

University of New Mexico

Success in the Classroom Conference: Teaching and Social Justice

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Keynote Speaker: Jesse Alemán, Professor of English and Presidential Teaching Fellow

Keynote Address:

**“Pedagogy of the Pissed”: Teaching Social Justice in a New Era of Anger Mismanagement**

Before I begin, I would like to take a moment of silence *in memoriam* for Mr. Juan Carlos Romero, a University of New Mexico graduate who was shot and killed across the street from campus last week. I hope and trust Mr. Romero’s family, friends, and community can sustain each other during this time of loss.

Thank you, Dr. Aeron Haynie, for organizing this event focused on social justice during such frustrating times. It’s heartening to see UNM’s Center for Teaching and Learning, along with other campus organizations such as El Centro, the Institute for the Study of Race and Social Justice, various departments, including American Studies and Chicano/a Studies, and so many scholars and teachers on the frontlines for our dreamers, refugees, immigrants, exiles, and other migrant souls in search of sanctuary.

We’re in heady times right now, and I must admit upfront that I’ve found this talk difficult to write because there’s so much to say about the current state of affairs. Every time I’d sit to prepare this piece, more fake news from CNN would crop up, countered by Fox alternative facts, and culminating with presidential tweets treated like *Requerimientos*, mini-colonial decrees of our subjugation in 140 characters. It is, admittedly, hard to block out, but it’s equally difficult to ignore, because now is not the time to remain conciliatory, even though we might all feel

considerable pressure—directly and indirectly—to not speak against the inequities we’re all feeling, experiencing, witnessing, or protesting. As one of my well-meaning colleagues warned me, the entire English Department at UNM might suffer administrative retaliation if I was too critical of the university and its government-appointed leadership today, as if they’re going to take away the raises they weren’t planning to give us because I’m up here being saucy.

Muzzles don’t quite fit me, though, and cautions for my silence make me bristle because they’re too quick a concession to the arbitrary use of power; moreover, with pointed politeness, I would wonder if this same colleague warned my friend and colleague, Aeron Haynie, also an English professor and the Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning, not to host a conference on Teaching and Social Justice for the same reasons, or if such warnings only come when a person of color takes the podium. I have absolutely no doubt that UNM’s English Department has weathered worse storms than my free speech, and I would, quite frankly, be surprised if anyone—a colleague, the dean, the acting provost, the interim president, or an absent regent—presumed I spoke for a department that has never seated a person of color as chair, has struggled over the nearly two decades I’ve been in the department to appoint and keep minority leadership in decision-making positions, and has failed on both counts because, until only quite recently, it has lacked a pool of full-time tenured minority faculty in the ranks in the first place, reflecting an institutional inequity that shores up just how difficult it is to make inroads on equality, inclusion, and social justice at our so-called public minority-majority institution when we’re short on tenured faculty of color across campus.

So no, I don’t speak for the entire English Department of the University of New Mexico, but I’m emboldened to say that I speak from it, because my department has produced some of the most decorated instructors on campus. It’s a department historically committed to teaching

excellence in literature, composition, and creative writing classrooms, and I have observed a number of colleagues whose pedagogies I've found inspiring, innovative, critical, progressive, caring, and smart. My indictment of the department's institutional history, then, has nothing to do with my admiration for its pedagogical legacy. Indeed, we might even say that I'm not only speaking from the department but speaking to it because, as with many of us here, I maintain that the creative and critical engagement with reading and writing are profoundly and powerfully transformative personally and socially, and large, front-line departments like English might not readily realize that they hold considerable ideological sway in the teaching of social justice precisely because language and literary studies can facilitate multiple forms of civic engagement, critical activism, and the skeptical analysis of prevailing discourses.

It's in this light that I make my first turn to my rather colorful title, "Pedagogy of the Pissed." I wish I could claim complete originality for it, but while the phrase came to me of its own accord, I quickly learned that it was already in circulation in the 1998 pages of *College Composition and Communication* (49.1). Almost twenty years ago, Seth Kahn-Egan, who has since lost half the hyphenation and now simply goes by Seth Kahn, penned a short piece on punk-inspired pedagogy titled "Pedagogy of the Pissed: Punk Pedagogy in the First Year Writing Classroom." A composition and rhetoric scholar whose work combines cultural studies and Marxism, Kahn has recently been tied to the critical rhetoric of labor organization, unionization, activism, contingent faculty, and political engagement, but back in the day, he saw punk rock as a viable form of critically progressive pedagogy in the composition classroom.

