Casual Racism and Stuttering Failures

An ethics for classroom engagement

JILL DOLAN

This essay concerns the eruption of 'casual racism' in two different graduate seminars and my failure as an instructor to address it head-on in the moment. These incidents represent for me times when my pedagogical ideals butted up against my own personal limitations and against intractable racist, sexist and heterosexist social and institutional structures, and highlighted for me the subtle, rarely articulated contract that holds together the progressive classroom. That is, these incidents underlined that the risks I think I'm taking in the classroom are built on a presumption of political and ideological agreement that most students don't openly challenge. When they do, those instances become nearly Brechtian in how they foreground the tacit assumptions we take for granted. The pedagogical failures I'll discuss here represented those moments when a student boldly or inadvertently breeched decorum and unmasked the coercion that founds my proudly progressive strategies. What I'm calling 'casual racism' were moments of injurious speech (see Butler 1995, 1997) that they thrust into classroom conversations with no intent to be malicious and with no awareness that anything they said might be perceived as offensive. Even after teaching for twenty-five years, I retain a visceral but rather inchoate memory of these two moments of failure, etched as they are in the hues of shame at how I behaved after these students made their remarks, and in the pungent, lingering aftertaste of my inability to respond quickly or appropriately.

Those of us with political ideals – and especially those who also aren't male or white or heterosexual; that is, whose personal identities remain marginal in the academy – often want our classrooms to be utopic oases. For me, that means a place where we can address tough questions but still treat one another with deep respect, even when we risk disagreement. For other teachers, that means creating a 'safe space', a counter-public where the pain and frequent humiliations of moving through daily life can be offset. The highly touted 'learning communities' we strive to establish in our classrooms come burdened with our own and our students' high expectations and sometimes unarticulated presumptions about ideology and politics, methods and strategies.

Progressive teachers sometimes feel that our own idealistic beliefs in the socially ameliorating effectiveness of our instruction will magically influence our students, implicitly schooling them in, for example, non-racist classroom practices. The first day of class each semester, for instance, I openly position myself in my course introductions as a feminist, as a lesbian, as a Jew and as an instructor who engages critical pedagogy and student-centred learning. If I think carefully about this first-day confession of my political and identitarian predilections, I would have to say that part of my aim is to signal my own investments. I want to let students know without quite saying so that how we speak to one another and what we say should be influenced by a commitment to social justice that makes speech acts always already ideological. But because I'm quite concerned not to appear dogmatic, politically rigid or like the 'tenured radical' on whom the Right harps (see Kimball 1990), the political frame of my classrooms is more often implicit than explicit, especially when I'm teaching courses that don't overtly name their content in the title ('Feminist

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Theory and Performance', for instance, generates different expectations than 'Research Methods'). The incidents I want to worry in this essay, in fact, demonstrate that sometimes, presuming every student in my class has subscribed to my implicitly articulated programme can lead to dicey situations that are difficult to address.

From 1999–2008, I taught in the Department of Theatre and Dance at the University of Texas at Austin, where the experiences I want to consider here took place. Our MA/MFA/PhD programme in what we called Performance as Public Practice (PPP) focused on multiple applications. We considered the degree's purview to be scholarship, historiography, dramaturgy, community-based theatre practice and teaching, devised theatre, Boalian theatre for social change, adaptation from literature or film to performance, and a host of other occupations and styles of theatre-making intimately connected to the public sphere.[1] PPP had an avowedly political perspective on the production of knowledge and a keen interest in mixing theory and practice to hone the skills of an ideal student we called, after Carol Becker, the 'artist/scholar/citizen' (see Becker 2000).

