

Oklahoma is a Moving Train: On Trump and the (Impossible) Demand for “Neutral” Classrooms in a Red State

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The day directly following the election, I had 10% of my Hispanic population either in my office or in the counselor’s office crying, believing that they were going to be deported. This is not because they watch how our president-elect speaks of them; it’s because of how their fellow students are treating them.

—Oklahoma Elementary School Administrator and Graduate Student

My third graders are on edge. . . . “I know my mom is lying so I feel better when she tells me it’ll be okay,” wrote one African-American boy in his written response to the election results. . . . There is a complete rift between the students whose families support Trump and those that supported Clinton. One Trump-supporter child even said, “Well my family is all White, so we’ll be okay,” as his classmates voiced their fears about being separated from bi-racial parents. The tension in my classroom is that of the weather before a major summer thunderstorm rolls in: You feel the pressure, know the rain and thunder are coming; you feel prepared, yet you don’t know exactly what to do.

—Oklahoma Third-Grade Teacher and Graduate Student

The reactions of the American people following the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in November 2016 were similar to the campaign itself—divisive, conflicted, and acrimonious. Not surprisingly, these reactions have found their way into America’s classrooms, both in K–12 and higher-education institutions. A survey conducted by the Southern Poverty Law Center (2016) of more than 10,000 K–12 teachers, counselors, and administrators found that “the results of the election are having a profoundly negative impact on schools and students” (p. 6). In our red state, the impacts of the rise of the white-supremacist alt-right on education contexts have been intense and have come to the forefront of conversation in the field. Educators at all levels are faced with navigating difficult dialogues that further expose the divisions of race, ethnicity, religion, gender/sexuality, and class in this country.

In Oklahoma, the outcome of the 2016 presidential election was quite predictable. In the university, most of our white women students come from conservative towns and

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areas of Oklahoma and Texas² that are majority white or urban/suburban areas that are deeply segregated along race and class lines. In a mock presidential election for the undergraduate elementary education majors in a class, the overwhelming majority voted for Trump. Our students of color, queer students, non-Christian students, and students with critical or radical politics often feel hyper-marginalized in their classrooms. Here, extreme austerity in education, and all other public social supports and services, has meant that universities rely heavily on private donor funds and student tuition, and teacher education program enrollment has been declining as the working conditions and wages for teachers have become nearly unlivable in Oklahoma (Eger, 2015). In education generally, and especially at our university where the norm is a gritty white conservatism, we are structurally disciplined to keep students happy and, for us untenured faculty, to remain “neutral” in our work and pedagogy. As critical scholars, our research claims education is, in fact, always already political.

We coauthors come from various locations—an Oklahoma native who studies higher education (Sarah); a queer-femme with abolitionist, feminist, and de-colonial commitments who has recently arrived in Oklahoma (Erin); and a Southern native who settled in Oklahoma four years ago and is concerned with the political context of education in the state (Jennifer). Our own roles as teacher educators, student advocates, and social movement workers—coupled with the struggles of our students and their students, minoritized along the lines of race, class, indigeneity, citizenship status, and gender/sexuality—provide motivation for engaging in critical conversations to make sense of education in the era of Trump. How do we engage pedagogically with our contemporary political moment deep in the heart of a red state?

We draw on our own experiences and responses from an anonymous department-wide survey that collected experiences and perspectives from undergraduate education majors, teacher education faculty, and in-service teacher-graduate students on the impacts of the election on their classrooms. This essay considers what it means to pedagogically engage the political in our Oklahoma contexts. We begin by describing the state’s political context and historicizing the impossibility of neutrality in education. Building on this framing, we analyze 25 survey responses, some stridently pro-Trump and unabashedly white nationalist, and others that describe in detail the effects of the election on Oklahoma’s minoritized young people. We end with some thoughts on pedagogical strategies moving forward.

The Oklahoma Context

Oklahoma’s formation as a U.S. state is constitutive with settler colonialism, genocide, forced migration of Black and Indigenous peoples from the Southeast, and white poverty disciplined through what Roediger (1999) has called the psychological wage of whiteness. As an example of its effects, in 1921 an economically successful Black neighborhood in Tulsa was violently razed, with more than 300 people murdered by white working-class men and police (Ellsworth, 1992). The legacies of these events

² As an example of the conservative culture in small towns in Oklahoma, see the New York Times article by Fernandez (2016) describing the violent reaction of some residents in Enid, Oklahoma, when their local newspaper endorsed Hillary Clinton.

are perpetually felt among Oklahoma's minoritized communities—communities that are growing and shifting Oklahoma demographics. White Oklahomans' education often ensures their knowledge of such histories is superficial at best.

