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My Students Are Terrified: Teaching in the Days after Trump

Abstract

After the election of Donald Trump, politically-engaged teaching has taken on a new importance—and difficulty. We don't know what Trump's presidency will mean in terms of policy, but we do know what that presidency already stands for: bigotry, exclusion, hate, and injustice. This short piece is an autoethnography of the author's initial experience teaching shortly after Trump's victory and his thoughts on how we should proceed politically, inside and outside the classroom.

Keywords

Pedagogy, Teaching, Critique, Autoethnography, Trump

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Cover Page Footnote

Bryant William Sculos is a contributing writer with The Hampton Institute, a PhD candidate in political theory at Florida International University, and Politics of Culture section editor for *Class, Race and Corporate Power*. His work has also been published in *New Political Science*, *Political Studies Review*, *Marx & Philosophy Review of Books*, and *New Politics*. Bryant is an at-large member of *Socialist Alternative* in the US. He can be reached at bscul005@fiu.edu.

Teaching today, November 9th at 11 am—as neoliberal Democratic Party candidate and likely popular vote winner, Hillary Clinton, delivered her concession speech to her supporters and vicariously to President-Elect and neo-fascist Donald Trump, who, with a message of anti-immigration, anti-free trade, hyper-capitalism, anti-climate justice, sexism, and nationalism, was able to turn reliably Democratic states red—was torturous.

For me personally, I have been terrified of both candidates for months and months now. Thinking of choosing between largely domestically-palatable liberal identity politics, irredeemable corporate capitalism, and criminal imperial hyper-militancy and the unpredictable bigoted narcissism of Donald the Orange’s neo-fascism, was never one that left me sleeping very well. I chose Jill Stein, but it didn’t really matter in the end.

Bernie gave me hope. He gave the Left hope. If he had been the nominee of the Democratic Party, my students—and the world—would be less terrified today. Yesterday, the morning of November 8th, I was planning my lecture for today and I was struggling to find the right way to encourage my first-year writing students to push the impending President-Elect Hillary Clinton to live up to her progressive agenda, which was much more popular with college-age people than it was with the general electorate.

I didn’t need those notes today. I needed something different. Waking up after three restless hours of sleep, I had nothing. After forty-five minutes of traffic, I still had nothing. After the walk from my car to my classroom, I still had nothing. I didn’t know what to expect from my students or myself. Typically still quiet and half-awake when I walk in, my students were talking a lot today—and no one looked very happy. As I would come to find out, they were—and are—terrified.

My students are black and white; they are women and men and transgender; they are gay and straight; they are largely first or second generation immigrants; some are citizens and some are not; some have children; some care for elderly relatives; most work part or full-time jobs while going to school full-time. I am terrified for them. In truth, I would have been terrified for them, and people in other countries even more so, if Hillary Clinton would have won, but they probably wouldn’t have been—for better or worse.

I sat on the table in the front of the classroom and we had an open conversation. Since this is a freshman writing course, I decided to then give them a free-writing exercise to explore their thoughts and feelings a bit more. Anonymized and with their permission, here is some of what they wrote—and I wish I could say I was surprised:

“...I am afraid of what’s to come. Will there be more social chaos throughout the states? Is he [Trump] truly fit to govern decisions for millions of people with [his] racist and misogynistic mentality[?] I am petrified of what will occur in the upcoming months.”

“...I am afraid of the message that his [Trump’s] election sends out to the society. If the President is disrespectful to women and is a racist, others might feel that’s okay.”

“...I’m worried about all the minority groups being affected because of Trump’s win. [With] Many of the things he claimed to [do]: building the wall, deporting illegal residents, imprisoning LGBT couples, as said by Vice President [-elect] Mike Pence....people will have their lives changed by Trump’s presidency.”

“I am afraid that with the stances Republicans hold, my parents will be forced to work their stressful menial jobs well past their retirement date. I am also concerned that with Trump’s unwillingness to support climate change reform and renewable energy, we will begin to see the effects of our dying planet much sooner than anticipated. I am scared for a nation that I no longer feel at home in.”

These responses are partial, but generally representative of the rest of the responses. Only three of my twenty-two students were even somewhat optimistic, hopeful, or excited for potential changes to the US political system they think Trump’s presidency could bring. The rest are completely terrified.

Now the question remains: what am I supposed to do next week when we have our next class? Next month? Next year? Honestly, I’m not entirely sure yet.

I do know something that I will do moving forward, something I did today after seeing their fear, something that I should have been doing a better job of all along: I will remind my students to take care of one another, to take care of those who are most vulnerable in their universes, and when the politics of the day presents them with increasingly unpalatable options, to speak out, to organize with one another, and to exercise their rights in ways that make sense to them.

For my part, I will continue to be more aggressively political in my scholarship and engagement with political struggle beyond academia. I owe this to myself, to my students, and to future generations alike. This isn’t a strategy per se, but it’s the start of one—I hope.

I want to end this with a message written and posted on social media by my younger sister, a freshman undergraduate at Lesley University, which speaks to the kind of disposition we need (and still would have needed if Clinton were elected, but in battling neo-fascism, the need is more urgent than ever):

“[T]o my fellow women, the LGBTQIA+ community, the disabled, abuse survivors, [people of color], immigrants, the mentally ill—my hand is in yours, and no matter what, I love you. [Y]our life is important. [Y]our existence is fundamentally necessary. [I] will welcome you with open arms forever and ever. [W]e will fight through this fire together and we will (somehow) come out on the other side.”

*A special thanks is owed to my Fall 2016 ECN 1101 students for their openness and willingness to allow me to share their thoughts here. This piece is dedicated to them.