

**Carol Batker** Introduction:  
**Eden Osucha** Critical Pedagogies for a Changing World  
and  
**Augusta**  
**Rohrbach**

**W**hy we teach what we teach is just as important as why we study what we study but is seldom discussed as a field-defining issue. In turning our attention to pedagogy, the editors of this special issue of *American Literature* would like to ask both how our scholarly engagement with our field has produced a distinct set of pedagogical practices and how our pedagogical practices raise new questions about the relevance and role of American literature, as we confront the pressing educational and political exigencies of our time. This volume presents an opportunity to integrate discipline- and field-specific knowledges more fully into a critical discussion of pedagogy. By leveraging the location of our teaching as developing out of specific scholarly concerns, this special issue illustrates the intersection of theory and pedagogical practice while highlighting the diverse disciplinary, institutional, and political contributions of American literature to higher education and community-based teaching and learning.

It's been almost fifty years since Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire urged educators to recognize the need for a paradigm shift with *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968). By insisting that "liberating education consists of acts of cognition, not transfers of information," Freire (1968, 79) rejected elitist educational models that imposed a static power hierarchy, placing the teacher above the student. Instead, Freire proposed putting students on the same plane as the teacher, inverting the dominant cultural script in which students were expected to be "docile listeners" rather than, as he wrote, "critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher" (81). In elaborating this

*American Literature*, Volume 89, Number 2, June 2017  
DOI 10.1215/00029831-3861481 © 2017 by Duke University Press

pedagogical philosophy's decolonialist methods, Freire argues for "authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality," rejecting the "ivory tower isolation" of academia and advocating for a critical dialogue that engages the world (77). Education, Freire instructed, was not the panacea for social injustice but oftentimes the very site of exclusion and domination. For many, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a work deeply informed by liberation theology praxis, brought to the space of the classroom the same kind of power-to-the-people thinking that had been fermenting in the civil rights movement in the United States and anticolonial freedom struggles throughout the world. As Chandra Mohanty (2003, 194), whose formulation of a feminist "pedagogy of dissent" extends Freire's theories to rethink critical approaches to teaching and learning about race, gender, and difference, writes: "Education [thus] becomes a central terrain where power and politics operate out of the lived culture of individuals and groups situated in asymmetrical social and political spaces. This way of understanding the academy entails a critique of education as the mere accumulation of disciplinary knowledges that can be exchanged on the world market for upward mobility." Freire's critical pedagogy blazed the way for a radical rethinking not just of the situation of classroom teaching but also of limiting literature curricula to the official knowledge of canonical texts.<sup>1</sup>

The political ferment of Freire's time has continued to spiral exponentially into our present, in which the inheritance of globalized racial capitalism reflected in the increasing intensification of wealth and poverty includes among its material conditions a vastly transformed set of circumstances for higher education itself. In the US instance, dramatic reductions to state funding for and correlative privatization and corporatizing of higher education are reflected in a widespread reorganization of educational models around the dictates of business efficiencies. For-profit industries and venture capitalists are unbundling faculty roles, building self-service models, and advocating the corporate development and evaluation of student "competencies."<sup>2</sup> Academic freedom faces compounding threats from public policy initiatives, such as Wisconsin's recent dismantling of tenure protections and faculty governance structures, and from activist groups like Turning Point U.S.A., the organization behind the notorious "Professor Watchlist" website, that aim to politicize and repress scholarship and teaching about race, gender, sexuality, and other indices of inequality

in the United States. These and other alarming trends in higher education increasingly undermine the very conditions of possibility through which Freire's radically intersubjective educational methods are put into practice.

Although today the breakthrough theories first articulated in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* are rarely questioned in the field of American literature, the political and economic pressures now reshaping the locations of our pedagogy lend new urgency to the task we have undertaken in this special issue: that is, to examine the relationship between scholarly specialization and our teaching imperatives, including those that proceed from Freire's radical interventions. Collectively, the volume's essays foster critical exchange—we might trace back to Freire—to ask how pedagogies arising from the field of American literature confront these pressures, including a now decades-long crisis in higher education itself.<sup>3</sup> A concern that runs throughout the essays is the question of how our pedagogy addresses the widening gap between the sophistication of scholarship and critical practice in the field of American literature and the current direction of institutional politics and practices. As several essays highlight, the interventions of transnational and antiracist critique and of feminist, queer, and trans theorizations of gender, sexuality, and race have led to the rearticulation of a richer pedagogy and critical practice, as well as a more expansive understanding of what “American literature” entails historically, materially, and in the context of globalization. This issue gathers together scholars, teachers, and cultural activists in different stages of their careers and from different sectors of pedagogical practice to explore pedagogy as both a cultural formation and a critical practice as it has been produced across specific geopolitical and historical contexts.