The article is an instructive piece about what was promising about critical pedagogies in the late 1990s and what was, already by then, the major blind spot of neoliberal critique. In what I can only characterize as a wishy-washy position, Kahn calls for introducing the principle of

punk in the composition classroom to engage and enliven social consciousness and activism in a student body he characterizes as increasingly “passive.” “I’m not advocating a full-blown, anarchist, self-mutilating classroom where students scarify themselves,” Kahn explains, “Instead,”—and I’m going to quote him at length to give the fullest expression of his position:

Instead, I’m advocating a classroom where students learn the passion, commitment, and energy that are available from and in writing; where they learn to be critical of themselves, their cultures and their government—that is, of institutions in general; and, most importantly, where they begin making it better. The punk classroom helps them move from being passive consumers of ideology to active participants in their cultures. Along the way, they may have to deconstruct the realities they’ve brought with them, but the focus of the pedagogy is on constructing new realities of their own design. (100)

I’m sure all of us can hear the hope and optimism Kahn places in his punk brand of liberation pedagogy, and to be fair, we should note that the late 1990s are uncannily familiar to us now, with the collapse of Clinton’s second-term in office under scandal, the consolidation of the Newt Gingrich lead Contract on America’s conservative agenda, the prevalence of domestic and foreign terrorism, and the congressional emergence of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, which set the legal ground for the border-security proviso of the subsequent Patriot Act and the following Immigration Reform Act—both of which provide the precedent used today to warrant building a wall, a “beautiful wall,” between the United States and Mexico. As a writing instructor, Kahn was setting out to enact a pedagogy that encouraged students to resist the prevailing powers of the day by way of a radical, largely (but not exclusively) British subcultural form of the late 1970s.

However, as a respondent to Kahn's essay pointed out in the same issue, a nostalgic look back to the punk movement as a model of critical pedagogy simply relies on a liberal humanistic position that reaffirms the very status quo it ostensibly critiques. In "Never Mind the Sex Pistols: Where's 2Pac," Geoffrey Sirc says of Kahn's punk pedagogy, "I suppose I should work very hard in my class to teach students effective ways to critique, say, the dominant white media. But too often I can't stomach the dominant white media enough even to care to do that project. It seems laughable. . . . I don't see any more interesting theorizing being done on a level where my students and I (hell, all Americans) have a common ground" (106).

The irony of two white guys duking it out in 1998 over the most critical approach to political consciousness-raising in the classroom—punk rock vs. gangsta rap—shouldn't be lost on us, but in this relative marginal debate in composition studies is the fundamental stalemate between liberal humanism and critical pedagogy as conjoined twins of cultural critique in the classroom. Sirc's position, which I would characterize as a nascent Critical Race thesis, points to the very problem that has vexed neoliberal liberation pedagogy over the last twenty years: we have never been on common ground; difference doesn't unite us; and the acquisition of critical literacies doesn't promise any more social equality than knowing the law promises equal treatment under it. What so-called gansta rap was telling Sirc way back then—though, he didn't put it this way—was that black lives mattered differently in and out of the classroom, that writing assignments designed to raise awareness about social justice are only meant for those privileged enough to be oblivious to it, while those who might live, feel, and know social inequality on an everyday basis might have trouble proving it on paper, in standard English, MLA format, and giving it a proper title that names the often unnamable power of systemic, internalized psychological racism.

A lot has changed in pedagogy studies over the last 20 years to redress the stalemate between these two propositions. Most notably Critical Race Theory challenge us to recognize and critique social inequality as personal and structural issues, and it de-naturalizes white privilege and its structural ideologies from our everyday rituals, cultural discourses, teaching assumptions, political slogans, and institutional operations, even the most liberal ones, that, in the end, seem simply to soothe white anxiety. But the Critical Race Theorist swims upstream, uphill, against prevailing winds, and in shallow waters, for how do you prove the dark matter of white privilege to students, colleagues, and administrators whose very institutions uphold it, and worse, how does the critical race theorist continue to work and teach under such conditions, perpetually feeling, seeing, and critiquing the systemic social inequality that can, much of the time, remain invisible to those operating within it, administering it, or otherwise believing in the color-blind opportunity for representational equality and advancement in the ostensible level-playing field of neoliberal capitalism?

