Stop Trying to Make Academia Great Again

The Necessity of Solidarity and Organizing to Make Better Futures for All of Us

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Here is a story about teaching: maybe the happy place was right before spring break 2020. On the syllabus for that day in my Early British Literature Survey course was Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Tale." While on many days I had group work and planned activities, today I wanted to try this thing that I do when I feel like a group has been really working and has developed trust and candor with each other. But it's always a risk and it's a big ask of them: we arranged our desks in a circle, I asked an open question—what kinds of things are you feeling about Chaucer and the Wife of Bath?—and then I bit my tongue. You know that pause, I bet. Full of hope and anxiety and audible breaths. On that day, the students took it all up; they took charge of the conversation. They were connecting the personal to the literary, sharing deeply, and really working through Chaucer, rape, systems of oppression. They listened deeply to one another. They discussed why, how, and whether Chaucer—and British literature more broadly—should be taught in high schools. They talked about what they didn't know in high school (that Chaucer was accused of rape) that they knew now, after engaging with an essay by Christine M. Rose (2001). And this group of mostly white, cis-gendered straight women were also developing the capacity to really begin to talk about race in their own lives and in the books that we read, and how our analysis of gender also needs to include analysis of race.

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The whole course had been designed for students to grow in that capacity. We had read essays and excepts from Marcos Gonsalez (2019), Mary Rambaran-Olm (2019), Dorothy Kim (2019), Toni Morrison (2019), Shereen Inayatulla (2013), and Gloria Anzaldúa (1999). We were moving toward a study of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, with work by Margo Hendricks (2019), Kim F. Hall (1992, 1995), and an episode of National Public Radio's *Code Switch* featuring an interview with Ayanna Thompson (Demby and Maraji 2019). Students were growing in capacity to read early British literature alongside diverse voices speaking to, and back to, and with, and against British literature. We ran out of time, and I closed class, and students lingered to chat. Some of them hugged each other with wishes for a good spring break.

We never returned.

The class went online, of course, and we muddled through that semester, and we have been muddling through more semesters after that. And when people say "oh, it will be so good to get back to normal," I get this—now gossamer and idealized—vision in mind of this profound moment before spring break in 2020 with those students in that room with those thoughts expressed, where we shared and held our breaths together. Just a week or so before, I had those students linking arms in a circle, with me in the middle, practically shouting in call and response the first eighteen lines of Chaucer's "General Prologue" to the *Canterbury Tales*—in an adaptation of an exercise Peggy O'Brien of the Folger Shakespeare Library led us through during a conference on the future of Shakespeare at the University of Alabama in February 2020. I wanted the students to not be intimidated by Chaucer's language. I wanted them to try it. I wanted them to laugh in pleasure before we asked the difficult questions we needed to ask about Chaucer and our various attachments to his work.

I want to start here with this "happy place" vision as I attempt to think about what has changed with the pandemic because I think it's a conventional narrative about teaching that some teachers like to tell and many teachers like to read, and it's a narrative that needs critique because of the harm it has been doing. I think teachers—to be more specific—white male teachers (like myself) often project a sort of rough magic on those kinds of classroom moments because that is a teaching story that often gets told, a story I've been hearing since I watched and loved *Dead Poets Society* years ago. In other words, it's an individual story of a teacher doing hard work and through some sort of alchemy making a memorable moment of emotional connection and intellectual advancement. Every teacher as their own Prospero, an innocent, benevolent, sweet Prospero. And no doubt, some of that is true, some of that

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is helpful, but it's not the whole story, and that story has already been problematic and embedded in a thousand acts, silences, and compulsions of white settler capitalism (see Tuck and Yang 2012; Hendricks 2019, 2021).

Even the genre of this type of essay—the personal reflective essay about teaching—especially in the hands of a white male with tenure who teaches Shakespeare, who benefits from the power entailed with whiteness, maleness, and tenure, drives me to imagine my own individual experiences as normative or central to a discussion of what "we" have learned because of the pandemic. I don't think the force projection of my narrative is much mitigated by the fact that I am attempting to make antiracist and antimisogynistic changes to my teaching and my writing. What I am saying is there are limits to what individual teachers can do by the act of teaching alone to address problems that are structural and collective.

