

“This is a Performance about Voice”: A Pledge for Racialized Pedagogies

Elena Esquibel, Cornelius C. Fair, David Hanley-Tejeda & Richie Neil Hao

I. Student Narratives

Cornelius

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, that our current educational system is fundamentally flawed. It is designed to produce obedient and civil-educated subjects, while excluding the needs and concerns of the Black, Brown, and Yellow students. I argue more voices must be heard, more experiences must be experienced, and more teachers must be willing to teach critical learning tools that *teach* students how they influence the landscape of our future and more teachers must be willing to *learn* from their students to gain a deeper understanding of the effects of a broken system.

Cornelius, “stop talking!” There was absolutely no talking during the reciting of the pledge in Mrs. Teal. She thought students should be appreciative of the opportunities they were afforded as American students. I remember standing, reciting the pledge with pride, never questioning the micro and macro politics embedded within the very act of standing, reciting, and displaying my affections towards my country. Looking about, reciting the pledge every morning permitted me and others an opportunity to actively develop and understand how patriotism works (communicating European traditions and values). I’m able to see how my Christian values were manicured each morning. I’m able to understand how I’ve come to love my country. I’m able to sit straight in desks. I’m able to identify the politics of ritualization across educational borders.

I attended a school where there was no justice. I learned as a child that Christopher Columbus sailed the ocean blue and discovered America. I learned I was just another Black child chasing the American dream; a dream that Langston Hughes reminded me is deferred, and rotten to its core. I learned that singing *Lift Every Voice*

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and Sing, by James Weldon Johnson was only sung during Black history month. I learned that the old Jim Crow days in South, compelled African-American’s to speak out against the racial injustice. I learned how to be obedient. I learned how to sit in smaller desks. I learned how to adapt to stricter rules. I learned what it meant to be stripped of my unpredictability as a student.

One day, Mrs. Teal, my fourth grade teacher, caught me talking during the pledge, and she shouted: “Cornelius, didn’t I tell you to stop talking?” She called me to front of class and pinched the skin off my arm as a reminder to the class. “No talking.” It was in this moment, I learned through physical disciplining and punishment how students were supposed to *act* in classrooms.

Richie

At the tender age of 13 (as a Chinese male raised in the Philippines), I became a part of the US classroom culture. I was an eighth-grader when I first (and last) attended Grandview Junior High School in Valinda, California, a suburban area east of Los Angeles. My only year of attendance at Grandview brought me a lot of difficulties and confusion. You see, I did not realize that “minority” students heavily populated the school. This was a shock only because while growing up in the Philippines, I always thought of the US as a white society. But even in the midst of “other” minorities, my Asianness at Grandview was hard to perform freely mainly because many Latino, African American and white kids would make fun of me every time I brought my “Asian” lunch, which always consisted of white rice and entrees that smelled funny, at least to them. That was the first time I felt I was different. My Asian immigrant body had uneasiness in it that I never experienced before. I knew then that I had to “change” this body to fit in—in anyway I can to be accepted and appreciated.

A year later, my family and I moved to Alhambra, California where I attended the local high school. Like Valinda, it is a suburb of Los Angeles, but it is a medium-sized city that is considered a second “Chinatown,” in a way that neighborhoods are marked by the people who inhabit the area. Alhambra is surrounded by Chinese stores, supermarkets, and restaurants and is mostly populated by Chinese people. Hence, the population of the high school I attended was mostly Chinese. Yet, despite the fact that both schools I attended had predominately non-white students, I wondered why the teachers were mostly, if not almost all, white.

I never truly questioned why that was the case—white teachers dominated the classrooms where I was a student sitting next to other students who did not look anywhere close to the racial markings of our teachers. Because our white teachers dominating the classroom spaces we inhabited, my classmates and I only learned about “US history” in which whiteness was celebrated and represented the US culture. The confrontation with Asianness in the history class was really a confrontation with absence or my own invisibility. The feeling of being in the presence of one’s own absence is actually a feeling of being invalidated in the company of others. I felt that

my particular difference did not matter and that the historical significance of my ethnic heritage was not worth noting.

Like society at large, the classroom is a public space that often ignores the bodies of students who are not members of the white population. Not having many Asian teachers who celebrated our Asianness when I was a teenager prevented me and other Asian students the right to be recognized culturally in the classroom or, at least, to see our own identity and potential reflected on the face and body of the teacher. Hardly any of the teachers I had mentioned anything about the Lunar New Year, the Mooncake Festival or any other specific contributions of Asian Americans that would have empowered my sense of being in the world.