It's the angry critical race theorist in me that leads me to *my* use of "pedagogy of the pissed," for it can get downright frustrating to challenge liberal humanism and liberation pedagogies that both, individually and combined, reconsolidate and further entrench social inequality through the very apparatuses, discourses, and pedagogies that seemingly redress it. This is why the critical race theorists in the room always seem so surly—we're tired of being the ones who must explain how everyday institutional practices are fundamentally flawed, as iniquitous to people of color, as racist at worst and paternalistic at best, as sexist and homophobic, and then seeming crazy for doing it, as if we're trying to expose some grand conspiracy that reveals the Klan as our shadow government whose discourses of white

supremacy permeate everything from our pedagogies to our elected president. We were right on this last point.

But if our new political era has taught us anything, it's that the rules of engagement have changed, with the core beliefs of liberal humanism and civic democracy the first casualties of the conservative populism that has taken hold of our state and national politics. Left and right, people are pissed off, and instead of a dispassionate approach, one that asks students with assignments to reflect on such emotions, we should instead invite and encourage invective and activism as critical forms of engaged agency that give a pedagogical platform for anger management in and out of the classroom.

What I'm saying is that, first and foremost, there is no cool, calm way of teaching social justice anymore, nor should there be, because it's not a dispassionate position. Over the last decade especially, liberalism has blunted the most salient aspect of critical liberation pedagogy—it is fundamentally an invasive form of teaching that challenges, interrogates, and sways ideologies of oppression; it is not a practice that can be done effectively if, in the end, the instructor swings back to center out of fear of offence, retaliation, or reactionary rebuke. I'm afraid we can no longer attempt to teach social justice halfway, raising it as one of many issues but then falling back on a fleecy centrist pillow that safely keeps the entire class and your instruction of it out of harms way after all.

No, teaching social justice begins with recognizing that social inequality operates in our very classrooms, in paternalistic pedagogies of racial uplift, and in the infrastructure of a so-called minority-majority university where the majority of faculty and key administrators are not minorities. As pedagogues, we all want to maintain some kind of belief and commitment that the classroom and college campus should be safe havens for learning, equity, and inclusion, but a

pedagogy of the pissed harbors no such liberal illusions—the classroom and college campus are, like the social structures around them, vexed by the very inequalities that we seek to remedy when we teach social justice issues.

Teachers of color have always known, for instance, just how risky it is for us to teach issues of race, to even touch on the topic sometimes, in the same way that female faculty—feminist or not—face blowback by raising any notion of sexual and gender equality or even teaching more than two texts by women. We are always-already walking in to a classroom space structured before us by social inequality, and it's the height of white pedagogical liberal privilege to ignore such inequity, presume it exists only outside of the classroom space, or treat it with kid-glove assignments that walk the liberal line of critique and consolidation, challenging the status-quo but then somehow falling back on it as the homeopathic solution to its very problems.

Truth be told, we should be pissed off already that we're faced with teaching social justice in the first place, in the same way that an entire population of people are peeved that they must affirm with t-shirts, placards, and bumper stickers that their black lives matter, presumably because such a statement isn't already apparent to law enforcement and other institutions of power, including college campuses. It's proof positive of liberal pedagogy's failure that, nearly twenty years later, I'm returning to a title—"The Pedagogy of the Pissed"—that, with all of its limitations about punk music, resonated with me unconsciously, so to speak: we are back where we were, thinking up ways to make the classroom space a progressive site of critical thinking, liberal learning, and social critique, again, while some of us are asserting the absurd notion that their lives matters; others are running from deportation; and a few of us are simply trying to decide which bathroom door to open.

This time, however, we're at the crossroads of free-floating anger, what I refer to in my subtitle as bad anger management. I'll be the first to warrant that I've been pissed lately. Yes, of course, with the new political regime, but what's been more troubling for me is that, in recent months, I've found the white-splaining of immigration and sanctuary movements, for instance, laughable in the liberal coming to consciousness that displaced peoples live in fear in the United States, as if the perils of immigration and deportation are new. We know the history of sanctuary, thank you very much, and, believe it or not, we also know a thing or two about deportation. What we're wondering is where was this same activism during the long-standing practices of INS and ICE—over the last twenty years, including the 8 under the Obama administration—to raid homes and workplaces across the country? We've been running from *la migra* for a very long time and certainly don't need otherwise well-meaning white liberals to now explain that fact to us.

