Carlos Hiraldo shares his story of shifting from a pedagogy based on racial identity to one focused on issues of class and how his students benefited from the change.

By Carlos Hiraldo

**Is Their Class in This Room?**

Focusing on Class in Diverse Classrooms

As the increasing racial diversity of the United States continues to be reflected in colleges and universities across the country, academics who think and write about their teaching philosophy remain more comfortable arguing for a curriculum that deals with race and gender than for one that centers on class and social mobility. Some academics feel that there is work still to be done in defending racial and gender diversity because of threats from anti-affirmative-action activists who petition courts to curtail the diversity programs and policies of universities. However, the silence about class from scholars in the elite private institutions that produce most of our academic literature also results from intellectual and social conformity. As bell hooks asserts in *Teaching to Transgress*, “most progressive professors are more comfortable striving to challenge class biases through the material studied than they are with interrogating how class biases shape conduct in the classroom and transforming their pedagogical process” (p. 187). That is in large measure because the poor, except perhaps in the form of maintenance staff, are largely absent from these institutions.

In recent years, critics such as hooks, Henry Giroux, Walter Benn Michaels, and Ira Shor have raised the alarm about the increasing class segregation of US higher education. As their work has shown, the system of higher education in this country splits into two tiers of haves and have-nots. One tier includes the private colleges and universities that, though nominally diverse by race, gender, region, and sexual orientation, are almost exclusively populated by upper-middle-class and rich students. The other tier consists of overpopulated and underfunded, but still relatively affordable, public college and university systems across the country. These state-funded public systems include community colleges where the majority of US college students, mainly the poor and the working class, now get their start. Because of this economic segregation in our system of higher education, progressive academics need to give greater focus to issues of class in terms of analyzing the social-economic background of their stu-
Progressive academics need to give greater focus to issues of class in terms of analyzing the social-economic background of their students, accounting for the topics and concerns of their classroom texts, and reflecting on the types of issues discussed in their courses.

students, accounting for the topics and concerns of their classroom texts, and reflecting on the types of issues discussed in their courses. A radical contemporary pedagogy would make such work its central concern.

As a professor at LaGuardia Community College in New York City for the past nine years, I have seen my own intellectual and pedagogical concerns shift from issues of race to concerns about class structure. My dissertation manuscript, published as the book Segregated Miscegenation: On the Treatment of Racial Hybridity in the U.S. and Latin American Literary Traditions by Routledge in 2003, traced the ways the definition of a black character had shifted in U.S. and Latin American novels from national independence movements in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the end of the twentieth century. In my early years as a tenure-track professor, I wrote articles and presented papers concerned with racial identity both because I was interested in the topic and, as a young Latino professor, I knew that would be the easiest, quickest route to publication.

However, as I taught the novels I had used in my dissertation, I became aware of several issues. For one, since most of these works focus overtly on issues of racial or ethnic identity, there were students who approached these books with trepidation or with concerns that their own ethnic experiences would not be reflected within. Because of its great diversity, LaGuardia calls itself “the world’s community college.” The institutional website points out that, as of last count, the LaGuardia student population comes from “over 160 countries.” The racial and ethnic diversity of LaGuardia foreruns what is already taking place, at a slower rate, across the United States. Originating from various Latin American countries, Latinos are, with 36% of the student population, the largest group. Working-class and immigrant whites and Asians do not lag far behind. Blacks from the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa make up the smallest, but still substantial, group. I do not wish to imply here that, for example, an Asian student would not be interested in reading about the experiences of African Americans or that a Polish immigrant student would automatically not want to read about the experiences of Latinos. My teaching of Esmeralda Santiago’s When I Was Puerto Rican in “Writing through Literature” during my first year at LaGuardia was a success. Santiago’s work covers the author’s life from her childhood in rural Puerto Rico, to her teen years in New York City with her large immigrant family, to her adult life as a writer in Massachusetts. The students were engaged with our daily discussions of the book, and this enthusiasm translated into insightful, well-written essays. Many students who were weaker writers at the beginning of that semester showed marked improvement by the end. In retrospect, I realize that the book was a success with the students both for its literary qualities and because of my approach to teaching it. When I taught that text, I weaved issues of gender and class as well as ethnicity into the topics I gave the students for discussion and essay writing.

