EDUCATING THE IMAGINATION

A Dialogue Between Michelle Naka Pierce & Thalia Field

Transforming Mind and Habit

Michelle Naka Pierce: In an interview published in *Chicago Review*, you "renounce the name 'teacher' in the face of the growing expectation that writing classes should be pre-professional."[1] Could you discuss your "utopian view" a bit more?

Thalia Field: "Teaching" in the corporate model is about efficiency, management, predictability, repeatable/verifiable results, and controlled conditions. I am opposed to every single one of these values when it comes to teaching writing, and if there is to be anything like the word "art" in our culture, we need to reexamine what it means to be teaching it. This is why I renounce "teaching"—at least in most contexts. I don't want to get confused about why I'm there. We need to reexamine what assumptions go into the roles of teachers and artists, and how these can meaningfully link up.

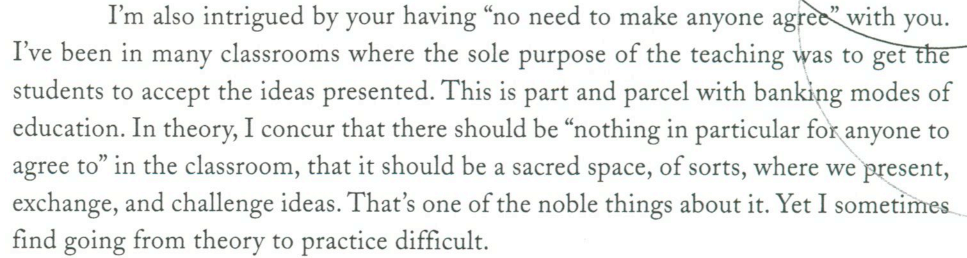
I've had some great teachers and in their names I also defy the word. Mrs. Okudzeto threw out all the chairs and tables from our second grade classroom, and we never took a single quiz. We did a play. We cooked. She told us stories from Ethiopia. All the best teachers make something work within the lives of the students—an awakening, a transformation of mind and habit. Perhaps because I am a student of Buddhism I believe that it is part of life's journey to find teachers and teachings that mean something and to test them again and again. There is no external way to determine whether or not someone is my teacher or that I am someone's—there is only whether what I study makes sense in practice, in a lived, transforming way. Likewise, there is nothing I "have" that I can simply "give" to students to take, like they would cookies or carrots. It's harder than that. I must be totally present to them, and they, as students, must be willing to give it all up and be there, too.

MNP: I, too, am interested in the idea of being present in the interactions among writing collaborators in the classroom, in challenging students' assumptions, and in turn, asking them to challenge mine—an improvisational pedagogy of sorts. I may create a stage or structure for learning—perhaps provide props, attempt to create a setting—but for any meaningful exchange to occur, we must all meet the challenge, really listen to one another instead of "talking at" or upstaging each other—which seems related to your "rehearsal." How do you prepare students for this kind of interaction, especially for those who may be resistant, who are used to, in Paulo Freire's words, a "banking"[2] kind of education?

TF: One of the main practices I use with all my students is to scribe the language of our discussion: the shapes and links and diagrams of our thinking and conversation; the ways in which our group mind has moved through a piece of writing or reading. For example, if we were embarking on a student's story, I would diagram not only the story, but also our discussion about it, including any dominant images or tropes. If the story circled around a mystery, we might find out what sort of "circle" it is: Are there spokes, tangents, intersecting circles? Or, if the poem under discussion used a particular rhythm, we might dance to that beat, then render an image of that dance on the board. This scribing tends to free our hands from our minds, lets us see the topography of the land we've just crossed and go "huh" a bit. Going "huh" is sort of the subtle form of "Aha!"—another important internal syllable. Those students who resist tend to give in because they can see the environment, too; they, even if they were resistant, were there and made the journey.

It's crucial that we never force anything—with ourselves, our work, our lovers, our children, our students. I have no need to make anyone agree, and in fact, there's nothing in particular for anyone to agree to. Once students figure that out, they also figure out that the essence of coherent teaching is being able to listen. As long as students are present and awake, it won't matter what they bring on the journey. Problems tend to arise more often with lazy or very emotional, reactive students. They can poison a whole class, and I often must deal with that separately if it gets too damaging. Luckily, these situations are rare, and generally, I find that what I'm doing as a teacher makes intuitive sense and allows trust and coherence to extend between me and those artists I'm in the room with. Scribing on the board makes me a leader who follows along with care.

