Pedagogies of Social Justice in Miami: Reflections on Healing Wounds of Discrimination and Inequity while Teaching at a State-Funded University

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Abstract: This conversational essay focuses on the authors' teaching at Florida International University (FIU). Their exchange begins with reflections on their overlapping journeys to heal intersectional wounds of racism and sexism that they have experienced as academics. They discuss the pedagogies they rely upon to support ethical and healthy classroom experiences for their students and themselves. In her History and International Relations courses, Chantalle implements a horizontal classroom design that includes un-grading as a decolonizing practice to make the classroom authentic and transformative. In her Writing and Rhetoric courses, Shewonda encourages students to value sociocultural writing projects by incorporating Black feminist principles that foster transgressive pedagogy, freedom, inclusivity in the classroom, and empathy for diverse cultural experiences. The authors invite readers onto the journey on which they explore the transformative power of inclusive pedagogies and their crucial role in reshaping academia's landscape toward equity, and its significance for the broader world.

Keywords: decolonizing pedagogies, ungrading, zines, horizontal classroom design, heritage stories, silencing

Heritage stories are representations of the lived experience of individuals who carry their home with them or re(create) a home when relocating to a new country. More specifically, looking at Haitian heritage, Haitians continue to find the strength to escape oppression and secure their basic human rights in other locations such as the Greater South Florida (GSF), which includes Miami-Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach counties. These stories of their new lives in GSF are blurry: there is no certainty of what the future holds. Yet, their endurance brings about and passes on heritage stories from generation to generation. These stories have shaped us, the authors of

this essay–Haitian women who are socially present and teaching in the GSF area at *Florida International University* (FIU), a state-funded Carnegie Classified Research University (R1) in Miami, Florida. FIU is at once a Hispanic-serving Institution (HSI) whose Spanish-speaking Latin America, the Caribbean, and U.S. students predominately identify as white Latinos; and it is an institution that celebrates having a diverse and international student body. In gratitude, we continue the work of our Haitian ancestors by embracing heritage in our pedagogies.

This heritage work is often challenging, so utilizing decolonizing tools, particularly Black feminist/womanist frameworks, is central to our pedagogies in the diverse yet hyper-segregated and racist context of GSF where most of our students reside. To carry on this work, we gather tremendous wisdom and strength from the writings of Black women authors/scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker, alongside other feminist and womanist writers and educators committed to equity who have made space in feminist and academic discourse. Situated in these frameworks, our essay serves practitioners committed to Black feminism/womanism, anti-racist, and decolonial pedagogy.

As Haitian American women and faculty in the English, History, and Politics and International Relations departments at FIU, a growing awareness that the personal is political has strongly influenced our experiences with the power dynamics of racism and sexism and, consequently, led us to shift from traditional pedagogies toward liberatory ways of teaching in our classrooms. We do this by moving away from traditional pedagogies that generally marginalize, alienate, and attempt to silence Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), and any other students for that matter.

Shifting away from narrow, alienating systemic traditions allows for ethical and healthy ways of sharing and creating knowledge relevant to contemporary realities. This shift involves asking critical questions, such as what pedagogical approaches help to preserve and share heritage stories in institutional spaces. How do marginalized practitioners, who bear the weight of heritage pain and trauma, persevere and set an example for persisting in challenging and uncomfortable work within colonial and oppressive environments? What does it mean to take risks and refrain from being silenced in the classroom? While there may not be definitive answers or a singular approach to tackle these critical questions, we can intentionally revisit questions like these when teaching, particularly at a time when Florida's educational regulations are contentious and unjust.

In this essay, we (Nou in Haitian Kreyòl) focus on our teaching at FIU. Our discussion begins with a reflective exchange about our respective and overlapping journeys in healing the intersectional wounds of racism and sexism we have experienced as academics. Then, we offer a peek into our classrooms by sharing examples of pedagogies we use to support ethical and healthy classroom experiences for our students and ourselves. In her History and International Relations courses, Chantalle implements a "horizontal classroom design" that includes a practice

commonly referred to as "un-grading" as a decolonizing practice to make the classroom authentic and transformative for her and her students. In her writing studies courses, Shewonda encourages students to value sociocultural writing projects (SWP) by incorporating Black feminist principles that foster transgressive pedagogy, freedom, inclusivity in the classroom, and empathy for diverse cultural experiences by analyzing the writing project Feminist Zines for Social Action.

Below, we invite readers to journey with us as we explore the transformative power of inclusive pedagogies and their crucial role in reshaping academia's landscape toward equity, and its significance for the broader world.