Elena

I remember the first time I realized I was different. I remember the first time I realized the inevitable binary of difference with negative terms. I remember the first time I was pushed unexpectedly into the margins. I was in kindergarten. I got into a fight with my best friend. I cannot remember what we were fighting about and I cannot remember why the argument escalated to words that continue to sting my being. I will never forget when my best friend squinted her eyes, clenched her teeth, and uttered “Blond is the color of gold. Brown is the color of dirt.” She turned and her blond hair slapped my brown face as she whipped her head around. I couldn’t respond. I couldn’t even move. I was silent and still. I realized I didn’t have a voice.

Throughout the majority of my education, I was an average student, even below average sometimes. When I reflect back on my educational experiences, I can’t remember ever really connecting with what I was learning. I didn’t care and nobody seemed to care much about me. Fortunately, I was still accepted into college, but when I got there, my poor grades reflected my lack of interest, motivation, and isolation.

Gloria Anzaldúa says, “For silence to transform into speech, sounds and words, it must traverse through our female bodies. For the body to give birth to utterance, the human entity must recognize itself [. . .] Because our bodies have been stolen, brutalized or numbed, it is difficult to speak from/through them [. . .] When she transforms silence into language, a woman transgresses” (xxii). During my junior year in undergrad, I took two courses that forever changed my path—Chicana/Latina Studies and Women’s Studies. A light inside me turned on. My world was literally turned upside down. The C’s and D’s on my transcript quickly turned into A’s. I realized how I felt silenced in traditional classrooms. I realized why I never related to what I was learning before. I realized there were other ways of viewing the world, and realized new ways of understanding my place in it. I realized that for the first time I related to what I was learning and had an outlet to name and express my experiences. I realized how my body has been ritualized, racialized, politicized, and gendered. Something within me changed. I transgressed. I realized I had a voice. I discovered my voice.

David

For fourteen years my name was David Hanley. David Hanley. David Hanley. Hanley. Hanley. Hanley. For years, the public transcript of my identity, as a student has been “predominately” white, predetermined-white. Dominant-white. Lately, I’ve been feeling that consciousness came too late for me—I grew up in a predominantly white area. I went to predominately white schools. Pre-dominant. Pre-determined. Deter. Detest. Determine. De Tour. The Mind. The body, I can’t salsa dance. I can’t tongue swirl. I can’t roll my r’s.

Deter the mind. Detour the body. I was in kindergarten: I remember my fellow students on the playground wanted to know why I was dirty. I was tan, brown, golden brown, and the white kids wanted to know why I was dirty all the time. Didn’t I bathe? I was brown, like-color. I was learning. Color theories. What colors you have to mix to make brown. How much white you have to add to brown until you forget, and you start thinking it’s just white, or crème, or tan. Theories of the Flesh-color. Color recognition. Cognition. Re-cognize. Eyes are mirrors. Hanley. “You don’t even look Mexican. Hanley.” Still, my father would often tell me that I had another last name, and that my mother’s Mexican last name was “*Tejeda*.” While there was the public passing of my name, there was simultaneously a private transcript, of my secret name, my secret mark, my secret body, that a “predominately white” context, and upbringing always— sometimes tacitly, sometimes overtly— asked me to suppress.

I remember in the third grade, I wrote the last name *Tejeda* instead of Hanley on a math test. My third grade teacher called me up and made me ERASE it. Erase my name. Erase the name that doesn’t belong to my body. Erase it. Take the eraser, rub the mark until it disappears. Fades away. Erased. A Race to the finish. Error Race. Wrong Race. You couldn’t keep up. The demands on the body. Erase my...

II. Teacher Narratives

Richie

After years of negotiating my Asianness as a student, I eventually found a way to make my Asianness visibly present—through the celebration of the Lunar New Year in *my* own classroom. Several years ago, when I became a public speaking teacher as a

Graduate Teaching Associate, I initiated my students the idea of having a class potluck in celebration of the Lunar New Year. Perhaps for the first time, many of my Asian and Asian American students appreciated the fact that an Asian instructor had initiated such a celebration that recognizes an aspect of their culture. This experience allowed me to reconnect with my own absent body in conjunction to my students' bodies as a sense of familiarity and belonging.

While growing up in the US academy, I could not find my Asianness in the classroom. Even though an Asian American month was often celebrated in schools I attended, I was often conflicted with the idea of cultural diversity that celebrates Asian Americans does not continue throughout the year. Should I be happy that only 30 days are devoted to celebrate Asian Americans in this country? From the Chinese Exclusion Act to the internment of Japanese Americans and other injustices that Asian Americans experienced throughout the existence of the US as a nation, it is hard for me to imagine why we are often erased from the US experience. Much like that of the US experience, my own experience in the academy lacked my own history. Therefore, the Lunar New Year celebration served as an opportunity for my students and me to see a part of us in this cultural practice.