MNP: It sounds like you use the chalkboard to "get meta" with your students. I think one important aspect of facilitating a discussion is for the facilitator to rise above the conversation at points to summarize, emphasize, question, check in, or capture what's been said. The process is similar to the infinity symbol, ∞. When facilitating, I travel down into the conversation to participate in the discussion with students, then move up above the conversation to process the discussion—then back into the conversation and above again throughout the interaction. The process reaches the meta-cognitive stages of learning so students have an opportunity to become aware of their learning and take that knowledge with them—i.e., to transfer that knowledge into their work, on their own time, without the assistance or intrusion of the teacher.



I'm also intrigued by your having "no need to make anyone agree" with you. I've been in many classrooms where the sole purpose of the teaching was to get the students to accept the ideas presented. This is part and parcel with banking modes of education. In theory, I concur that there should be "nothing in particular for anyone to agree to" in the classroom, that it should be a sacred space, of sorts, where we present, exchange, and challenge ideas. That's one of the noble things about it. Yet I sometimes find going from theory to practice difficult.

TF: While I tend to shy from jargon—things like "meta" anything—I believe I know what you're referring to. I usually call it a "From the Sky" point of view versus Extreme Close Ups. There are also Double Clickings, Two Sides of the Coin, or the basic Tetralemmas, which are other ways to position ourselves in relation to anything we think we "know." Absolutely, it is imperative—in life, in writing—to be able to be wrong, to change one's mind, to try arguing the other side of something. For example, I always ask for "what ifs" as part of a discussion—these are a way for students to try out ideas for deep revision without committing to anything except in an improvisatory and collaborative way. "What if the piece were all in questions?" "What if this story were told over the course of a thousand years?" "What if every paragraph repeated key phrases from the one before, as you did accidentally here?" Any silly idea can be a "what if"; it allows a lot of serious play into the discussion as well as opening up future play in the inner revision one has with oneself. This creates an atmosphere in which changing one's mind (point of view, position, investment, etc.) is not only possible but de rigeur. Something that is perceived as a flaw from one standpoint has the opportunity of being seen as a great virtue from another.

It would be outright disingenuous for me to say that I never put forward my opinions or that I don't have a certain authority in the classroom. I do. But it is just as important for me to learn to listen, to be wrong, to take backward steps, not to know—I am just as human and flawed and arrogant and stubborn. By seeing me work through habits of my own, I think students see me as an artist and person like they are, and we can all be in it together. That doesn't mean I don't have certain experiences they don't, or haven't read or thought about certain things they haven't. But they, too, have seen and thought things that I benefit greatly from hearing, and it is this exchange that makes the classroom a sort of profane, sacred space for everyone.

MNP: Yes, reciprocal learning (the teacher learning from students as well as the other way around) is one way to handle the issue of authority in the classroom. Actively engaging and challenging ideas as well as acknowledging "not knowing" in other cases shows students the true faces of teachers—as opposed to the wizard's curtain some hide behind. A number of folks address power through negotiating curriculum and grades. In some of my courses, I begin the first day of class with a brainstorm on what students want to learn about the subject so I can incorporate their concerns alongside my own in the syllabus. I also find giving grades too subjective a process and am interested in alternatives to navigating this practice.

Another way I negotiate power structures is through feedback. In all of my courses, I stress that I am only one reader, and that as a writer, one must take all advice and sources into consideration and weigh them against the intention of the work, among other matters. I want my students to understand that as writers, they have the authority—in fact the responsibility—to make the final decisions about any piece of writing, even if that means ignoring the teacher entirely. It's also important for teachers to demonstrate how to participate in a discussion that moves toward genuine responses instead of stock replies. Using Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff's "Movies of the Mind"[3] is one way of thinking about feedback. I believe we need to explore being present in our workshop critiques, instead of remaining static in our feedback habits.

TF: I find that it is very important that the teacher provide the clarity, consistency, balance, and view, offering a container for the class. This role is inherently different than being a participant in the class. Even in nonhierarchical situations or collaborations, I find it essential that someone in the group inhabit the role of container-keeper. This is one of the major pragmatic disagreements I've had when the person facilitating the class participates in freewriting or focused-freewriting. I don't find that it's possible to both facilitate responsibly and participate fully. Perhaps my ideas about this come from theater, where I practiced as a director. Part of what makes the experience one of viable growth and depth is that there is someone monitoring and paying attention to what's happening in both the group energy and the individual experiences. I take on the role of container-maintainer so that others may free themselves to have a safe place to work. Creating a safe community space entails trying to engage the wisdom—not the neurotic—sides of power. If you came into my classrooms, you would see a very active dialogue between students and myself, although I think you wouldn't have any trouble sensing that I remain in charge.