As head of the PPP programme, I taught mostly graduate seminars. Actors and designers of various persuasions, as well as MA and PhD students, were sometimes required to take my courses. For example, Supervised Teaching in Theatre and Dance (which we called 'Pedagogy') was necessary for graduate students who would teach at UT as assistant instructors (lecturers who write the syllabus, conduct the classes and grade as the instructor of record). Some of my more content-driven seminars were electives and attracted MFAs from the department's numerous 'practical' degree programmes, as well as PPP students. The grad students, from what I could observe, were mutually respectful across degree programmes. But in two of my seminars over my nine years at UT, the codes of political correctness that had been tacitly adopted by the PPP programme were inadvertently revealed as tenuous, fragile and not as progressive as I thought by students from the department's MFA programmes who lacked experience with the ways we agreed to agree about politics and (frankly) to tiptoe around race. What I explicate here as my 'stuttering failure' literally represents my own difficulty speaking when confronted with the casual, unthought racism of two white students unaccustomed to treading lightly and respectfully around race and ethnicity. Since they mostly trained in classrooms in which identity was not considered overtly by their instructors, their presumptions were unexamined, easily uncorked and not at all tempered by the anxiety of those white people who are more well-meant about race. In many ways, although these two artists – one an actor, one a dancer – instigated the uncomfortable experiences I want to parse, they revealed how the silence of PPP students made them complicit in the racism these artists casually enacted. They also brought to stunning visibility the political hegemony of the PPP programme that, even as head of the programme, I rarely articulated directly.[2]

THE ELECTIVE

In the first instance, in my spring 2003 'Gender/Sexuality/Race: Text and Performance Practice' seminar, as we discussed a play by and about African Americans, a white MFA acting student who grew up in the South (I'll call her 'Franny'[3]) told us that she knew all about 'them' and proceeded to mouth derogatory stereotypes as truths with no idea that her speech was offensive. I actually don't remember which play we were addressing at the time, but I do remember my physical and emotional response to this student's words about 'them'. I felt my face flush deeply, my heart race and my mouth freeze in a non-committal smile. Franny was extremely well-meaning and had been an energetic, voluble and committed if naïve member of the eighteen-person seminar all semester. She was a talented actor and a sweet, lively presence in class, which somehow made her blind spots about race more difficult to address. In the moment when she asserted her superior knowledge of 'black people' from her 'authentic' experience, I was flummoxed

[1] The programme description is available at http://www.finearts.utexas.edu/tad/degree_programs/graduate/performance_as_public_practice/phd_performance_as_public_practice/index.cfm, accessed 31 July 2011.

[2] A white male MA PPP student, in fact, wrote me a very long letter after he received his degree to confess that he'd never felt so ostracized or disrespected for who he was in his entire life as he had in our programme. He expressed his astonishment at the gender hegemony of the PPP programme (where 95 per cent of the students were female) and shock at his *de facto* outsiderness as a white man with no prior facility with theory and with a staunchly humanist rather than feminist commitment. Unbeknown to me, some of the PPP students disparaged him out of hand, because they couldn't get past his white male privilege and his liberalism. Had I known about this excessive political correctness, I might have intervened. On the other hand, I don't think it's necessarily a bad thing when someone with a great deal of social power is forced to experience marginality that's most likely just temporary. This student's perspective, however, could have prompted a useful conversation about the hegemony of the programme's ideology, which the PPP faculty very much took for granted during my years at UT.

[3] I've changed all the students' names in this essay.

and so completely undone that I was unable productively to counter her remark, to turn her words into a 'teachable moment' or to ameliorate the sour, unhappy aftertaste that lingered in the small, windowless seminar room after she spoke.

Most of the other students in that class were white, with the exception of 'Mi-Hee', a Korean lesbian feminist (who figures in my next story), 'Alberto', a Latino gay man, and 'T. J.', a bi-racial lesbian who identified as Asian American and who was in the process of a gender transition from female to male. T. J. had become the self-appointed watch-person for race and ethnicity in our conversations. She usually looked out for slips in appropriate speech or for remarks that didn't consider race when people offered their insights about the plays and essays we read. T. J. usually sat near or beside me at the four-table square with the hollow centre arrangement in which we constituted our classroom. As Franny made her uninformed remarks about African Americans, I felt T. J. fuming beside me; I couldn't look at her. I couldn't look anywhere. I hoped against hope that a student would take on the challenge of responding to Franny; none did, not even T. J. The 'other' that had been called into our space by Franny's anecdotes was absent; that is, no African American students were present in the room to feel directly attacked. But I wonder, in retrospect, why T. J. declined to respond this time around, and why we seemed collectively to decide to shoulder our mutual embarrassment – indicated by the fact that no one looked at one another – and not to confront Franny's remarks.