Like other “non-white” holidays, the Lunar New Year is not a recognized U.S. federal holiday. However, celebrating the Lunar New Year in my own classrooms allowed my students and me to celebrate something that challenges the erasure of our Asianness. My students and I did not need the government's approval to make the Lunar New Year as a recognized holiday. After all, how long should we wait for our holiday to be legitimized as “American”?

As one would expect in a classroom potluck, there were different foods and drinks set on four desk chairs set horizontally in the middle of the room. While the potluck seemed very simple, I felt that this was a classroom moment that validated many of my Asian and Asian American students. After all, different Asian and Asian American experiences in academia are often ignored—as was my experience as a student with white teachers even in the midst of other Asian students. In my classroom, intra-cultural representation existed where I, an Asian instructor, was performing my Asian identity in front of my Asian students. The Lunar New Year celebration provided an opportunity for my Asian students and me to find our bodies and identities in the classroom. For the first time in a long time, I reclaimed my Asianness without the need to compromise who I was. My racialized Asian body was no longer invisible and was proudly to be marked as such. Even though I could not confront and celebrate my Asianness in the classroom as a student, I can finally do so as an educator in ways that could reconstruct Asian and Asian American identities in the US academy.

Cornelius

I pledge Allegiance that teaching is like good soul food, prepared out of love!

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Teaching is like good soul food, soul food that makes your heart smile and your stomach full. Teaching is like good soul food prepared with the perfect blend of herbs and spices. These spices linger on my tongue, like students’ experiences linger to their bodies, informing and transforming how they understand the sociopolitical undertone that underscores teaching, learning, and preparing soul food. Teaching is like good soul food because teaching and soul food requires careful preparation. Reading, reflecting, and remembering ensures students a rich flavor of life. Teaching like soul food is culturally sedimented because teaching requires daily practice, self-reflexivity coupled with love, and a commitment for challenging traditional practices that silence us. As Audre Lorde reminds me, “We can learn to work and speak when we are afraid in the same way we have learned to work and speak when we are tired. For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of the silence will choke us” (44). Like silence, too much soul food can choke and even cause death. This is why teachers must pay close attention to their politics and the amount of salt needed because teaching, like soul food, is never completely about you. Teaching like soul food requires you to know what ingredients are needed to prepare the perfect soul meal.

Finally, good soul food, like good teaching, is a mixture of culture that is political. Hell, soul food is political as well as teaching. Good soul food like good teaching blends the micro and macro rules to highlight a larger system of oppression, an oppression that has standardized our performances in schools and has created a health scare amongst African-American and Latino communities. If teaching is like good soul food, teachers must incorporate nuanced tactics and ingredients in order to nourish our minds and bodies.

David¹

[Hey me!] *Not me. No, not me.* This is where my skin ends. There is no pedagogy quite like standing here and declaring myself a person of color. It is the scariest thing in the world. *Not me.* There is no body like the visual, no pedagogy quite like the mirror. *Not me. No, not me.* There is no ascription quite like disavow. These are a politics of disappearances As a teacher in the classroom, I am guilty of identity theft, but the crime is more like self-mutilation. I am the thief. I am the stolen. I am the victim. I am the stolen, and the identity I steal is my own.

This is where my skin ends.

In front of the classroom, my body is how it has been taught to be. Outline me in white chalk, Mr. Hanley-Tejeda? These are the politics of disappearances. Can you even see me Mr. Hanley-Tejeda? Can you even hear me, Mr. Hanley-Tejeda. Who are you, Mr. Hanley-Tejeda? Can you even see yourself? Can you even hear yourself?

¹ This section of the script utilizes the trope of repetition and fragmentation to offer a textual mosaic

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There is no hybridity quite like power. Passing up in order not to be passed up, passing proves how power flows—the politics of disappearances. Am I standing in front of myself?

I have the privilege to teach about racism in the classroom without appearing as bias or politically loaded as my darker colleagues of color. Hybrid in the conference room, and the hotel lobby—my passing body picks and chooses when to identify. No hybridity quite like power. No double consciousness, quite like white privilege. Not me, but the politics of disappearances. Mr. Hanley-Tejeda. Not me. No avowal like “not me,” Mr. Hanley-Tejeda. *In the classroom, can my body even bear the weight of its own name? No Tejeda in my face. No mestizo in my nose. No mestizaje in my curriculum. No body in front of this class. No body brown. Nobody bent. No español in my poetry. No esperar in my pedagogy. No identity. No hope.*

Identities of Hope:

Can I be a person of color in front of the class? This is an identity of hope. This is the politics of appearances. Aimee Carrillo Rowe reminds us that: “The command to longing is one that you, reader, ‘be’ something that you are (not), but may not think of ‘yourself’ as because you (especially the Western reader) have been hailed as a subject through countless articulations of ‘Individuality’ [Be white, be right.] It is signaling toward a process that places one- self at the edge of one’s self and leaning and tipping toward the ‘others’ to whom you belong, or with whom you long to be—or those who are ‘you.’” (17). A movement beyond the illusion of self to one in motion.

