

Transcript of Audio Portion of “An Encounter With Pedagogical (H)alterity”

Narrated and Transcribed by Eric Detweiler

From the start of my teaching career, I've always had misgivings about asserting my authority in the classroom. As a young white male marked with privilege in all sorts of different ways, I was always nervous that doing so would reassert certain historical authority structures in my classroom and over my students. Fortunately, when I started teaching, I was doing so during my master's degree, and—in concert with some administrative work—I just had to teach one class a semester, which gave me plenty of time to plan and reflect on and think about the decisions I was making: how I wanted to present myself; since I'm about five foot four and 125 pounds, keep from coming across like I had a Napoleon complex; and other sorts of things like that.

The year after I finished my master's degree, however, I found work adjuncting. I spent one semester teaching four sections of first-year writing at a community college and then, the next semester, I found myself again teaching four sections, but this time split between two different institutions: one predominantly white and the other one predominantly black. And in one of those classes at the predominantly black university, I had an absolutely miserable semester. I was doing everything I can—everything I could to keep the classroom rolling, but despite having about 20 students enrolled in the class, I was getting maybe five or six students showing up to any given course meeting. I was especially nervous about asserting my authority in this situation, not wanting to come across as one who was trying to exert power over the language of my students, over their subjectivities, over all these different things that teachers can discipline in different ways—especially, as I mentioned earlier, since I reap the benefits, quite frankly, of different forms of historical privilege in all sorts of different ways.

But we got about halfway through the semester, and as I said I had just terrible attendance. I wasn't sure what to do. I had tried shifting the way I taught the class, I had tried switching out readings, all sorts of different things, but nothing seemed to be working. And so finally, in a moment of desperation at the front of the class one day, after I took roll and checked the very small number of boxes that I needed to check to indicate who was there, I just sort of shook my head and sort of looked down at my feet and—quite frankly, I don't even remember what exactly it was I said. It was either, "I'm going to have to crack the whip" or "I'm going to have to whip this class into shape." But in either case, it was a euphemism that used the word "whip" prominently. And one of my most diligent students—who was in class regularly, participated in discussions, turned in her work, all this sort of stuff—immediately [snaps fingers] raised her hand and said, "You can't say that here," implying that as a white man standing in front of a class that was largely made up of black students, I could not use that sort of language, I could not use euphemisms that involved things like whips and violent workings of authority that—even though they may not have been physical in the way that I was using them—came with a long history of real, physical violence, even if I was only repeating that in the form of words.

And she was absolutely right. I had no response to what she said beyond telling her that she was right and apologizing, and ever since then being very, very, very careful not to use that sort of language, to think about the words I'm using, to think about the relation it suggests between me and the students in the classroom, and between those students in the classroom.