I recall feeling so astonished by what Franny was saying, I couldn't think of a quick and adequate comeback. I was ashamed that halfway through the semester, all my teaching about race and gender and sexuality and social justice and all my political modelling apparently hadn't taught this student that she couldn't speak on behalf of or casually characterize an entire race of people based on her own very partial experience. Margaret Werry and Róisín O'Gorman, in their essay on shame as a component of pedagogy, note

> it is perhaps no surprise how frequently shame coagulates around race in the classroom. The psychic, corporeal and sociopolitical economy of race in the US is characterized by a profound mutual interest (co-implication, desire, fascination) matched only by its equally vigilant blockage. Race – a relational construction – could be understood as in part constituted by affect, by those tense volleys in the medial space between the dramatic text and the student's (students') body, the circulation of injury, interest, authority, humiliation between text and student, student and teacher: in short, by shame. (2007: 223)

If nothing else, Franny's remarks evinced her fascination, while the rest of us participated in the vigilant blockage of her contribution because she hadn't got it 'right'. But Franny wasn't ashamed of her speech; she had no idea how discomfited the others and I felt.

What dissolved in that classroom at that moment was a tenuously constructed learning community formed on mutual understanding that was finally something of a lie. We presumed, in our self-congratulatory, liberal anti-racist commitments, to be well beyond the kind of speech Franny inserted into our conversation. Its articulation revealed instead our inability to truly address the racism that had never, in fact, completely disappeared. Some vital strategy missing from my own ability to teach from an anti-racist perspective had been revealed, and my other students' silence, too, evinced their essential unpreparedness, as well as the guilt of a mostly white group performing politeness instead of confronting the inappropriate presumptions of Franny's speech. Why couldn't I gently point out to Franny that her remarks were stereotypical generalizations? Why couldn't I reframe her words, addressing the offensiveness of asserting these opinions? Why did all of us squirm uncomfortably, humiliated that racism had entered our charmed circle, instead of *expecting* it to be there, instead of knowing, in fact, that racism never vanishes, just as sexism and homophobia, too, haunt any discussion? As Mi-Hee pointed out to me years later, I was silenced by my own 'essential (white) unpreparedness for racist daily life' (2009).

THE REQUIRED COURSE

The other instance of stuttering failure occurred in the required Pedagogy course. I approached Pedagogy with two goals: First, I introduced students to progressive, student-centred instruction, asking them to read material informed by performance studies scholars who have addressed the specific challenges and rewards of embodied, identity-sensitive teaching. My second goal was to help them rehearse their teaching strategies with 'microteachings', ten-minute slices of a lesson presented for their peers and me to review. Although I meant the theory to inform their practice, sometimes the semester and the students split down the middle. Many students – especially those in the practice-oriented MFA programmes – found the theory irrelevant and onerous and were loath to accept the implicit feminism that much of the material we read espoused.

The fall 2004 iteration of the Pedagogy class I want to discuss here was relatively small at around ten people, with an array of students from Drama and Theatre for Youth MFAs, to dance and design MFAs, to a handful of PPP students. The incident in question took place about a third or more of the way through the semester, when we were still engaging the initial theoretical material. 'David', a white, male, heterosexual MFA dance student, tried to trouble our discussion of a set of readings about race and ethnicity in the classroom by proposing that our conversations might be different if there were people of colour in our own class. He looked around our seminar table and announced, 'We're all white here,' as though pointing out the futility of talking about race without people of colour present.

I think that David was truly trying to trouble the material's claims. But throughout the class to that date, he had played the 'devil's advocate', openly sitting above the reading to pass judgement on how effective or not he found its ideas and strategies. To complicate matters, he was a returning student, probably ten years older than the others. He was one of three men in the class and one of two dance students, the other of whom – a Latino man – was absent on the day of the incident. David wanted the MFA credential but found it difficult to submit his body and his mind to the academy's disciplining structures. The Pedagogy course also challenged his life experience, since he'd already spent some years teaching in non-academic environments. He often spoke against the theoretical material, policing what he found the politically correct construction of the syllabus and our conversations.