Still, it took me a while to realize the hard way that a predominant focus on race and ethnicity when analyzing a text wasn’t the best approach in a diverse classroom, even for students who supposedly share the same or a similar ethnicity with the author and his/her characters. I almost encountered a rebellion at the end of the fall semester in that same course during my second year at LaGuardia. The students, mostly young Latinas, reacted with anger against Julia Alvarez’s How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents. The thinly veiled memoir of the migration of Alvarez’s privileged Dominican family
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to the United States in the early 1960s did not reflect the immigrant experiences of any of my foreign-born students or that of the immigrant families of the US-born ones. No matter how much I tried to focus the students’ attention on the “literacy” of the work, I could not get them to overcome their resistance to the characters depicted, the narrators, and the author.

Had I read bell hooks’ *Teaching to Transgress* before the course, the experiences of my students and me would have been markedly different. The students’ intense emotion, though expressed in the negative language of “hating” the book and of finding certain passages “unreal,” still demonstrated a high level of engagement. hooks argues that even progressive college professors wish to impose a predominant upper-class ethos of order and restraint in the classroom as an easy sign that learning is taking place. I thought I was just being positive when I wanted my students to focus on stronger aspects of Alvarez’s book, such as the beauty of the language and the creativity of the regressive narrative arc. However, at least in part, I was also exhibiting the fear of excitement that hooks finds in educators. She writes about her early experiences in the academy: “Excitement in higher education was viewed as potentially disruptive of the atmosphere of seriousness assumed to be essential to the learning process” (p. 7). Instead of harnessing the students’ excitement, I attempted to thwart it, because I was concerned that we wouldn’t finish the novel and cover everything I had planned to discuss before the end of the semester. hooks points out that the inflexibility of teachers, academic departments, and programs as to what material must be covered and how it must be covered in the classroom often interferes with student learning and discovery. As she puts it, “excitement could never be generated without a full recognition of the fact that there could never be an absolute set agenda governing teaching practices.” In my classroom, students had generated excitement, but I mistook it for anger and a potential threat to my agenda. Instead of resisting my students’ anger, I should have embraced it. I should not only have encouraged them to voice their frustrations with the class biases of the novel, which I did to an extent, but I also should have helped them acquire a theoretical language to express their ideas by bringing to the classroom articles that articulated similar concerns with Alvarez’s work.

The justified reactions of the students at the end of that course nonetheless proved fruitful in that it awakened me to the fact that a focus on race in a diverse, public institution like LaGuardia was not the best teaching practice. Had I embraced my students’ focus on class in their reading of *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, the course would have been more of a success. In *Empowering Education*, Ira Shor argues for a classroom in which students participate in creating the course. I am not sure I am prepared to accept some of the more radical strategies Shor uses to include the students in the development of his lessons, such as allowing them to select and to veto texts. However, I have learned that in order to fully engage students in studying the texts I choose for the class, they must select the initial thematic approach. For Shor, “the empowering educator is also prepared to back off and change the subject if students exercise their democratic right to reject the theme under study” (p. 133). As teachers, we can help guide the conversation in certain directions, suggesting questions and problems for discussion, but we can neither force the parameters, the themes for discussion, nor the destination, the conclusions the students reach. Paolo Freire makes clear in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that “the teacher cannot think for her students, nor can she impose her thoughts on them” (p. 77). The destination of any conversation, any lesson, inevitably becomes more obvious when we focus on ethnicity than when we make class the central discussion topic. After all, it is inconceivable that an educator who brings up race and ethnicity in a classroom today doesn’t want the students to reject prejudice. The obvious goal of focusing on race and ethnicity in
The obvious goal of focusing on race and ethnicity in a contemporary classroom is to have students reach an understanding of the historical and social perspectives of whatever group in question has been oppressed.
shatters along with all advices his father had ever given to him. Their separation had begun.” This kind of insight into the play, though not of a purely economic nature, begins students on the process of questioning the emotional and psychological ideals attached to our economic system. The students soon realized that Willy’s middle-class life is built on interlinked emotional and financial falsehoods.

Willy took the initial step in living a false existence when he chose to become a businessman instead of following his family to Alaska to work on mines, something his manual skills at home repairs attest that he was better suited for. Willy chose the wrong career on the flimsiest of bases. He decided to follow the career path of an old traveling salesman he once met named Dave Singleman. Willy was lured by Singleman’s apparent popularity in the towns he traveled as a salesman. As another student pointed out in his text analysis essay, this decision shows Willy’s shallow mind-set:

The sad reality that Dave Singleman is still working at the age of eighty-four never occurs to him. Being a successful businessman is more important for Willy than following the family roots and doing what he was most likely predisposed to do, which is working with his hands, because it would prove that he was successful at his job and that he is not mistaken when thinking that financial success brings happiness.