Sè Ayisyèn: Reflections on Belonging and Pedagogy

> *"When everyone in the classroom, teacher and students, recognizes that they are responsible for creating a learning community together, learning is at its most meaningful and useful."*
>
> – bell hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking*
>
> *"Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."*
>
> – Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light*

Nou: *So, let's begin: How do we, Sè Ayisyèn (Haitian sistas), find belonging in academic spaces that continue to invalidate our experiences and heritage?*

Shewonda: So much of it lies in the story of how our life paths have crossed and are intertwined in many ways. Since we first met in February 2020, we've learned that we share the same Haitian cultural background, Miami upbringing, and Michigan State University grad school experience. I rarely come across another Haitian woman in academia who understands both the struggles and beauties of being Haitian and rooted in South Florida.

Chantalle: The overlap in our identities, academic paths, and the synergy between our intellectual interests is super energizing. When we met, you were presenting your research on digital storytelling about how Haitian women make sense of and name their identities by reflecting on their cooking practices at an FIU Humanities Edge (HE) workshop. It blew my mind that there was now a Sista on the faculty whose research questions, methods, and overall presence spoke straight to my soul.

Shewonda: Exactly. Meeting you at that HE event brought a sense of familiarity. It's not often I feel that kind of connection in academic settings. I remember being at FIU's new hire orientation, feeling the lack of diversity, with just two other Black women from other disciplines in attendance. I thought, how could I feel this way at a Hispanic Serving Institute (HSI) with a high population of first and second-generation Black and Brown immigrant students? I realized that my Black faculty community would require building across disciplines. Reflecting on my graduate program and noticing this currently, students are diverse, but there needs to be more diversity in faculty. So, with campus engagement slowly resuming, it feels right to continue where we left off, building community as two Haitian women professors collaborating at HE and LACC workshops.

Chantalle: Consciously acknowledging one another and finding ways to connect allowed us to continue the conversation. And, while the pandemic made it difficult for us to follow up immediately, recent opportunities for on-campus faculty development offered us a space to reunite and collaborate.

I am grateful to FIU's HE and Latin American and Caribbean Center (LACC). Administrators in these units have used their funding to support our research, the courses we offer, and our commitment to community engagement. Their workshops (especially the grant writing one led by my History colleague Bianca Premo), undergraduate research assistantships, and public symposiums have offered us opportunities to advance our research and teaching in ways that are rewarding and life-giving (a term used frequently by Sherry Watt, my dear friend and colleague at the University of Iowa).

Nou: *Unfortunately, this season back on campus also includes the reality that FIU administrators and faculty are negotiating impending educational mandates being legislated by the Board of Governors and State of Florida officials who fund our institution. How has it been adjusting to this period of political assault and uncertainty?*

Chantalle: Currently, faculty are spending energy managing so many unknowns about how to lead in their classrooms. My response has been to put my fears aside, work despite them, and practice civil disobedience. In a context where we are already overworked, this is exceptionally exhausting.

We are being terrorized by national, state, and institutional politics. I have deep concerns about how the political current impacts our faculty body (e.g., who we can retain or recruit as new hires, what positions will be funded, and how our daily work becomes even more challenging).

We have to contend with looming and actual threats of censorship: what terms or topics we can or cannot discuss and what draws backfire. There are also union-busting tactics to continuously contend with such as the recent outlawing of public employer payroll deductions for

union members (excluding police, fire, and corrections officers!). For the past 40 years, public workers in Florida have had the benefit of paying their dues through their paychecks. Eliminating this benefit makes it more difficult to maintain the minimum 60% membership roster required for the certification of our union chapter. Decertification means the loss of our Collective Bargaining Agreement and all the rights contained in that contract.

Our students are also impacted directly. They are fearful (at worst) and cautious (at best) about what they can or cannot say or do in the classroom. This is compounded for students who work in our public schools. They are concerned about how this plays out in their K-12 classrooms. Even as their university experiences help them think more critically and boldly, they are unsure of how to hold space for their primary and secondary-level students.

Shewonda: What you're saying reminds me of bell hooks' warning that when the process of thinking is no longer enjoyable, we fear the thinking mind. We are silenced. So, knowing that students will walk into my college classroom in a state where they are afraid to ask questions because they are used to being silenced, I approach teaching from a Black feminist pedagogy. I can't teach with the fear of thinking.

I don't leave myself out. With everything I do as a scholar and educator, I value the self.