Rather than thinking through these issues by focusing on a particular teaching strategy or text, the essays gathered here approach the topic of critical pedagogy from broader philosophical and disciplinary perspectives. For example, in “Fictionality Risen: Early America, the Common Core Curriculum, and How We Argue about Fiction Today,” Thomas Koenigs offers us an opportunity to rethink the terms on which we advocate for fiction's role in education at a moment in which it is increasingly questioned through institutional policies like the Common Core. The essay recalls the antifictional discourse that permeated early US print culture and brings it into contact with

an understanding of the terms on which early Americans valued fiction. In this prior historical context, fiction is neither aligned with nor in antithesis to literal truth but requires an interpretive act or a determination of value and plausibility. Koenigs evokes the term “historical prosaics” to describe “the estrangement produced by grappling with the past’s understanding of what texts do and mean [which] encourages us to recognize the historical specificity of our assumptions about literature more generally.” Thus, he demonstrates how earlier historical contestations over fictionality’s cultural meaning and purpose have significant implications for current debates over methods in English instruction occasioned by the Common Core’s privileging of nonfiction and “informational” approaches to literary understanding. Arguing that this curriculum’s categories obscure the complex functions of fictionality, Koenigs uses early US literary debates and discourses of fictionality to rearticulate the case for “the workplace value of the kind of suppositional reasoning and conjectural thinking inherent in the reading of fiction,” avoiding the types of transhistorical claims more conventionally used to shore up fiction’s “value” in critiques of the Common Core.

Although Common Core curricular approaches stop short of the college classroom, their implications for our pedagogy are extensive, given their formative role in the earlier educational experiences of the vast majority of our students. In a similar vein, but working with a quite different set of objects, genealogies, and disciplinary perspectives, Cassius Adair and Lisa Nakamura’s essay opens up for consideration a social media site that, through their analysis, becomes tremendously generative for contesting the boundaries of pedagogical praxis along Freirean lines. “The Digital Afterlives of *This Bridge Called My Back*: Woman of Color Feminism, Digital Labor, and Networked Pedagogy” rethinks debates about digital pedagogy and academic labor from the vantage of vernacular and collective pedagogical practices reflected in the unlicensed digital circulation of this long out-of-print feminist classic and the work of feminist women writers of color more broadly. Adair and Nakamura use the digital circulation of *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981) to think through the early pedagogical contributions of that collection as reenacted in a digital form of “consciousness raising” or “networked pedagogy.” Their essay shows us how new and radical forms of publishing have “truly transformative potential . . . from pedagogical and intellectual labor

undertaken as a collective.” On the other hand, these new digital circulation models, dependent on corporatized social media, might problematically extend what Adair and Nakamura identify as institutional “educational economies” that have historically excluded people of color. Of particular focus in their discussion of the risks of vernacular digital pedagogy is the site Tumblr. What Adair and Nakamura point to as its structuring contradictions encompass not just the contrast between its activist user base and corporate commercial structures but also tensions inherent in digital reproduction as an anticorporate strategy of “resistant piracy” that might simultaneously, in terms of authors’ unremunerated labor, be construed as “extractive theft.”