In front of the class, I am a body that does not coincide with itself. It coincides with its own movement, its own transition, its own variation. In front of my class, I long to be longing. I will name my hybridity. It is difficult, and I will make mistakes, but I will strive to name my struggle, my particular racialized story, and stand in solidarity as biracial person of color in the classroom. So that I may avow: this is where my skin begins.

Elena

My body in the classroom cannot hide. The politics of the body present. I will most likely be the first Latina instructor my students have, and may ever have in their college education or entire schooling. My body in the classroom cannot hide. The politics of the body present, make my flesh speak volumes. I can’t hide, but my voice can.

One of my worst and most memorable educational experiences was during my first semester as a Graduate Teaching Assistant. Angela was a student in my introductory interpersonal communication course. From the very first day, Angela was disruptive and resistant. At first I brushed off Angela’s remarks and hoped she would settle down with time. On the contrary, Angela’s behavior grew worse as she

became a ringleader bringing other students under her influence. I dreaded teaching the class and often cried in the privacy of my office.

What made matters worse, was the fact that Angela was a woman of color. Whether I talked about race and gender or axioms of interpersonal communication, Angela was resistant. As John Warren reveals, performances of whiteness cannot be essentialized to the body alone. To understand the complex social power of whiteness, scholars must recognize ideological factors that produce the material body through reiterative and performative acts. Thus, performances of whiteness not only affect white bodies, but people of color may perform their own manifestations of whiteness as well.

I talked to other graduate students about the difficulty I was having, but they shrugged their shoulders and did not share my experiences. My white colleagues asked me questions and tried to figure out what I was doing wrong. I struggled with their interrogation. Why was this only happening to me? What was I doing wrong?

Early on I did not fully understand the potential ramifications of my politicized body. I went to my mentor and he asked me to think about what it might mean for my students to have a woman of color as an instructor? What did it mean for them to have a Latina in the front of the classroom? Studies reveal that Latina/os often must overcome stigmatization and face alienating practices among both students and faculty in higher education (Solorzano and Yosso). Instead of blaming myself as the sole problem in my classroom, as my white cohort assumed, the notion of the politicized body enabled me to complicate this deductive rationalization.

My experience with Angela, serves as one example of the many challenges I face as a woman of color in the classroom. My experiences in front of the classroom have led me not to feel safe with my students. When I talk about the politics of my body, my race, my gender, my agenda is written on my body. I have foreground my politics in the classroom and I have received rewarding experiences, but the majority of the reactions I encounter are resistance. This struggle, this resistance, takes a large toll on me and my body. How can I be silent about the very politics that changed me and gave me voice? In many ways, silence has become a mechanism of survival.

Like Bernadette Calafell, I offer these stories to center the experiences of women of color in the academy, "to give flesh to an intersectional perspective of identity" (365) and to add to the experiences of Others in the classroom. I am left wondering how our bodies impact our agendas, our privileges or the marginalization we experience in the classroom? How are identity markers read differently on our bodies? What hides, what is voiced, and what is silenced? I ask you to think about how your body is written on? What does it say?

III. Pledging for Color in the Classroom: A Counter Pledge

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Richie: I pledge to affirmative action pedagogy, which is a pedagogy that “seeks to ensure that we bear witness to marginalized voices in our classrooms, even at the minor cost of limiting dominant voices” (Boler 4).

Cornelius: I pledge to teach a critical pedagogy that takes into account my experiences as a student of color, cultivating my students with an awareness of race in the classroom.

Elena: I pledge allegiance to my voice and to continuing to find my voice as a woman of color in the classroom. In the face of resistance and when I sometimes fall into silence, I pledge to remember my voice. I pledge to give my voice flesh. I pledge to break barriers with my tongue.

David: I pledge to err on the side of compassion as an educator. I pledge to have compassion for my students and myself, so that, together, we may keep going. Far from perfect, critical performance pedagogy is a political tool that speaks to that which would otherwise remain hidden. Erased. I pledge to use performance pedagogy as a tool to re-trace and name histories’ historical silences. I pledge allegiance to a subversive identity politics in the classroom, striving to find a safe space for our hidden subjectivities. Remembering, we must be brave to find voice for our many names.

Richie: Why do you pledge?

Cornelius: How do you pledge?

Elena: Who do you pledge?

David: When do you pledge?

All: What do you pledge?

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