The state's broader culture is shaped by Republican-party values, such as deregulation, decreasing government size and scope, demonization of same-sex marriage and abortion, and tax breaks for the wealthiest. These have ensured ecological degradation via fracking and wastewater injection, and the upward redistribution of wealth (Cohen & Schneyer, 2016). Education budgets were already declining before Oklahoma's oil industry took a recent steep downturn. Since 2015, education and social services have been hit even harder with cuts. In February 2016, higher-education budgets were cut by 16% in one fiscal year. K–12 districts were forced to lay off teachers and/or cut pay, and many districts changed to a four-day school week to save money (Perry, 2016). With no fix in sight, Oklahoma remains 46th in the nation for education ("Oklahoma earns," 2016) and 47th in the nation for spending per pupil (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015), and leads the country on making the deepest cuts to school funding (OK Policy Institute, 2014).

Years of poor funding choices, massive budget cuts to education and social services, and punitive use of state test scores on Oklahoma's teachers have made the classroom environment in Oklahoma tense and difficult at times. Coupled with a fiercely conservative majority of voters, state legislative attempts to pass deceptive and discriminatory laws (e.g., an attempt to legislate against teaching evolution in the classroom and the Oklahoma International and Sharia Law amendment; see Gershman, 2013), public demonstrations of racism (e.g., "greeting" President Obama by waving nearly a dozen Confederate flags across the street from his hotel when he visited the state; see Zezima, 2015), and a university fraternity caught on video singing a racist chant (see New, 2015), these issues demonstrate Oklahoma's volatile racial and educational environment.

Political Discussion in the Classroom

Curriculum scholars have long argued that neutrality lends itself toward stabilizing and sedimenting the status quo (Grumet, 1989; Levin, 2008; Thampi, 1975). In Oklahoma, pressures on educators to create learning environments that are "apolitical" and "neutral" serve to reinforce the racist, colonialist, and sexist logics that undergird so much of our state's governing practices. Thus, engaging in political/politicized discussions is a controversial and often risky practice for the largely un-unionized educators in Oklahoma.

Ziegler's (1967) seminal research on the political lives of teachers highlighted the extent to which teachers feared sanction for discussing controversial subjects in the classroom. They cited administration, parents, and local groups as likely to influence repercussions if teachers broke the status quo in this manner. Levin (2008) confirmed that such groups are powerful in disciplining classroom topics. Teachers also cited an unwillingness to offend their students—partly due to their perceived nurturing roles and partly again for fear of sanction—as reason to not raise controversial topics in the classroom (Evans, Avery, & Pederson, 2000). There are also risks to individual students. Initially, students may be unfamiliar with instruction about political issues and may be

unwilling to participate; additionally, students come to class with firm prejudices and ways of thinking that may not be conducive to discussing these topics (Stradling, 1984).

Sillin (1995) names the continued use of the nuclear family as one example of the ways that attempts at non-bias reinforce the status quo: Curriculum generally sticks to a generic example of one father, one mother, and one or two children when speaking of the family, despite the fact that single-parent households are quite common—in fact, recent surveys have found that more children were born to single mothers under 30 than to married mothers (Martin, Hamilton, Osterman, Curtin, & Mathews, 2013). The most overt and widespread difficulty is the assumption that there is a set of “facts” for each controversial issue, or hard truths that are simply muddled by bias and extenuating cultural circumstances. Feminist theorists have long argued that the supposed objectivity and neutrality of such facts are products of the imposition and universalization of Western and patriarchal knowledge traditions (cf. Grumet, 1989).

The theoretical grounding for teaching political issues emphasizes not only that teachers are not neutral in these discussions, but that it is impossible to be (Hess, 2004). Neighbour (1996) states that even the choice to avoid an issue in class is a political decision. When teachers do engage politics in the classroom, they are often expected to be moderators that allow for both sides of each issue. Such an approach can sway toward validating all viewpoints. When one side of an issue is white supremacy, teachers cannot possibly remain neutral and neither can their institutions.

The Survey: Teachers Have Politics and Classrooms Are Porous

Our own experiences, coupled with reports from colleagues, students, and graduate students who teach full-time about a spate of post-election racist, xenophobic, and gendered incidents of bullying in schools, on campus, and in the community, led to the creation of a departmental initiative, Equity to Action. The initiative grew out of a desire among Erin and a few of our colleagues to collect these stories and perspectives and use them to form the basis of a statement, making clear that our department refuses to tolerate discrimination. To ensure maximum participation and sincerity, we offered complete anonymity. Although this was limiting in some ways, respondents’ anonymity illuminated the precariousness and superficiality of common educational and institutional discourses that appropriate the language of “multiculturalism,” “social justice,” and “diversity.” Analysis across the 25 responses revealed a strong dichotomy between (a) educators attempting to make sense of the intense effects of election discourses on themselves and their students in their school contexts (12 respondents), and (b) a deep frustration among many pro-Trump students and some faculty with the survey’s implication that classrooms are/should be political spaces at all (13 respondents; given the demographics of the department, we can assume the racial make-up as majority white and women).

Survey responses that demanded politics be left out of the classroom drew on two main thematic arguments: First, the demand grew out of a palpable fear of and/or anger at dissent. Respondents’ fear/anger manifested in language that masked and delegitimized the historical foundations and the racialized, gendered/sexualized, and classed nature of the rise of white nationalism in the US and globally. Second, arguments for classroom neutrality largely drew on an ideological framework that imagines the ideal “learning

child” as ahistorical and politically pure (cf. Lesko, 1996; Meiners, 2015). Such responses cast any classroom discussion of electoral politics or politics more broadly as unprofessional or “inappropriate” (the latter a popular word among respondents).