I think this teaching-narrative-as-force-projection is acute in literary studies in English departments. This was true before the pandemic, and the pandemic has re-entrenched many of those desires for those traditional happy places, those traditional approaches to content, pedagogy, and curriculum. I think those of us in positions of some power also need to acknowledge that, in the main, literary studies in English programs has idealized and essentialized what goes on in individual classrooms and has neglected the wider systemic and institutional circumstances that made it possible to posit not only the literary text but also the classroom as pastoral, idyllic retreats. Much of that retreat has been about defense and protection of the joy many of us find in these old literary texts and teaching them to students, against the encroachment of market forces, or the business school's "misunderstandings" about the value of the English major. At the same time, literary studies has debated far too long about whether or not it is acceptable to discuss social contexts of literary works; the whole enterprise has always been political. A literary studies that mostly sees the close reading and interpretation of texts as its core, that ignores an analysis of systems of power, and that doesn't develop the willingness and skill to intervene in external affairs, is not well-equipped to find ways to contend with the fallout of an ongoing pandemic (see generally, Eagleton 1998: 174–75).

Literacy studies has overlooked that analysis at its own peril. Further, undergraduate English programs like mine, despite falling enrollments and increased administrative and public pressure (ADE 2018), have sought solace and refuge in English studies' supposed centrality to Western culture, and the belief (perhaps founded, perhaps naïve) that our continuance as an ongoing concern is something that a "real" university would maintain. And yet,

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the same settler capitalism, white supremacy, and exploitative labor practices that kept English afloat may now be plunging it asunder. Depending on your perspective, this may or may not be a good thing. For example, bell hooks (1994), who is so approvingly cited in discussions of teaching English, for her "engaged pedagogy," also, in the same book critiqued English as a field for its white supremacy, elitism, and sexism.

In what remains of this essay, while reflecting on some of the tensions of teaching right now, I want to point to how many in the profession have worked to intervene. That is, I am trying to interrupt my own narrative making, to draw attention to wider systems at work, to interventions that link conversations about teaching in the pandemic to those about gender, race, class, and disability, and to conversations about academic labor and faculty fights for better pay and working conditions, shared governance, and academic freedom.

It's Not Just Us and Our Students: The Environments Where We Teach

What happens in the courses we teach has always been inextricable from the web of practices, policy, and current events that shape our teaching environments. We teach in environments where governments and university administrations have been both unscientific and rent seeking: they have passed problems—both practical and ethical—and the labor that these problems entail, down to faculty and students. The experience for many has been isolating; a lot of this has been by design. As a special report from the American Association of University Professors (AAUP 2021a: 34) finds, "The COVID-19 pandemic has presented the most serious challenges to academic governance in the last fifty years." Administrations have forced decisions about where and how to teach, aka modality, and have been often very unresponsive to legitimate requests for faculty to work from home to protect their health or health of family members, while "COVID-19 dashboards" have been, at best, vague. Further, administrations, governing boards, and elected officials have passed down mandates about whether masks can be required in classrooms, and whether vaccines can be required. It has been unclear for many workers during this pandemic whether their employers cared if they lived or died. And still further, there has been a sustained effort by lawmakers to install "educational gag orders" on faculty (AAUP 2021b), when it comes to teaching history, race, and gender; and some of us live in states where abortions are now effectively illegal. All this influences what we are able to teach and how. Decisions that belong to faculty have been taken out of our hands, and yet fac-

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ulty have been left with a variety of practical and ethical teaching problems, of which the following is a partial list.