I know this position of mine is not fair, generous, understanding, or nice—it's bad anger management, frustration that white liberalism didn't do its job of achieving social inclusivity and, in fact, made matters worse for us by making us the target of the populist right's own misplaced anger. Indeed, the reason why the teaching of social justice is so crucial for us now more than ever is not to raise the awareness that minority subjects are oppressed—most of us are smart enough to know our dispossession—but to correct, to stop, the growing trend of populist and nativist conservatism that would rather direct their anger at marginal subjects than critique the way global capitalism created a white economic underclass in the first place.

And you see, here is where a pedagogy of the pissed gets difficult, where it crosses lines that liberation pedagogy marked but liberal humanism would dare not traverse. We must fully own that a large body of people, a populist conservative block that includes educated and undereducated, middle, lower, working, and upper-class men and women across regions and

racism in a concerted effort to protect their sense of possessive individualism against the imagined threat of liberal ideology. They too are pissed off, but their anger is fundamentally misplaced onto the marginal rather than the structural forms of power that create and maintain social inequality across the board, including their own misplaced feeling of disenfranchisement.

If we want to teach social justice, then we can no longer afford to be afraid or shy away from calling out and, I dare say, correcting, the positions, beliefs, and rhetorics that keep inequality entrenched through bad anger management that blames minorities of all sorts. There's no other way of getting around this—to teach social justice means to change how people think about themselves in relation to others, but if our previous position was to find some kind of common ground, we must now own that our current era of bad anger management commands a different commitment to social justice, one that, in truth, requires us as pedagogues to fight for social equality through community engaged learning, student activism, and an overarching commitment to challenge and check positions and beliefs that are antithetical to social justice. Some positions are, simply put, wrong to hold, unethical, incorrect, or mired in racist, sexist, homophobic myopic thinking, and these positions are not on the same field or equal to ones that fuel social justice.

I wish I could say that we can have it both ways: to teach social justice as an idea but then allow in the classroom the ideologies of, say, xenophobia that are presented as personal opinion. But at this point, we should own that liberalism has failed liberation pedagogy; that in fact we're stuck in our current moment precisely because the centrism of pedagogical critique couldn't liberate itself from the dominant power structures that critical pedagogy and critical race theory don't take for granted.

Let me be clear, then: I'm advocating for a pedagogy that doesn't skirt anger or try to transform it into some higher, rational emotion. There is, especially at this critical juncture, something pedagogically productive about the anger in the air, and in the context of teaching social justice, we should direct that anger toward the discourses, ideologies, and institutions that continue to disenfranchise people. I'm talking about directly critiquing right-wing rhetoric; challenging liberalism out of its privilege; rejecting a culture of police force mentality; and calling on our own institution—its departments, faculty, administrators, and appointees—to advance social justice in and out of classroom rather than maintain the same status quo that has us all pissed off in the first place.

Indeed, as college instructors, we should hold our institutions directly responsible for advancing social justice equality and critique them directly when they fall short. For instance, Ana Marie Cauce, president of the University of Washington, and, by most accounts, a liberally-minded leader, reflects perfectly the position I'm critiquing. In her February 20, 2017, interview with the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Cauce defends her decision to reject students' request to cancel a hate-speaker's campus visit: She says, "One of the reasons why we let Yiannopoulos go on is that how can you shut him down and not shut down a Black Lives Matter protest?" (*Chronicle*, Feb., 20, 2017).

