional “American” culture. What benefit is this course to non-Asian students? In the future, Professor Hao may want to consider including Thanksgiving or Independence Day in his classroom activities, for the sake of balance.

As a result of my teaching observations, I have grave concerns about the professors’ “fit” with our department and mission. This institution is dedicated to providing measurable success for its students. The learning achieved through this “embodied experience” will be impossible to evaluate using our institution’s instruments. For these reasons, I find that I cannot recommend Drs. Esquibel, Hanley-Tejeda, Fair, and Hao for positions in the Department of Erasure and Transparency.

Escaping the economy of erasure, Bingham tells us, is not truly possible. This is due to what Derrida calls the pedagogical “scene,” where power is constituted through the effects of that very scene, “no matter what the political or ideological nature of the power in place around it” (79). The educational institution grants us power over students in a classroom. There are many ways to negotiate some liberatory space within that scene, but one cannot ever step outside of power altogether. It circulates through classroom relations, settles on the desks and lectern like chalk dust, and is imprinted on all the paper we exchange like a watermark.

So as a teacher, one has institutional power; however, as teachers with bodies that are more or less marked with racial difference, the institutional power shifts. It doesn’t

settle upon those marked bodies easily. While “people of color may perform their own manifestations of Whiteness” as Professor Esquibel notes, race is not easy to transcend, particularly in a scene laden with power. Students struggle to equalize or sometimes seize power in classrooms. They come to class with “unconsciously held beliefs and assumptions rooted in white supremacy” as hooks tells us in her essay on being “Black, Female, and Academic” (ch. 17, loc. 1229-1252). And really, don’t we all come class with a degree in racist relations, teachers and students alike? Power can’t be checked at the classroom door.

Bingham offers the somewhat unsatisfying solution of encouraging active learners, ones who are never satisfied with what they’ve learned, whether it’s the canon or anti-racist pedagogy (29-30). That’s not a bad place to start, but these narratives reveal that there’s more to be done. Professors Hao and Fair offer ritual and performance to their students. Professors Esquibel and Hanley-Tejeda weave their full, marked bodies into the curriculum. These teachers enact Elyse Pineau’s “educational poetics,” reframing “the whole educational enterprise as a mutable and ongoing ensemble of narratives and performances” (23). The entire constellation of performance pedagogy offers us “a pedagogy that shifts the focus from dormant bodies to lived/experienced bodies,” as John T. Warren tells us (102). Those “lived/experienced” bodies resist erasure. They refuse to disappear. They draw attention to themselves and the “scene of power” in which they are positioned. They ask hard questions with no clear answers.

A Performance Pedagogy Pledge

*I pledge alliance to the multiple, contradictory voices in our classrooms,
and the histories for which they stand,
many bodies,
moving through their experiences,
individual and communal,
with liberty and justice for all.*

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