What does student attendance mean? Should we compel students to attend face-to-face if it is not safe for them, even if we as faculty are compelled to be present? How do we encourage students to wear masks? If students do not come, should we require them to watch class via a livestream or watch a video afterward? Will they be taking the course asynchronously on their own time? How does this affect what serves as/counts for class discussion? How does this affect how one assesses learning or determines grades? Should we really at this point forgo grades ("ungrade") completely—as Susan Debra Blum (2020), Jesse Stommel (2021), and others suggest? Do students have access to the necessary technology? To what extent are students suffering financial hardship that forces them to work for more hours for more money, which in turn affects their ability to attend, participate, and do course work? (see, e.g., Bousquet 2008: 125–56; Horgan 2021: 91–97). How do we get students to work together on projects or peer review in a way that ensures students' safety but can also be scheduled around the students' other responsibilities? What does a faculty member say to the well-paid, surveilling administrator who roams the halls to see if faculty are teaching in their classrooms, when only two students are in the room?

And yet to imagine a world before the pandemic where these—and more—were not already pressing questions reveals a lack of attentiveness or a surfeit of privilege. Here is where I must call myself in as well, to the extent I didn't understand that, even before the pandemic, the practical and ethical problems about equity were already there; students with disabilities could not necessarily access that classroom space on the same terms as everyone else (see, for example, Hamraie 2017, 2020). This is also true when we consider gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation; true, as we consider how university administrations and political leaders have created and exacerbated institutional racism, as seen in the AAUP's (2022) investigation of the University of North Carolina system, as well as in the writing of bell hooks (1994, 2003) and Sara Ahmed (2012, 2021), among others.

While faculty need to make our courses culturally responsive and sustaining (Ladson-Billings 1995; Paris and Alim 2017), as well as broadly and universally accessible, this creates additional, uncompensated labor for faculty: if a student can take any course live face-to-face, live virtually, and asynchronously at the same time, it is to the faculty member the same as teaching three different courses at once. And creating the sorts of environments needed to sustain universal accessibility—as well as spaces of diversity,

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equity, inclusion, and belonging—requires investment by the university and a real willingness to change given necessary critique (Ahmed 2012). Further, there is a great need for solidarity among the faculty, so that the pressure to do this extra labor, a lot of it emotional, to make things better for students and to rectify institutional racism, sexism, and discrimination doesn't fall chiefly on the shoulders of faculty with contingent appointments, and/or who are women, and/or who are faculty of color (see, for example, Kynard 2015).

And clearly, when I was thinking about my own British Literature survey, it is just one course, faculty member, and classroom: what are the experiences of the students, who are taking first-year composition courses or who are majoring in English, across these different spaces? How do we assess our programs, map the curriculum, assess student learning outcomes, and think about what it means to progress through the first-year composition sequence or an English major? How do we assess the experiences across these modalities of teaching and learning? How do we factor in the environmental factors—as students will be continuously dealing with the economic, cultural, and health fallouts of the ongoing pandemic? What are the implications of this work in pandemic time for faculty who teach, research, and serve in all these programs?

In short, these are questions about the labor of teaching. University administrators and public officials often put the emphasis on the teaching and elide the labor; they have removed supports and heightened the pressure. This, of course, is a strategy by the people in charge.

Bosses Behaving Badly, Workers Pushing Back

Thinking about pedagogy in English studies after COVID-19 can't just be about curriculum, grading policies, assignment design, and the like, but also needs to be about labor practices and policies—on institutional, community-based, statewide, and disciplinary levels. Or as the New Faculty Majority has long put it, "Faculty working conditions are student learning conditions." As the pandemic revealed the extent that teaching needed to be flexible, accessible, and creative, university administrations were largely unprepared and unwilling to compensate—or even to acknowledge or render thanks—for the labor this flexibility, accessibility, and creativity created for its faculty and staff. Instead, as the AAUP reports about COVID-19 and the University of North Carolina (UNC) System demonstrate, university administrations and their governing boards have aggressively used the pandemic as a pretext for further cementing a decades-long drift, from understanding public higher education as a public good, to seeing higher education as a business and