His remark, 'We're all white here', challenged how we were discussing race and might have been well taken and even worth pursuing. But David's oversight was to misrecognize Mi-Hee, the Korean lesbian feminist PPP student who sat directly beside him. When he described the group as all white, I protested at once, saying, 'David, Mi-Hee's not white,' but he retorted, 'Oh, well, she's almost white.'[4] His proclamation provoked gasps from other students. 'Ruth', a white lesbian feminist PPP student, immediately excoriated David for his comment, accusing him of using male privilege to try to control the conversation and our interpretations of the material, as well as to humiliate Mi-Hee. Perhaps to empower Mi-Hee, David then turned to her and asked what she thought. But Mi-Hee resisted what felt like a preemptory command to speak, which led David to add, 'Since you have been silent in this class, you're invisible to me,' as though blaming Mi-Hee because he misrecognized her presence. In my own effort to give Mi-Hee room to speak, I asked her if she wanted to say something, emphasizing that I wasn't trying to force her response so much as give her the choice to express it. She took the opportunity to speak about 'cultural differences of speaking frequency in class.… It is believed in Korea that saying too much is arrogant, immature and unthinking. So I say something only when I really have to or I have really good and important points' ('Mi-Hee' 2009). I encouraged the other students to speak, too, asking them directly to participate in what had become a four-way conversation among David, Mi-Hee, Ruth and me. But other than my three interlocutors, the class essentially refused.

[4] In my correspondence with 'Mi-Hee' while writing this essay, neither of us could recall if David said, 'She's almost white' or 'Oh, well, she's white-ish.' Either way, his meaning is the same.

When the hour ended, I told the students that I would start a Blackboard discussion thread on which they could register their impressions and insights about what had happened, hoping that the relatively more removed online forum might ameliorate whatever fear they felt around participating in the conversation. But only David used the discussion thread. For him, the forum became self-serving. He tried to shift the incident from a destructive, painful experience into one that he called 'a beautiful moment' that reminded him of 'good art'. In a rather perverse way, he might have been trying to take responsibility for his speech, but instead of apologizing and listening to Mi-Hee's objections, he asserted his own experience and its truth, silencing her once again. He described his emotions after the incident as 'feeling elated, felt kind of liberating, sort of gleeful, felt good to fly, and felt freeing' (Blackboard thread).

The other students steadfastly remained silent on Blackboard, until one or two finally put up weakly argued posts trying to explain that they felt torn between Mi-Hee and David, since although David had been hurtful to Mi-Hee, Ruth had attacked David. A few of the students' posts suggested that they wanted to 'embrace' or 'comfort' Mi-Hee, effectively displacing evidence of systemic racism onto conflicts between individuals and excusing their own refusal to act on the basis of emotional difficulty. Mi-Hee rebuked them: 'After I read a few [of] your responses on Blackboard, one more thing! I'm not your poor crying coloured baby. You don't need to *embrace* or *comfort* me. What I expect from you is critical empathy and introspection.'

In fact, Mi-Hee posted an eight-page, single-spaced manifesto she called 'The Unbearable Weight of Silence in the White Classroom'. The piece offered a detailed account of how she had felt during the incident but also upbraided the other students for deflecting responsibility for their own racism and its circulation in our class:

> I felt that, in many classes in PPP, students just presuppose that sexism, racism and heterosexism are OUT THERE, not IN the classroom. But it's not true. Many ugly monsters of racism, sexism and heterosexism sneak, haunt and prowl in the classroom, and sometimes they make a surprise attack on a classroom like our incident. They still persistently survive in our unspoken minds, words, behaviour, and imaginations. Racism is not an issue between crazy conservative whites and people of colour. It's OUR issue and YOUR issue as well as mine. It's not just about oppression of people of colour. It is also about YOUR privilege, complicity, scrutiny of Whiteness and critical awareness of it … YOUR growth and evolution. ('Mi-Hee' 2004)

THE CHALLENGES OF CONFRONTING SYSTEMIC RACISM

When David proclaimed, 'Well, she's almost white,' referring condescendingly to Mi-Hee, I found his remark aggressive, hostile and provocative, even though he delivered it in an off-hand fashion whose very casualness made it even more offensive. And unlike Franny's speech in the other seminar, David's addressed a person of colour who was present in the room. He implied that the only races that mattered were 'black' and 'white', and presumed them distinctive visual categories. His assertion erased Mi-Hee. He placed her among a dominant group from which her personal experience as an international student for whom English is a second language, and whose nationality and sexuality positioned her as subaltern, already made her feel part of a derided and despised, invisible underclass on the predominantly white, heterosexual, virulently American Texas campus. David's casual racism wiped Mi-Hee off the face of the class. When Ruth leapt into action to defend Mi-Hee, the other white students around the table seemed terrified and upset. Even at the next class meeting, when I'd gathered my own thoughts and insisted we address the incident together as a learning community, they clammed up, and two white female students began to cry. They sobbed about how difficult all this was emotionally and how hurt they were with my critique of their Blackboard posts.