The first rationale portrayed negative responses as a form of “whining.” As one put it, “People need to stop promoting the idea that all republicans are racist and/or sexist. People also need to stop promoting the idea that everyone needs to be comforted and babied 24/7.” Similarly, another respondent likened “demanding special care” with acting childlike:

I find peoples [*sic*] reactions to the outcome of this election to be appalling. Pleading classes to be canceled or requesting counseling because someone is so “scared” of the new president is the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard. [Disappointment] does not give anybody the right to cry or demand special care because of it. We’re all adults here.

A third respondent went so far as to say: “RESPECT IS REQUIRED, NOT CRYBABY TEMPER-TANTRUMS BECAUSE WE DIDN’T GET OUR WAY.” Such responses dehistoricize and depoliticize reactions of grief, fear, rage, and solidarity. Drawing on their experiences of daily epistemic, physical, and state violence, minoritized students who are fearful of an intensification of this violence are cast as crying babies. In this framing, Trump supporters are imagined as persecuted. One respondent wrote,

I am aware that there have been numerous instances of people wearing Donald Trump hats or shirts being accosted or even attacked by so-called anti-racists who are against hate. That is why I’m afraid to wear my “Make America Great Again” hat in public.

Respondents for neutrality argued that the classroom should be “a safe space for BOTH/ALL political parties,” where such a space is predicated on silencing dissent and erasing the structural and everyday effects of racism, colonialism, and hetero-patriarchy. Toni Morrison (2016) writes of this imaginary of persecution as fear of lost status, where

white Americans tuck their heads under cone-shaped hats and American flags and deny themselves the dignity of face-to-face confrontation, training their guns on the unarmed, the innocent, the scared, on subjects who are running away, exposing their unthreatening backs to bullets. . . . Only the frightened would do that. Right? (para. 4)

This rationale appropriates the language of *safe space*, language created through feminist/queer, and women-of-color-led movements to create less-violent institutional spaces (Ellsworth, 1989). Here, safe space means space where white people are free to live out a white supremacist imaginary free of bearing witness to the humanity of their non-white, non-heteronormative, (dis)abled, or non-English-speaking peers and students.

The second rationale for classroom neutrality drew on conceptions of the ideal learning child and educative environment as untainted by and sheltered from politics. Yet, as many have argued, children always already live in the real world and deal with and regularly think about issues of race/ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality (Milner,

2010). Educators and undergraduate education majors responding to the survey with accounts of their K–12 students’ and peers’ responses to election discourses illuminate that classrooms are porous spaces where, for better or worse, students do not and cannot leave their beliefs, worries, bodies, histories, or ways of knowing at the door. One teacher wrote,

I allowed my third grade students to write about their thoughts and feelings the Wednesday after the election. . . . One Hispanic girl wrote how her father has told her to keep a bag packed and ready. Another girl, she is mixed African American and Caucasian, wrote how she was sad because her family is already poor and she fears they will become even more poor [sic] and is scared because she doesn’t really know what more poor will look like and entail for her. I had another student who stated to one of my Hispanic students that she should pack her bags because she would be going back to Mexico. After speaking with his grandmother and her talking to him he felt terrible. He was repeating what he heard from another adult and did not realize the impact of what he was saying.

This and other similar responses reveal that, of course, students bring the overwhelming and pervasive (beyond and within school) racialized, gendered, and classed election-related discourses with them into the classroom. As this teacher indicates, without space to process these discourses, white students may perpetuate violence unknowingly or without deeper understanding of what they are reproducing. At the same time, by creating spaces to engage with political questions, educators can support working-class students and students of color in making sense of the visceral fears and violence that shape their daily lives.

Considerations for Moving Forward

With many educational institutions, including our own, appropriating multicultural rhetoric—often while avoiding deeper structural transformations that would substantively address institutional racism and sexism—the fear of and anger at dissent exemplified in many responses, and the separation of schooling from the political, is deeply entwined with the historical relationship between education and nation-building (Meiners, 2002). Further, the survey’s deeply divided responses illuminate that Oklahoma’s volatile political environment is perpetuated by efforts to limit spaces to meaningfully engage and think through the relations and practices that shape our daily lives here. Our strategies for moving forward turn on a theory-praxis process. We plan to conduct an interview study with K–12 and higher-education faculty members to continue to better understand the experiences of educators in navigating the “aftermath” of the 2016 presidential election—while also making sense of the continuity of struggle for many here. We continue to engage our colleagues in pedagogical discussions and organizing toward making our institution take a strong stance against racialized, gendered, religious, or other kinds of violence on our campus and in our classrooms. Although it may feel trite to claim in this particular forum that classrooms are political spaces, politicizing education and teacher preparation and education is a perpetual and dynamic problem that is deeply shaped by

place and history, and we continue to make sense of our work in the specific context of Oklahoma.

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