MNP: It sounds like you attempt to decenter authority through dialogic interactions but choose to maintain the flow of energy, if you will—never forgetting your role as the teacher, caretaker of the space.

I was first introduced to you and your work at Naropa's Summer Writing Program. You introduced your work (or someone did) as "post-genre." Your book *Point and Line* feels (could I be any more vague?) like innovative prose yet is classified as poetry. Could you discuss how you approach the poetry, prose, cross-genre, hybridized, and post-genre categories in your workshops? How do a writer's intention and her audience (the class, perceived readers, economic or demographic audience, etc.) come into play?

TF: Perhaps a good way to think of it is that there are simultaneously co-existent, often paradoxically related, layers to the way a work of art (and all things?) manifests itself. What I mean is that there are outer layers that involve the social context, audience, and other abstractions, such as power, money, etc. Every artwork of necessity interacts

It is important in talking about creative work that we learn to speak creatively... making the "crit" into a creative discussion where no language is allowed to be generic.

in a real way with these outer things—though of course all relationships of this sort change as time changes. Then there is the more esoteric level of the work—which arises perhaps without as much of a sense of those outer concerns or constraints. And I don't mean this in some psychologically reductionist sense because the mysteries of writing can be mysterious to the writer, too.

Somehow I find that student-writers have a harder time trusting their own esoteric sense of things, the secret manifestations and whisperings of a weird and paradoxical, often messy, sui generis sort of world. I think believing that only the outer or only the esoteric have value or are "real" is what led modern art into some of the dead-end thinking which we've seen in 20th-century European aesthetics. Sometimes we think our "name" is a socially given thing, and sometimes we feel it from another more mysterious place. Both are valid in different ways. I know that doesn't quite answer the question, but that's today's try at it!

MNP: In my experience, these personal beliefs about aesthetics drive the feedback process in workshops. Students and teachers speak from what they like and don't like; they cite tenets, like "show don't tell," as if they were the only ways to write—not taking into account the myriad of views on writing and art, not realizing that these so-called "rules" are merely conventions. Presenting these conventions as hard and fast rules that must be followed disenfranchises the student-writer. I believe it's important to teach students to see how writing conventions affect them as readers and as writers. Only then can they decide how they would like to work within or outside the conventions—hopefully increasing their openness to risk, revision, and serendipitous adventures in writing as they become empowered and informed in their decisions.

You've taught at a few of the more alternative schools. What have you gained as a teacher working in these writing programs that you think is important to share with others?

TF: I have had the pleasure of teaching at Bard, Brown, and Naropa, where the students' sense of their own creativity has already, to a large degree, been awakened. I am grateful that I also had the experience for several years of teaching in New York City through Teachers & Writers, Theater for a New Audience, and at Borough of Manhattan Community College, because being in the public school system, whether in third grade or college level, gave me invaluable lessons in the difficulties creativity poses in overstressed systems. The relative privilege that private college students have, the freedom and time and ease to explore one's creativity in a supportive environment, is a rare and precious thing. I wish that all students could have the experience of that sort of self-discovery—in the context of time and environment dedicated so exclusively to them.

My journey as a teacher started long ago—teaching horseback riding as a kid, teaching Montessori preschool after college, becoming a dog-trainer, and finally teaching college writing. I think that there is a common experience to all teaching, which is about opening oneself as a guide to experience, becoming a ratty little questioner, some

sort of spritely presence who prods with tiny needles or eases with soft feathers. Occasionally the merry band, which the class becomes, can start to feel headless, like a multi-handed dancer, clown, or bird. It is important in talking about creative work that we learn to speak creatively. This is why workshops often feel so deadly—the language employed in most workshops treats the work under discussion like a specimen being dissected by some sort of objective language. I always think that it's exactly the people speaking about the work who have the greatest responsibility to approach art creatively, find a unique way to speak, try out different approaches to describing it. Making the "crit" into a creative discussion where no language is allowed to be generic makes the whole process a lot more fulfilling.

Notes

1. Thalia Field, interviewed by Eric P. Elshtain, *Chicago Review* 47, no. 3 (2001): 110.
2. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 2000) 72. According to Freire, "banking" is "education [that] becomes an act of depositing, in which knowledge [is] a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing."
3. Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff, "Movies of the Mind," in *Sharing and Responding* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2000) 30–35.