The authors included here all intervene in the corporatization of higher education, including hierarchical and exclusionary practices, labor exploitation, and privatization. For example, Sarah Ensor, in “Relative Strangers: Contracting Kinship in the Queer Ecology Classroom,” challenges economic instrumentality, foregrounding how the American literature classroom presents a potentially radical alternative to the corporatized university by articulating how queer kinship—as theorized by Elizabeth Freeman and Jack Halberstam, among others—in its pedagogical instantiations, reveals unforeseen conditions of possibility for resistance from within higher education. Taking as a starting point queer ecocriticism, Ensor develops a pedagogy of relationality—which she pointedly deems *kinship*—within the physical classroom. Fundamentally concerned with pedagogy as social interaction, Ensor applies a variety of paradigms of provisional relationality—queer theory, ecocriticism, anthropological structures of kinship, and contagion theory—to the classroom to define “pedagogical consubstantiality.” Ensor values “the political potential of the classroom’s forms of fleeting, improvisational, and resolutely embodied relation.” Claiming that physical proximity is central to pedagogy, Ensor argues, “The classroom is a space in which we embody our willingness to be touched and changed and *impressed*, where we expose ourselves—intellectually, affectively, and materially—to the strangers in our midst, where we avow that we are susceptible. . . . The physicality of the classroom space is not simply the background for or incidental to the lessons that we learn and relationships that we develop there; rather, it is absolutely foundational to them.”

Other authors turn to earlier activist interventions in American literary studies to critique exclusion and develop equitable pedagogies within and outside of educational institutions. Danica Savonick, like Adair and Nakamura, takes up classroom social relations from an activist perspective, ascribing a dynamic role to “peer educators” in opposition to hierarchical relations between teacher and student. Whereas Adair and Nakamura (re)collect the writings of women of color, Savonick’s activist teacher’s “poetics” derives from the pedagogical archive of Adrienne Rich. By tapping a little-known archive of Rich’s writings, including essays and speeches on higher education and the poet’s own college syllabi, the essay brings to light both the institutional radicalism of Rich’s pedagogy and her critical poetics in which “metaphors, comparisons, erasures, elisions, and gaps, and how the elliptical, unsaid, implied, and occluded might be deployed to build a better present.” Savonick argues, “By teaching students to make, rather than just read, literature, this pedagogy challenges the racial and patriarchal structures of colonial modernity through which affluent white men have been the privileged producers of literature and public school students the consumers.” Savonick’s essay shows how Rich anticipated the political conditions of higher education today. Rich’s position, Savonick suggests, forms an early history of what has now come to be known as critical university studies.

Redirecting questions of activist educational praxis to institutionalized knowledge projects, Tina Chen’s essay looks at a crucial moment of field consolidation in Asian American studies to offer a case study in pedagogical ethics. The academic year 2014–15 was a watershed year that saw four different publishers undertake anthology projects focusing on Asian American literature and Asian American studies. Chen sees this as a period that “constitutes an opportunity not only to recognize the institutional gains of the field but also to address the (in)compatibilities between the field’s theoretical developments and its pedagogical practices.” The consolidation of the field through the production of anthologies and an alternative canon is a pedagogical practice Chen reenvisioned by making visible disjunctures through a process she terms *ethical alienation*. Chen’s pedagogical practice of ethical alienation is illustrated in her analysis of the complex representation of “‘comfort women’/military sex slaves/*halmoni*.” This act of naming highlights and formulates a pedagogy that not only arises

from the contestations that surround each term but also puts into practice how Chen's pedagogy of ethical alienation and "active interference" works critically, in the classroom and in the field, by "destabilizing critical consolidations before they concretize into unquestioned prominence."

Andrew Donnelly's essay, "The Talking Book in the Secondary Classroom: Reading as a Promise of Freedom in the Era of Neoliberal Education Reform," echoes these concerns by looking at how a central trope for African American literary study—the slave narrative's "talking book"—and a misquoted Frederick Douglass figure in a problematic and widely influential contemporary educational reform discourse that simplistically aligns literacy with self-emancipation. By refuting the association of Douglass with literacy as an unencumbered passage to freedom, Donnelly frames Douglass's true pedagogy as one of active engagement and resistance, noting, "Whereas the talking book trope imagines literacy bestowing at once and permanently the gift of freedom, Douglass imagines literacy as resistance, which he understands as the practice of freedom." For Donnelly, "Douglass is a forerunner to Freire's problem-posing education, for literacy and knowledge do not give him freedom but allow him to see the problem. . . . The blessing of literacy is, for Douglass, not freedom, but discontentment, one that, like Freire's problems, leads to commitment."