Suddenly demystified in this ordeal was the social contract of progressive teaching, which naturalizes a regard and respect for, if

not an appreciation of, identity differences in the classroom. In classes like mine, everyone knows that being considerate is part of the tacit agreement. In her own assessment of failures in the classroom, Dale Bauer says, 'Part of my current sense of teaching's impossibility comes from [an] awareness of the enforced conformity of the classroom' (2007: 159). In Theatre and Dance at UT, because of the primacy of PPP's progressive political orientation, the pressure to conform came from students and faculty with social justice agendas. PPP was visible and powerful among faculty and students. It set a certain tone and assumed a certain benchmark of sensitivity to how identity plays over our bodies as people, not just as students and as teachers.

David, like Franny, however, was an outsider to the hegemonic rules of the PPP programme, which might have provided him some slack, had not his dismissal of Mi-Hee been so offensive and so deeply personal. But both incidents made me realize that although students outside the PPP programme might blunder into casually racist speech, even students in the programme with supposedly more progressive politics often didn't know how to comport themselves around race and ethnicity. Because PPP students were at the time predominantly white – even though the faculty, when I left in 2008, included two women of colour out of five female professors – students could maintain what they thought of as anti-racist intellectual and artistic values while rarely putting them to the test.

David's remark unmasked my own fear of seeming racist and my own fear of not saying the right thing. As Rebecca Schneider says, in her assessment of pedagogical failures around racism,

> I do think that fear is an underestimated ingredient in what keeps us habitually playing out old patterns of gender and race and ethnic identification in heteronormative tropes of behaviour. And fear can have a major place in the classroom – on the part of teachers as well as students. (2007: 260)

In part, I feared siding with one student against another, even though David's remark was obviously inappropriate and hurtful. Despite my openly stated political affiliations, I prefer to preserve the appearance of even-handedness, which makes it difficult for me to flat-out tell a student that he or she is wrong. And I didn't want to shame David. As Werry and O'Gorman observe,

> Shame is an affect associated in pedagogy … with precisely failure, guilt and self-condemnation, or worse with the condemnation, stigmatization or blame of others. To shame someone else is a negation of alterity, an assault on the integrity of their self-hood – it is a fundamentally illiberal thing to do. (2007: 217)

Yet not to chastise David for his remark left him unsullied by his mistake.

I stuttered at the head of the table the day of the incident, worrying about how I would be perceived if I entered the fray and what would be the costs of remaining outside or above it. If I aligned myself with Mi-Hee and Ruth, a 'gang of three' would be produced for David – all lesbians, all feminists, all PPP-affiliated – who would be easy to dismiss as 'biased' against him.[5] If I protected David from Ruth's attack, I'd betray her and Mi-Hee, one of whom was injured, the other of whom was taking a risk by trying hard to explain to David what he'd just done. In that moment, I felt the costs of aligning myself as an instructor in a class in which injurious speech had been uttered. My mind raced along with my heart. I felt my face flush more deeply red (the always embarrassing tip-off to my discomfort) and my palms sweat. As Werry and O'Gorman say,

> [W]hen shame shows up, so does a body. Thus, acknowledging shame recuperates the body, its ability to feel, even to feel unpleasant things – and it recuperates the body in its relational fluidity, its capacity to affect other bodies, to register them. (2007: 219)

Perhaps part of what David (the dancer, don't forget) accomplished with his remark was to push us back into our bodies. We felt an electric shock circulate around our table, zapping all of us with a suddenly inescapable conviction about our presence, an understanding that we were *here* and there was no escaping the consequences of this conversation.

[5] I think we discount how difficult it is to negotiate the stereotype of the 'man-hating lesbian feminist' to which some of us continue to fall prey. I probably give too little thought to the always-present emotional costs of unconsciously working against the prevailing man-hating lesbian stereotype as I teach.

