

## Teaching Philosophy

Race enters writing, the making of art, as a structure of feeling, as something that structures feelings, that lays down tracks of affection and repulsion, rage and hurt, desire and ache. These tracks don't only occur in the making of art; they also occur (sometimes viciously, sometimes hazily) in the reception of creative work. Here we are again: we've made this thing and we've sent it out into the world for recognition—and because what we've made is in essence a field of human experience created for other humans, the field and its maker and its readers are thus subject all over again to race and its infiltrations. In that moment arise all sorts of possible hearings and mis-hearings, all kinds of address and redress.

~ Claudia Rankine

For the past year, Claudia Rankine's words have both inspired and haunted me, both as a scholar of race, popular culture, and intellectual property law, and a teacher of those subjects. Rankine is perhaps not an obvious choice to anchor a teaching statement. Yet for me, her words are pedagogically valuable for understanding the fields of race, popular culture, law, and rhetoric. The notion that "[r]ace enters writing" suggests that it is an (unwelcome) guest, one who is always present but often unobserved. We can, perhaps, identify a moment when the fleet-footed guest joins us, or their presence comes to our awareness. The notion that race enters writing as "a structure of feeling" points us to the role of public emotions in racist and racist thought but also to the amorphousness and stickiness of racial feelings. Rankine, an incisive communication scholar as well as extraordinary poet, traces the relationship between production and text, audience reception and audience mis-reception. Together, Rankine reminds us that we must always be mindful of the way that race infiltrates cultural spaces, written, visual, and aural, in ways which are perniciously invisible but deeply emotional. Attending to the vagaries of the racial categories which we inadvertently produce and reproduce is a central part of my goal as a scholar of race, popular culture, law, and rhetoric. I am interested not in filling my students' brains with facts and numbers, in a manner that Paulo Friere would certainly critique as part of the "banking model" of education, but rather by offering them space to cultivate tools, language, emotional self-awareness, that will help them navigate the ubiquitous and complex racial landscapes to which Rankine alludes.

While on research leave last year, I spent much time deliberating about how the election of President Donald Trump could and should change my teaching. As an individual who is deeply committed to anti-racist pedagogy that is responsive to the needs of the moment, I consider often that which is *new* and that which is *more of the same* in the United States since November 2017. While I believe it is important to situate conversations in contemporary historical moments, I also believe that Derrick Bell's theory of "racial realism" is one that is important to recall today. The racism of the contemporary moment is unquestionably both new and more of the same and, as such, it calls for new and more of the same in terms of pedagogy. Thus, even in this post-Obama moment, I retain the core of my teaching philosophy. My pedagogy remains grounded by the desire to help students develop sound skills in critical thinking, media consumption, and self-expression skills in a manner which recognizes and honors differences in identities in and out of the classroom and encourages students to do so as well. In order to achieve these goals, I use popular cultural content and student-centered projects such as class discussions, in-class presentations, creative projects, and self-evaluations to introduce concepts and theories drawn from critical/cultural studies, critical race theory, and rhetoric. Conversations about culturally significant texts through the lenses of race, critical/cultural studies, media studies, and rhetoric offer students the opportunity to develop insights as informed scholars, engaged citizens, and compassionate humans.

All of the courses I've taught over the years – including Rhetorical Criticism, Black Popular Culture, Race, Law & Media, and Reading Race at the Millennium – center questions of difference, particularly race and gender, through readings and in-class discussions. In method heavy courses such as Rhetorical Criticism, I supplement readings with examples drawn from popular culture and contemporary politics in order to ensure engagement with questions of race and gender and demonstrate the practical utility of rhetorical concepts. I intentionally select texts for in-class analysis which will elicit strong opinions and make connections with diverse student bodies. For example, I use a speech by Lady Gaga on Don't Ask, Don't Tell to explore Aristotelian criticism and Sojourner Truth's *Ain't I A Woman* to explore feminist rhetorical criticism. The conversation about the ethos of the speaker is invariably an interesting one. In theory and concept heavy courses such as Race, Law & Media, I focus my teaching thematically, using case studies to explore the relationships between identity and legality. In one class, I pair the musical *Parade* with cultural criticism on the Leo Frank trial in order to explore the race, gender, and class issues that dominated Southern culture and Southern courtrooms in the early 1900s. In another class, I pair an episode of the show *Daredevil* and a clip of real-life Seattle superhero Phoenix Jones with the narrative of infamous New Yorker Bernie Goetz in order to introduce a discussion of race, vigilantism, and comics.

All of my courses contain significant writing components, whether in the form of critical opinion pieces, long essays divided into parts over the course of the semester, or short papers. Except in intensive writing courses, they also tend to contain non-writing assignments such as creative projects which encourage student engagement with and understanding of digital and analog mediums of communication. For instance, in Reading Race at the Millennium, I encourage students to choose their own topics related to issues of contemporary concern, which have included Hurricane Harvey, President Trump's Muslim Ban, and Beyoncé's *Lemonade*, for critical opinion pieces and current events presentations. A self-evaluation at the end of the course allows students to track their own learning and progress, both academically and personally. In Black Popular Culture, I ask students to carry out their first works of cultural criticism in a non-paper format. The Creative Project initially produces anxiety for students who are used to strict rules for writing assignments but yields impressive engagements with popular cultural texts in the form of hand-illustrated posters, spoken word pieces, mobiles, mini-documentaries, and radio programs. Not only does this assignment prepare students for a full length piece of cultural criticism of a text of their choosing but it also encourages self-expression in a manner which makes teaching and learning a creative enterprise of creating knowledge in a consumable form, not exclusively regurgitating it on an exam.

My courses and their component assignments thus facilitate both work and play, encouraging learning through curious and creative engagement with the world. I find this approach entices students to think outside of their usual comfort zones and often adopt of a spirit of radical openness to identities other than their own. While centering discussions of identity is often an uncomfortable and fraught process and some students struggle with race-based content, overall my students report that my courses offer a safe place for processing difficult realities and facilitating growth and development. Notably, it is here, in this place of discomfort, that I have created space for my teaching philosophy to evolve. Given increasing student concerns of "liberal bias," I have incorporated into my teaching a framework for understanding and processing racial feelings, in ways which both unpack concepts such as bias, threat, and terror as partly emotional and allow for self-reflection. Specifically, I increasingly take my cue from Rankine – as well as Raymond Williams, Sara Ahmed, and Paula Ioanide – in teaching and thinking feelings. While my courses appear the same on paper, they are framed with conversations about economies of emotion, the politics of discomfort, and the tendency of feelings of belonging to accompany feelings of fear, anxiety, and hate. Asking my students to identify and process their own racial feelings is a project of personal excavation which is often productive and eye-opening. And engaging difficult conversations early on, while admittedly challenging for all involved, more often than not produces a productive space in which authentic, though imperfect, discussions can unfold over the course of the semester. As these conversations evolve in response to our changing context, so too will my teaching philosophy.