I deliberately echo Audre Lorde's words, "I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood" in my email signature. Being exhausted by the persistent underrepresentation of voices like mine is what keeps me courageous in institutional spaces. I am determined to challenge and disrupt patterns of dominant discourses that ignore and devalue Black women's ways of thinking. As a Black educator, I embrace connecting with my students in ways that help them feel comfortable to begin to unlearn oppressive mindsets. I aim for students to leave my writing classroom with a newfound sense of empowerment, unafraid to engage in Black feminist critical thought.

Chantalle: I was not always so courageous in the classroom. I did not recognize it at first but I learned through sessions with my writing coach Cassie Premo Steele (a white woman who shared her expertise in feminist writings, particularly wisdom from Audre Lorde, with me quite generously) that fear was paralyzing me during my early teaching days. I was highly cautious and tentative about bringing politics into the classroom. I understood that the topics I was teaching about race, class, gender, and imperialism in the histories of the United States, Caribbean, and Latin America history could be considered political.

That fear led me to become anxious when teaching. A very pronounced version of this was during and following the elections of Barack Obama in 2008 and Donald Trump in 2016 to the

U.S. presidency. I didn't want to alienate any students. I didn't want to be questioned about whether or not I was offering a fair and quality classroom experience. I guess, in the traditional social science academic way, I was trying to be as objective as possible. I got caught up in this quixotic pursuit despite knowing from my experiences assessing published scholarship that it is impossible to be objective and, therefore, we must be transparent about our subjective stance.

Shewonda: I give students a disclaimer on the first day to avoid tensions about the topics and readings I teach in my classroom. I make it transparent that my teaching approaches are informed by my own identities and oppressions—that of being Black, Haitian, and a woman. I make clear my commitment to incorporating the voices and experiences of underrepresented groups in our class materials and discussions to challenge the problems of representation. I make it apparent that we will have dialogues about race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and various social, economic, and political issues, even if these conversations may be difficult or uncomfortable. Acknowledging and addressing these topics within the classroom is crucial for students to recognize and confront injustices that affect them, their peers, and their loved ones.

Chantalle: Now more than ever, I recognize that everything we do is subjective because we are all subjects – everyone, including those passionately waging cultural wars as if they are defending objectivity. We all have experiences and knowledge that inform our positions and approaches to whatever we do in life. And so, contrary to my first instinct, I now understand that when I leave my politics out, or anything critiqued for being political, I am not being authentic, and more importantly, I am not being transparent. Being transparent means unapologetically including my personhood (who I am, what I think, what I experience, how I see the world). This allows me to discuss the logic behind my choices and the basis for my understanding (i.e., the meaning I make of things).

Nou: *Typically, graduate school does not include training on being transparent and capable of having difficult conversations in the classroom. How do we help our students learn how to have difficult conversations?*

Shewonda: I don't remember ever being fearful about my teaching or research practices and topics. For instance, in my dissertation, I made the rhetorical choice to cite only BIPOC scholars. I didn't care how many well-known white scholars talked about the topics within my dissertation; they weren't gonna get a citation from me. How I value and make visible underrepresented voices is crucial to me and my work. The lack of Haitian women's representation in academic spaces keeps my fear away. I don't have the luxury of being fearful when there's a need for Haitian women's voices. I refuse for my Haitian community to continue being underrepresented. I didn't go into academia with the fear of the personal being political because it's the personal that keeps me in academia doing this work. I'm not fearful because I imagine the hope I give underrepresented students when they walk into the classroom and see me, a Haitian woman, standing in

front of the classroom. Hope hits differently when it's visible.

Chantalle: Now, I talk with as much transparency as possible about my focus and approach in the classroom. I either explicitly discuss or let students know that I am open to discussing why I might choose a particular text or organize a course in a particular way in terms of the thematics.

And now, in terms of the structure: I have learned that if I leave myself out of the classroom, my ability to connect with and elicit genuine engagement from the students is less effective. I learned this and continue to learn this from a treasured network of pedagogy mentors and colleagues who specialize in teaching and learning. Besides my writing coach Cassie, experts from FIU's Center for the Advancement of Teaching (Erica Caton, and before her Isis Artze-Vega. and Leslie Richardson) and at the University of Iowa's Multicultural Initiatives Research Team, led by Sherry Watt, have been instrumental in helping me strengthen my capacity as an instructor.

These interlocutors have led me to ask the question: How can I invite students to bring themselves into the learning environment if I am hiding behind something else myself?

I used to get evaluation comments where a handful of students criticized my discussion of race and topics that can be easily labeled Black history when in fact, they are simply History (i.e., history that does not exclude Africans and African-descended people from the narrative). Now that I am more open about my stance and approach to teaching, I generally don't get those comments anymore.