My ruminations after the Pedagogy incident became a two-page written meditation I called 'Self-reflexive questions towards an ethics for classroom engagement', which I brought to the class at our next meeting. My goal was partly meta-pedagogical – that is, I hoped the students would think about how these questions might be helpful in their own teaching. But the gesture was also calculated to make those students think through very specifically how we were all implicated in the devastation of the last class in micro ways – in how we wore our expressions or wrung our hands, in how we leaned forward or back from the table and in how we performed our responses to David, Mi-Hee and Ruth. My questions were meant to help students pay attention to difference and to force them to come to terms with their own complicity in ways they might not have considered. The questions represent a strategy for reading the signs of colleagues in a class that might sensitize us to the many currents of personal, professional, pedagogical and political investment navigating through a discussion. I offer them here, lightly edited from when I wrote them in 2004, after which I'll end this essay with brief reflections about what the questions might mean and how they might work.

SELF-REFLEXIVE QUESTIONS TOWARDS AN ETHICS FOR CLASSROOM ENGAGEMENT

How is our very position around the room in this class a text that can be read, that lends meaning to how we interact with each other and that underlines what we say? Notice where you are around the room. Notice where everyone else is. Does placement necessarily mean anything? Why are you at the side of the table and not at the head? How are people sitting? What does their body posture tell you? What do their faces tell you? Do their bodies or faces change as they speak? In what way? How does your face or body change? How aware are you of your own posture and facial expressions and what they might mean to others in discussion? Why is this important to our discussions and to your own teaching? How might body positions, positions in the room and facial expressions influence our experience of class discussions and interactions?

Think self-reflexively about yourself in this class. What identity issues are most salient for you (region, nation, race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, age, artistic commitments, scholarly interests, teaching concerns or many others)? How do they filter everything we read and everything you do in the context of your education? Do they come into conflict with other people's identities? In what way? How do you negotiate your identity in class and in other interactions at school? Are there certain aspects of identity you highlight? Others that you erase? How are these choices contextual? Which aspects of your identity feel most salient to you here in this class? Are they the same every day? Are they different from those you experience outside of this class? Why might that be?

Have you addressed your identity differences/similarities before in a classroom discussion? How do your own identity markers get called into question or simply into operation? What might identity mean for your practices as a teacher?

Do you respond to discussions, in this class and elsewhere, politically or personally? Both? What kinds of incidents prompt which responses? Why is that? Is there a difference between responding personally and responding politically? In what way? How are they related, and how are they separated? Is one more productive than another in a classroom setting?

How do you measure your own propensity to 'take risks' in the classroom? What does it mean to take a risk? To 'make a mistake'? To 'offend' someone? To 'scream' at someone? Do we have to apologize for the mistakes we make in class? What rights do people have in a classroom? What responsibilities do people have? Why? Does this change in different kinds of classrooms? Is teaching equivalent to parenting? Why or why not? What does 'pedagogy of whiteness' mean? How does it operate in a classroom? Should an instructor never silence a student? Should other students

silence students? When might or might not that be appropriate?

AFTERTHOUGHTS AND EXPLICATIONS

The first set of questions concerns students' placement in space. Too often, we don't pay attention to the quotidian aspects of our bodies in a room, yet the positions we take (Do students sit in the same seat for each class? Does the instructor?) are meaningful in how they demonstrate relations of power and collegiality. In the Pedagogy affair, David sat at the head of the table, opposite me, who, as an instructor eager to see each student clearly, assumed the other head of a long, rectangular seminar table that made it difficult to see everyone from the sides. David's desire to inhabit the panopticon position was meaningful, as it seemed (in retrospect) to give him a position of power from which to judge Mi-Hee's racial markings and their importance. Other students sat along the sides, where they could more easily fade into the crowd. Where do white students tend to sit in our classes? Where do students of colour sit? How do these choices change depending on the content of our class meetings or our courses in general?

After noting where students and instructors put themselves in the room, how they sit and how they hold their faces (as well as their arms, legs, hands and feet) accrues equally significant meaning. David, for example, had a habit of reclining during class, of sitting at the table casually and putting himself physically at as far a remove as he was able while still maintaining his place. He seemed to want to mark his difference from the rest, or perhaps to perform his discomfort with being subsumed along with them under the 'graduate student' rubric. Other students leaned in to the table, writing in notebooks or laptops and sending their gazes around the room. How does the simple choice of how to position their bodies in relation to the room's common space signal a student's attitude toward the discussion? These questions help me see more aspects of our physical circumstances in class as choices and as signs full of meaning to be read.