In Stephen Brauer's essay, "Critical Educators and Active Citizens: Pedagogy and Critical Praxis," we reencounter Freire's idea of praxis as informed action but under a significantly different set of ideological constraints. Brauer, who teaches at St. John Fisher College in upstate New York, notes that not all students follow the aspirational model of college as leverage into a liberated life of inquiry and engaged criticism but rather view higher education as a sturdy hedge against the downward spiral that they have witnessed in the world around them. Thus, Brauer reflects on Freire's key principles in the absence of a radical liberation agenda. Noting that we must unite the roles of the critical educator with the active citizen, Brauer struggles to make palpable the tension his students strive to smooth away. As he chronicles in his essay, he at times resorts to debunking his own thinking in order to find ways for his students to grapple with the very ideas that they have come to aver, in the hope that they might even contest them. Brauer's challenge is to come as close as he can to awaken the political consciousness his

students need to be what Freire called “co-investigators” without affirming the oppressive student/teacher dichotomy.

While Brauer’s essay takes up the need to find ways to make our pedagogical practices line up with the standards of our field rather than produce a model of corporate education, David M. Stewart considers the reworking of teacher-student relations that results from the importation of New Criticism to Taiwan, shifting a knowledge-based curriculum to “the sociability of teaching” and requiring “that teachers not dictate readings but relinquish enough authority to be persuaded (at least theoretically) by student arguments.” As practiced in Taiwanese English departments, New Criticism restored “the student-centered interpretive writing lost when New Criticism was imported and taught as a formalist abstraction.” Close reading was taught, Stewart observes, “as a way to make meaning through a system of interpretive protocols anchored by the authority of the text. . . . Such reading treats hierarchy as a collective act conducted within limits set by the text but also by the collective, as its members learn to accommodate differences of interest and interpretation.” Stewart’s analysis of the circulation of New Criticism in a Taiwanese context to value the material pedagogical impact of close reading and interpretive writing shows how the “survival of formalist interpretation stemmed from the role it played in a system of mass tertiary education, the task of which was to foster skills required in an emerging postindustrial knowledge economy.”

The diverse perspectives and topics included in this volume highlight the breathtaking range and depth of the pedagogies derived from the field of American literature, broadly construed. The collective contributions of this volume address American literature as a field confronting a vastly transformed, still-transforming landscape of higher education, as the broader social and political challenges to our teaching bring renewed urgency to these pedagogical questions.

In the present moment we have seen pedagogy take a new, urgent, and public form with the emergence of “the syllabus” as a public humanities, activist, often collectively authored genre. Amid the unrest and widespread protest that followed the police shooting of an unarmed African American teenager, Michael Brown, in Ferguson, Missouri, in August 2014, Georgetown University historian Marcia Chatelain started using #FergusonSyllabus as a call to scholars on Twitter to circulate, via the social media platform, suggested readings



for understanding the historical roots and broader contexts of this national crisis. The resulting syllabus, generated via the hashtag, includes scholarship on African American history and the civil rights movement and on racial violence and antiblack racism, as well as fiction, children's literature, popular song, and public documents such as maps of St. Louis's school-desegregation struggles. Chatelain's innovative and inspiring call to scholars to share their expertise in a decentered, widely accessible, explicitly activist knowledge project has shaped a new curricular paradigm. Online syllabi have continued to proliferate as efforts to historicize, interpret, and critically respond to political crises, public events, and popular culture phenomena. Among the most notable instances to emerge via Twitter are the #CharlestonSyllabus, which contextualizes the June 2015 African Methodist Episcopal church massacre, and the #LemonadeSyllabus, a crowdsourced black feminist reading list responding to Beyoncé Knowles's 2016 "visual album" *Lemonade*. Social media is central to the dissemination and evolution of more curated online syllabi, such as the LGBTQ Studies Orlando Syllabus (responding to the Pulse nightclub massacre), the Standing Rock Syllabus (in solidarity with indigenous protests over an oil pipeline slated for construction under Lake Oahe, the primary source of water for the Standing Rock Sioux), and the Trump 2.0 Syllabus (a corrective to an initial *Chronicle of Higher Education*-suggested syllabus that offered to contextualize the rise of then-candidate Donald Trump without sufficient attention to issues of race, gender, and xenophobia). Higher education commentators, in examining this recent spate of online syllabi, have highlighted the collaborative learning models that underwrite the phenomenon and the democratizing potential of the digital dissemination of learning resources—concerns that intersect with many of the arguments and analyses found here.<sup>4</sup> What seems especially striking, from our perspective as editors of this special issue of *American Literature*, is how, in giving the lie to popular assertions that the academic humanities are out of touch with "real world" matters, these online syllabi also underscore the vital importance of American literature pedagogy, specifically, in this current moment. Arguing for a complex awareness and imbricated experience of social and institutional systems of oppression, the authors gathered here do not develop pedagogies that transcend, but instead, following in the footsteps of Paulo Freire, they develop knowledges that foster commitment to radical engagement.