Well, first, the answer to her rhetorical question is easy: you call in an armed police force to disperse and remove the aggravating agent by way of intimidation, force, tear gas, weaponized dogs, zip lines, bean bags, and incarceration, as police have done plenty of times to shut down BLM events, including arresting 17 in Portland, just up the street from the University of Washington. So, Cauce's position seems to be misleading, for BLM events, speakers, and rallies have been easily shut down and yet such violations of free speech and assembly don't seem to

apply in turn to a white hate speaker from enjoying protection under the law. Second, the otherwise liberal university leader simply does not realize the degree to which racist thinking permeates what might appear as an enlightened leadership stance. The university president tries to make a point about the ostensible equality of free speech: namely, you can't curtail it for one but then allow it for another, which seems to be the standard byline these days. But, the trouble here is in the very characterization of the comparison: Cauce names Yiannopoulous as an agent of speech while presenting BLM as one of "protest." It's free speech when Yiannoploulos wants it but a protest when people of color practice it; more, it's always-already a "protest" in her statement, meaning that she frames a BLM event as already in need of being shut down because it could only be a protest. Perhaps inadvertently, Cauce reveals the latent racism that makes liberal leadership vexed for people of color demanding social justice on and off campus: we are already construed as "protesting" against rather than asserting a right to something that, apparently, white subjects inherently enjoy.

Maybe in the past, we would analyze Cauce's statement more generously, debate it, and give it the benefit of the doubt, suggest that she didn't intend the meaning we're gleaning, or otherwise argue away from its implicit affirmation of white rights and privilege. But a pedagogy of the pissed does just the opposite—it argues toward a position of critique, showing that in one simple sentence is an institutional entrenchment that not only protects white privilege under the rhetoric of rights but already criminalizes black resistance to that privilege through discursive disenfranchisement.

I want to end where I almost began my keynote. While I was drafting this talk, the University of New Mexico campus was abuzz with the impending visit of Yiannopoulous, whom our interim president, our faculty senate, and the Academic Freedom and Tenure committee all

agreed had the right to speak on campus, even if what he had to say was deplorable. It was the standard line one would expect from university counsel to mouth to its campus administrative bodies: the speaker has a right to free speech and universities must remain open to the free exchange of ideas—our interim president even taking free a little too literally here by waiving the standard security fee that all student groups must otherwise pay for events. The night went off as one would expect: white privilege on stage; an audience taking it all with open or guilty pleasure; protestors outside, deploring the event and the university's seeming complicity with it; and of course police in riot gear ready to quell peaceful assembly—standard fare these days for Albuquerque, New Mexico, and I guess we should be thankful that no one was shot off camera. Afterwards, the *Albuquerque Journal*, that beacon of journalistic prowess, praised the university for its decision and gave special kudos to APD for keeping the crowd “in check” (*Journal*, February 6, 2017).

It was my intention to critique what I initially called our mealy-mouthed leadership for accommodating hate speech, fear mongering, and race baiting on our campus. But I've come to rethink my position about the university's free speech stance, especially after the *Journal's* editorials in support of free speech on campus. The next four years are going to be a challenge for social justice, and we can take to the streets, pen letters in protest, or stage walk outs, but our greatest leverage remains our profession and the pedagogies we deploy in the classroom. At UNM, we now have very clear assurances from the interim president, the faculty senate, AF&T, and the brilliant editors of the *Albuquerque Journal* that they will openly support (even if they don't agree with) our free speech and academic freedom in and out of the classroom, including our right to teach social justice fiercely, to critically call out, critique, and engage myopic, misogynistic, racist, homophobic, sexist thinking, to turn our classrooms, lessons plans, reading

lists, lectures, and assignments into projects for radical thought about equality, and to call out the bigotry of the Trump administration and the myopia of Susana Martinez's New Mexico governorship, especially as they inhibit our role to teach students how to think socially and radically. I'm so very thankful after all that our university leadership and the editors of the *Journal* all stood up so boldly for free speech and academic freedom, because they're now committed to hold the line for us, social justice thinkers, critics, teachers, and activists, to bring our pissed off pedagogy into the classroom without fear, knowing we will enjoy the same full protection, blessing, and fee-waiving support our leadership and local paper extended to an idiot. As the *Journal* likes to often say, mouthing Governor Martinez, "the taxpayers deserve better" from our university, and I agree: it's time we taught social justice better, actively, critically, and openly because we have the right, duty, protection, and pedagogical training to flex our academic freedom under the now-seemingly-sacred banner of free speech. In fact, given the current political climate of anger mismanagement, we have the professional obligation to transform our pedagogies from ones of liberation and enlightenment practices to engagement and activism if, in the end, we envision social justice to be at the heart of our teaching missions, in and out of the classroom.

#### Citations

*Albuquerque Journal*. Editorial: "UNM Got it right handling Yiannopoulos appearance." Feb. 6, 2017.

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