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the student as a consumer. In this climate, administrations have accelerated the discourse of "disruption" and "strategic innovation," and they often portray faculty as out-of-touch elites whose concern for process, data, and shared governance is *the* impediment to "necessary change." *Disruption* and *innovation*, in practice, often mean overriding, ignoring, or eliminating faculty handbooks or elected faculty senates and assemblies; constituting administratively appointed (not elected by the faculty) ad-hoc teams; maintaining opaque processes; eliminating academic programs and faculty; underresourcing academic programs while blaming them for reduced productivity; taking over general education by administration; not renewing faculty on semester- or year-long contracts, or generally making all faculty, regardless of administrative rank or tenure, precarious, anxious, and fearful. This pressure on faculty—and staff—is fueled by the rhetoric of "demographic realism" as universities and their governing boards chase student dollars (see Ginsberg 2011; Cottom 2017; Nemser and Whitener 2021; Siddique 2021). As Dan Nemser and Brian Whitener (2021) and Asheesh Kapur Siddique (2021) point out, such administrative attacks on shared governance take aim at faculty and keep the scrutiny off university administrations and governing boards, and the state politicians who encourage this behavior.

Of course, there have been significant, collective, and at times effective pushback by faculty and campus workers. Faculty at the University of New Mexico organized online during the pandemic (Wichelns 2022), and the California Faculty Association has worked toward an antiracist internal culture and external action in their pandemic organizing (Toombs 2022). This kind of collective organizing isn't just available to faculty who are able to or can work toward collective bargaining. Nearly one hundred new chapters of the AAUP have been established since March 2020, including at my university, the University of South Carolina Beaufort. Faculty across the USC system have worked together to begin a structured issue campaign around budget transparency and greater participation in the budgeting process. To do so, we have drawn on the work and experience of a broader labor movement (see, for example, Bradbury, Brenner, and Slaughter 2016; McAlevey 2018, 2020). This kind of collective work on budget matters, and more generally in strengthening shared governance and defending academic freedom, has certainly, at times, drawn the annoyance of our administrators, but it also has helped our faculty feel less alone and has helped deliver results.

The nature of this collective work means that faculty must organize ourselves, work in concert with others, and show up for their fights—when the critical race theory panic came to South Carolina, K–12 teachers and

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teacher organizations, students, and parents mobilized, along with the American Civil Liberties Union and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. Many higher education faculty in the state participated in actions in solidarity with K–12 colleagues, and this was a good start, but there is so much more work faculty can do.

Conclusion: Solidarity

Creating better futures—or a future at all—for higher education or for English studies is not getting back to some prelapsarian Eden (Making Academia Great Again?). Creating better futures requires ethical clarity and courageous action—not only in our interactions with students in the courses we teach and in our relationships with faculty and staff colleagues, but also in our stances toward our administrations, governing boards, and the political powers in our states (governors, legislators, school boards, city/county councils, commissions on higher education, etc.). As a part of preparing students majoring in English, we need to be better at preparing them to make both rhetorically savvy and ethical choices about the world they are already in, and we need to help them learn how to work together to fight to protect communities and persons with their considerable skills of reading and writing.

Here are two small teaching interventions I have tried to make. First, in my first-year composition courses during the pandemic—at a regional, comprehensive state university—my students have written "performative literacy narratives," and I have foregrounded for students how literacy narrative assignments and ideas about literacy are often embedded in systems of domination. I also encourage students to see how they can play games with the assignment, an idea written about by Shereen Inayatulla (2013). I share with my students her words:

> By considering the performative functions of literacy narratives, students and teachers have additional choices for how to read and write these texts. Students may feel more adept at *playing* to pressures of convention if and when they make direct choices about how to intervene, resist, satisfy, satirize, or evade such demands. Of equal importance, performance becomes a tool for leveling or renegotiating an uneven playing field—one in which readers cannot gloss over the multiple or intersecting identities present on the pages of a narrative and in the unknowable, uncodable, behind-the-scenes space. (24)

My attempts at doing this in a course are imperfect; my knowledge of how my students negotiate this assignment is partial. It seems, though, that many

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students are taking the opportunity to imagine and reimagine what their literacies, educations, and lives are and can be, and that seems significant.