Unfortunately, even when all his schemes fall apart, Willy never changes his thinking on the connection between money and happiness. He commits suicide in order to leave his life insurance money to his family, erroneously believing that this will redeem him in the eyes of his sons and his wife. As one student described the sad ending:

After working one job for decades, he [Willy] still fails to provide for his family and in his impaired mind, he sees his suicide as the only way to be remembered and valued by people close to him. He measures his success by the number of people that show up at his funeral, and he fails once again. The only people who always loved, remembered and valued Willy were the people he hurt the most by committing suicide, his family. Unfortunately Willy was too blinded by his obsessions to see that.

Students are often led by media reports or by their own relatives and friends into careers that they too have no interest in and consequently no aptitude for performing in order to secure dreams of middle-class stability. While students in my “Writing through Literature” class are engaged in text analysis, not personal narratives, it is clear that such insights into Willy Loman’s failures can be useful to them as working-class students tempted by the same lure of the “right career” and “good salary” that quite literally drove Willy to death.

Well-written, canonical, frequently anthologized works can get students engaged with concerns about class even if the initial approach prioritizes other issues. The poems “Those Winter Sundays” by Robert Hayden and “My Papa’s Waltz” by Theodore Roethke focus on the type of fraught father-son relationship that is a subplot of Death of a Salesman. These poems invite a reading centered on gender relations and constructions of masculinity. Yet, through classroom and small-group discussions, students realize how economic status affects the construction of masculinity and influences the boundaries of gender relations. One student tapped into the connection between class, discipline, and masculinity when she compared the two poems in her essay: “Both fathers are very hard working men, the authors have often mentioned their father’s dry, cracked, hard hands from all the work that had to be done throughout the years. They also express the aggressive and disciplinary behaviors their fathers share.” Here the student connected the physical aggressiveness the fathers had to show in their labor-intensive jobs with the aggressiveness they showed in disciplining their respective sons. Another student found evidence of a difficult husband-and-wife relationship in the facial expressions of the mother in Roethke’s poem. She wrote: “This statement by the son describes that there was also anger and tension in the house. He

If the students feel alienated from the work, if they are not enthusiastic about the text they are reading and analyzing, they will not write at their optimal level because they will find the stages of prewriting, drafting, and revising more difficult to engage in.
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could always tell by his mother’s facial expressions that she was unhappy.” The student proceeded to elaborate on how the father actively expresses his frustration with his difficult work and his limited economic opportunities by getting drunk before arriving home to either romp with or beat, depending on the reader’s interpretation, the speaker/son. However, according to the student, the mother, a working-class woman living in a prefeminist world, internalizes her frustrations and only expresses them through her features.

The reaction of LaGuardia students to works like When I Was Puerto Rican, Death of a Salesman, “Those Winter Sundays,” and “My Papa’s Waltz” demonstrates that a focus on class doesn’t silence discussions about race, gender, sexual orientation, and other identity markers. Instead, a focus on class serves as a filter through which anxieties about race, gender, and sexuality can be expressed more effectively and in more coherent connection with economic issues and with each other. Freire reminds educators that “the process of searching for the meaningful thematics should include a concern for the links between themes” (p. 108). After all, classism, racism, sexism, and homophobia are not oppressive tools used separately, one at a time. This would imply a conscious awareness on the part of the oppressor that would make such oppression relatively easy to eradicate, and would also imply a clearer distinction between oppressor and oppressed than this messy world allows for. The poor and working class can be racist, sexist, and/or homophobic. Class insecurity, such as concerns about their ability to finish their education, unites students of different races, genders, and religions in public institutions under siege by budget cuts and belligerent politicians. For this reason, I find it easier to have students discuss identity issues through a focus on class. As Freire points out, “the investigation of thematics involves the investigation of the people’s thinking—thinking which occurs only in and among people together seeking out reality. I cannot think for others or without others, nor can others think for me. Even if the people’s thinking is superstitious or naïve, it is only as they rethink their assumptions in action that they can change.” Teachers can’t separate the “problem-posing,” “liberating-pedagogy” from a democratic approach to themes and to the ways issues will be addressed and discussed in the classroom. The shift in my focus to class issues as a thematic unity for “Writing through Literature” and other courses doesn’t constitute surrender to students’ prejudices. Rather, it results from the desire to meet students where they are.

Notes