Shewonda: Sè Ayisyen mwen an (my Haitian sista), we must be aware of our role as Black, Haitian, and underrepresented educators and actively engage in a continuous learning process that forces our students and us to think critically. We have to keep asking questions that shift and decolonize systemic education practices that hinder the learning journey of marginalized students.

> "Learning in action means that not all of us can be right all the time, and that the shape of knowledge is constantly changing."
>
> —hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking*

Chantalle: Horizontal Classrooms as a Decolonizing Practice

As a scholar of Haitian descent and one who studies Haiti, it might seem a given that decolonization would be at the center of all that I am and what I do; but that was not entirely the

case when I first began teaching. It took many semesters and conversations with colleagues and coaches immersed in pedagogy and Black feminist writing before I fully embraced implementing horizontal classroom structures as a way of establishing a more equitable learning environment. While there are many ways to design a class "horizontally," in essence, the practice calls for a focus on a student's strengths, emphasis on everyone in the classroom as participants on equal footing (i.e., students and instructors alike), building on existing knowledge and skills, and supporting holistic learning by bridging theory with practice (Gawinek-Dagargulia and Tymoshchuk).

When I teach about Haiti or the experiences of other historically marginalized groups, I am encouraged to align myself and my teaching with decolonial ways of being. The very existence of Haiti is the result of decolonization (a thirteen-year war that culminated in the founding of an anti-slavery and anti-colonialist Black state). The ability of Haitian people (and particularly its women, given the heightened assaults they face) to survive and thrive amidst persistent and new challenges requires recognition of colonial vestiges and new forms of colonialism. When I speak to students about hierarchy as a historical and sociological term, i.e. something from the past and something that persists in present-day society, be it along lines of class, color, gender, sexuality, religion, or any other demarcating factor, it soon becomes apparent that our understanding of hierarchy cannot be bound to a classroom discussion. The values and circumstances that come up in discussion frequently translate to our lived experiences. Whether I invite specific examples or not, students usually introduce examples from their workplaces, civic settings, or the world stage that they are on their minds.

Thus, there is ample room to practice decolonial ways, and for those who are committed, decolonization is an imperative path that shapes our everyday realities through the meaning we make of things, the forms of resistance we take, and the ways of Being we embrace (Watt et al. 2022). An equitable learning environment invites us to care for ourselves not only in the physical sense but also in how we care for our ideas, our right to speak, to write, and to simply be in this world. When students experience this type of care in the classroom, they have an opportunity to better know their rights in this world. I consistently aim to pass on these lessons, which I've learned so poignantly from the writing coaches and the teaching and learning experts (listed above) who inspire, instruct, and support me in more ways than I could ever describe.

However, teaching from a liberatory space is not always easy. I have come to realize that while university instructors may be refined in helping students recognize inequity when studying historical figures and moments, we can be less adept at living in alignment with our historical observations. This reality frequently comes to light when I'm listening to deliberations in faculty meetings or trying to make sense of the disconnect between a university administrator's words and their actions. And, in a more personal context, parenting a child who is now 5 years old has helped me appreciate even more fully the challenge of consistently practicing a decolonial way of Being. As the teachings of Akilah Richards, author of Raising Free People, and other members of

a virtual parenting community called My Reflection Matters (founded and facilitated by Chemay Morales-James) remind me regularly: a commitment to decolonization requires patience, continuous self-reflection, assessment, and adjustment. When we lose sight of all that is required in a decolonial practice, we inevitably and at times unintentionally (like a reflex) fall back into practicing fear-based tactics such as minimizing, shaming, and imposing hierarchies in our relationships with one another.

Decentering myself to decolonize my classrooms

Setting up a horizontal classroom is one way that I practice living and modeling in the classroom what I would like to see in the world. By decentering myself (the instructor) and, anyone else working with me to administer the course, in cases when I have teaching or digital assistance, I invite and emphasize an equitable space and place for all members of our learning community to participate in our collective knowledge and skill-building experience, including evaluation measures in the course through a process commonly referred to as un-grading (See Appendix 1).

This means that whether teaching in person or online (synchronously and asynchronously), the parameters of the course are set up in a way where everyone occupies relatively equal power in the classroom. I say relative because I acknowledge my power as the instructor of record who sets the tone (how I show up and invite others to do the same), who sets the overall agenda, as presented in the syllabus, accompanying materials, and assignments, and who submits final grades to the Registrar's office. However, my tone and how we proceed with the agenda, including the un-grading approach to final grade calculations, is always in relationship to, respectful of, and responsive to all who participate in the course.