Second, in an upper-division course on literary theory, we spent part of the semester reading and thinking about how material conditions influence the interpretations and uses of literature; by happenstance, Carl Sandburg's poem "Chicago" became an anchor text, as we read excerpts from Thomas More's *Utopia*, Marc Bousquet on student workers, Amelia Horgan on the labor movement, and bell hooks (2000) on race and class. I asked students to keep a log of their labor (broadly conceived) for a period of two weeks and to write a three- to four-page essay where they did some theorizing with those writers about the ways in which their material conditions (and the environmental conditions of our region) "shape your capacity to do work, have and enjoy leisure time, and shape the work you do in English courses." I did this work alongside my students (at least partially at the time; this is probably the essay) in an attempt to be as vulnerable as bell hooks suggests teachers should be. Guest speakers and colleagues, Mollie Barnes and Sarah Swofford, also assigned texts and shared how theories "work" for them. Again, my knowledge of how students took these assignments is partial, but many did express frustration about how much time they must devote to work for money (almost all of them had jobs) to pay for school (including a required meal plan, even for off-campus students), some relief at understanding their commonality in this situation, and how this has shaped their understandings of literature and English studies.

These course-based interventions are limited examples, and they are rooted in the peculiarities of my institution, my location, and the moment in my career that I'm in—my material conditions. At the very least, I can say that I have invited my students to explore the ethical, material, and intellectual dimensions of this moment, with the hope that the exploration can better fortify them to find their own thoughts, directions, and solidarities. And yet I believe we as faculty could still be better role models: imagine the impact and example of faculty linking arms with staff linking arms with students linking arms with our communities against repressive forces. Imagine if students could come to our courses with less anxiety and more financial stability.

Most of the time the English literary canon doesn't give those kinds of visions; I can't find them in Chaucer or Shakespeare. As Marcos Gonsalez (2019) meditates in "Caliban Never Belonged to Shakespeare": "Or maybe thinking within the framework of Shakespeare's classic is too limiting. Maybe there are no Ariels, Calibans, Prosperos, and Sycoraxs. Maybe it's foolish to think we can think outside those character types and plot structures. Maybe

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we're all just doing this wrong and that's the place where the work really begins. At being okay with not knowing." There is a beauty and wisdom to how Gonsalez engages and disengages with Shakespeare's text. Shakespeare's Prospero, near the end of *The Tempest*, does state he is giving up his power: "But this rough magic / I here abjure. . . . I'll break my staff, / Bury it certain fathoms in the earth, / And deeper than did ever plummet sound / I'll drown my book" (Shakespeare 2000; act 5, scene 1). But, then again, he ends the play secure as the Duke of Milan. Of course, with *The Tempest* we should explore its colonial world, its racism, classism, misogyny, ableism, heteronormativity, pedagogy, and political economy; that's doing justice to the work. But it's also OK to reject *The Tempest* as a foundational text and pick up the work somewhere else: with bell hooks, for instance.

As Nemser and Whitener point out in their article about how university administrations and governing boards obscure their own political economy, we need different visions: "If college was free, if debt was abolished, if students were given more support (both financial and instructional), what would the retention rate be, who would enroll, what other worlds might be possible?" Indeed. If we hope to make visions of better futures real, then—yes—we will find it necessary to keep on doing good work in our courses with our students, to attend to pedagogy. We will also find it necessary to think—and act—in broader ways. If the pandemic is teaching me anything, it's that we—across disciplines, across ranks, with staff, with students, and across communities, across identities—must organize for a more just university, community, and world. Will you join your campus union, faculty association, AAUP/AFT or NEA chapter/local, make it better if it's not great, create one if it doesn't yet exist, ask for help with all of this, and get in solidarity with university staff and K–12 teachers and community groups (this starts by listening, and perhaps by not trying to turn it into a research project)? Of course, this is difficult. The bosses seek to keep us divided, hopeless, fearful, and confused (Bradbury, Brenner, and Slaughter 2016)—but your voice and your participation with the people are your power.

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