Noting to whom students address themselves when they speak is also meaningful. Franny, in her casually racist moment, took in the whole class with her gaze, implying she thought this was a cozy moment in which she could speak openly to a group she presumed would agree with her. David often talked directly to me when he spoke, despite my efforts to encourage students in the Pedagogy class (and all my classes) to speak to and look at one another instead. His choice to make me the sole locus of his speech reinscribed an authority I otherwise sought to displace. I might try to install student-centred discussion practices, but these two incidents reminded me that despite my intent, students have innumerable choices for resistance. Simply by looking at some students when they speak and not others, they can create an elite circle in classes I'd prefer to consider democratic. Where and at whom we look when we speak is in itself a political choice that can support or dismantle our attempts to form inclusive learning communities.

The second set of questions addresses identity markers, both those derived from genetic circumstance – skin colour, facial structure, mobility etc. – and those perhaps more difficult to see but constitutive of our subjectivities nonetheless (for instance, identifying as a scholar or an artist, a teacher or a student, as well as through religion, nationality, region, dialect, sexuality or other identity markers that may or may not be visibly or audibly performative). In the Pedagogy incident, where racial identity was so horribly misread, how might that scene have played differently if I'd encouraged students to see (or understand their inability to see) one another's racial or ethnic identity markings from the outset of the course, to make more palpable and articulated the identity frames present in class, not just in the reading? Likewise, I should expect racism in the classroom and be prepared to confront it; it's a function of my own white privilege that I didn't expect it and wasn't ready for the conflict that ensued.[6]

[6] The freshman introductory course for majors at UT is called 'Languages of the Stage'. The syllabus was written by two of my former colleagues, Stacy Wolf, a white woman, and Deborah Paredez, a Latina, to include a variety of plays by people of colour, gays and lesbians, and other minoritarian authors. When the white woman taught the class, students accepted the syllabus without question. When our African American female colleague taught the class, she got poor evaluations, on which students complained that the course was only about people of colour. I've no doubt that my African American former colleague expects racism, even though she was frustrated and upset at her students' responses.

Finally, the question of risk-taking in the classroom is even more vexed for those of us who teach from anti-racist, feminist, progressive and/or student-centred perspectives. What does it mean to ask students to take risks? Sharon Grady tells a story about prodding her students to take risks in her Languages of the Stage course, a large lecture for freshman and sophomore theatre majors at UT. When one of her students met the challenge in a performance for the class that ended with her taking off her shirt, Grady's own discomfort belied everything she'd encouraged in her students. She joked openly about losing her job and otherwise performed her embarrassment and fear, prompting the confused and hurt student to ask, what, then, had Grady meant by taking a risk? What are the limits of our own ability to absorb what students might take such a dare to mean? As Wendy Coleman and Stacy Wolf ask, in their own complex account of failure in the classroom, '[W]hat is risky? What does revolutionary mean? And … what is the value of "risk" in and of itself? Why does "danger" matter?' (1998: 23). My questions for an ethical classroom are meant to make explicit some of the ways risk is inevitable in the fraught but exciting, heady but materialist, erotic but platonic atmosphere of the classroom. How might I at least prepare students to contemplate working on emotional evaluation and risk as a vital part of learning, along with the inevitability of making mistakes and offending one another, so that they won't be surprised when it happens, as it did so unsettlingly in that Pedagogy class?

Dale Bauer says,

> Galvanized by our dreams of community, many of our classes model utopian efforts in formulating community, especially in a culture so overwhelmingly individualistic and all too often hopelessly narcissistic. Thus, we need to teach students how to have committed affiliations with each other. (2007: 168)

These self-reflexive questions hopefully offer me and my students strategies for thinking very specifically about our performances as citizens in the community of the classroom. After all, the affiliations Bauer idealizes happen at the micro-level of social relationships that performance studies can let us parse, access and practice. How might we be as self-conscious about our self-performances in the classroom as we are productively analytical of actors' performances on stage?[7]

[7] I'd like to thank 'Mi-Hee' for her engagement with me on this essay, which I dedicate to her in the spirit of solidarity and with great admiration for her wisdom and resilience. I'd also like to thank Margaret Werry, Roísín O'Gorman and Stacy Wolf for their productive, insightful comments on drafts of this essay, and to acknowledge the students in TD389T, Fall 2004, at the University of Texas at Austin, whose struggle to process our collective experience inspired these thoughts.

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