## Notes

- 1 The first edition of *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, published in 1990, registers Freire's impact on the shape of American literature as a curriculum. As Paul Lauter (1993, 327) notes, the *Heath Anthology* "was shaped by a conception of American culture as multiple and often contradictory"; it includes as wide-ranging a variety of voices as it does forms. The field quickly adopted the anthology—now in its seventh edition; it remains the best-selling anthology in the field and a testament to the defining influence of Freire's work.
- 2 These trends have been extensively covered in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed*. See for example, *Chronicle of Higher Education* 2014, Waldman 2016, and Fain 2016. For examples of problematic corporate and competency-based models, see Weise and Christensen 2014 and Lumina Foundation and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation 2015, as well as a description of the Western Governors University model by Sally M. Johnstone and Louis Soares (2014).
- 3 Published in 1994, the essays collected by Michael Bérubé and Cary Nelson in *Higher Education under Fire* register many nodes of this debate, forecasting the concerns taken up in this special issue.
- 4 See, for example, Schuman 2014 and Caldwell 2016.

## References

- Bérubé, Michael, and Cary Nelson, eds. 1994. *Higher Education under Fire: Politics, Economics, and the Crisis of the Humanities*. New York: Routledge.
- Caldwell, Ellen C. 2016. "Teaching Trump: The Rise of the Crowd-Sourced Syllabus." *JSTOR Daily*, December 1. [daily.jstor.org/teaching-trump-rise-crowd-sourced-syllabus](http://daily.jstor.org/teaching-trump-rise-crowd-sourced-syllabus).
- Chronicle of Higher Education*. 2014. "25 Years of Declining State Support for Public Colleges." March 3. [www.chronicle.com/interactives/statesupport](http://www.chronicle.com/interactives/statesupport).
- Fain, Paul. 2016. "Efficiency, at Scale." *Inside Higher Ed*, October 18. [www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/10/18/competency-based-educations-business-model-offers-promise-report-finds](http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/10/18/competency-based-educations-business-model-offers-promise-report-finds).
- Freire, Paulo. 1968. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Seabury Press.
- Johnstone, Sally M., and Louis Soares. 2014. "Principles for Developing Competency-Based Education Programs." *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 46, no. 2: 12–19.
- Lauter, Paul. 1993. "On Revising the Heath Anthology." *American Literature* 65, no. 2: 327–30.
- Lumina Foundation and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. 2015. "Convening in Support of Federally Authorized Experimental Sites for Competency-

- Based Education.” September. [www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/Experimental-CBE-sites-convening.pdf](http://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/Experimental-CBE-sites-convening.pdf).
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 2003. *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press.
- Schuman, Rebecca. 2014. “The Birth of the #FergusonSyllabus.” *Slate*, September 8. [www.slate.com/articles/life/education/2014/09/ferguson\\_and\\_college\\_education\\_sociology\\_and\\_history\\_professors\\_teach\\_the.html?wpsrc=fol\\_tw](http://www.slate.com/articles/life/education/2014/09/ferguson_and_college_education_sociology_and_history_professors_teach_the.html?wpsrc=fol_tw).
- Waldman, Annie. 2016. “Who’s Regulating Troubled For-Profit Institutions? Executives at Other Troubled For-Profit Institutions.” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 26. [www.chronicle.com/article/Whos-Regulating-Troubled/235498](http://www.chronicle.com/article/Whos-Regulating-Troubled/235498).
- Weise, Michelle R., and Clayton M. Christensen. 2014. *Hire Education: Mastery, Modularization, and the Workforce Revolution*. Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation. [www.christenseninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Hire-Education.pdf](http://www.christenseninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Hire-Education.pdf).