A horizontal classroom design amplifies the opportunities my students have to be seen, heard, supported, and welcomed to fully express themselves orally and in writing, as they study, and grow. While I offer students this type of support, I also invite them to offer others the same. Thus, when I create a radically open space for my students to learn, I model in the classroom what I would like to see in the world. In these political times, that offering includes the capacity for each of us to engage in civil dialogue, and to co-create spaces of equity, respect, and genuine learning. It is the space where we truly get to heed hooks' caveat in the above quote: that we cannot "be right all the time," and that "the shape of knowledge is constantly changing."

Our students regularly express that participating in a horizontal learning environment does not come naturally, it can be difficult to adjust to, and for some, it can be anxiety-inducing. Students typically expect me to set their learning priorities for them and to tell them how well they are progressing toward a particular final grade. Ceding this power to students means that they take the lead, and I simply make myself available to coach them through a personalized learning plan (PLP) they define for themselves. The self-directed plans are a modified version of the process

in Personalized Learning in a PLC at Work (Stuart, et al.) and are intended to help students take stock of how their personal interests, priorities, and needs align with the goals of the course, as well as how to establish strategies that can help them meet their goals.

The liberatory learning environment I offer students through horizontal classroom design is an opportunity for healing. A horizontal classroom structure supports a socially-emotionally healthy and ethical classroom environment. Evidenced-based findings in pedagogy and general brain development indicate that the absence of fear, anxiety, and other stressors facilitates emotional regulation which in turn allows for higher-level cognitive function (i.e., a greater capacity for critical thinking, verbal expression, and writing) (Matsumoto, Conscious Discipline Brain State Model, Ambrose, Verschelden).

Whether teaching a lower-level course on the History of the United States or Latin America, an upper-division course on the History of Haiti, International Relations of the Caribbean, or a graduate seminar on related topics, I begin with bell hooks to invite students to a joint commitment to critical thinking in our learning process: “Everyone is participating and sharing whatever resource is needed at a given moment in time to ensure that we leave the classroom knowing that critical thinking empowers us.” (hooks, Teaching Critical Thinking, 11) The setting calls for all to be engaged, for there to be a “radical commitment” to “radical openness” by “[k]eeping an open mind.” (hooks, Teaching Critical Thinking, 10). These practices usher in the possibility of experiencing radical freedom and for new perspectives and even knowledge to emerge.

In the essay I assign, hooks describes that “children’s passion for thinking often ends when they encounter a world that seeks to educate them for conformity and obedience only. Most children are taught early on that thinking is dangerous. Sadly, these children stop enjoying the process of thinking and start fearing the thinking mind.” (hooks 8). By reading and discussing hooks in my classes, students have an opportunity to learn that critical thinking is an innate and organic skill that children of all backgrounds come into the world doing (e.g., investigating and interrogating with curiosity and without reservation). They soon realize for themselves when relaxing into a different type of learning environment that most of their social experiences and traditional classroom experiences discouraged and challenged them, even at a physiological level (i.e., in the ways that fear and anxiety blocked their mental processes) from the practice of critical thinking.

The process of engaging in the risk-taking required in a horizontal classroom, for instructors and students can feel and can become dangerous, particularly in our current political climate. However, in these moments, I remind myself and encourage my students to heed the words of Audre Lorde, so that we can remember: “...when we speak we are afraid/ our words will not be heard/ nor welcomed/ but when we are silent/ we are still afraid/ So it is better to speak/remembering/ we were never meant to survive” (Lorde).

From my vantage point, those who are engaged in the backlash that has fueled this politically turbulent time are also afraid. Those who aim to censor information fear the awakening that comes when we gain an awareness of more complex realities about the world we live in. At the university level, there are many uncertainties about such censorship efforts, therefore, the ultimate costs associated with the risks that come to those who choose civil disobedience in settings such as a horizontal classroom also remain high at this moment.

It may not seem very consequential to some; but, two stage plays recently produced in South Florida vividly underscore otherwise. The theatrical works Cry, Old Kingdom, written by Haitian playwright and Miami native Jeff Augustin, and Create Dangerously, based on a book of essays by Haitian author Edwidge Danticat and adapted by Lileana Blain-Cruz remind us that in times of political repression, those being repressed often grapple with whether or not take risks (such as practicing civil disobedience) and that the costs of those risks can be high. The plays emphasize that how we live and what we do is a creative process and that when anyone attempts to create authentically, without reservation, and unapologetically, they are taking risks that leave them vulnerable. Periods of political authoritarianism, such as François Duvalier's authoritarian regime in Haiti (1957-1971), that of his son Jean-Claude (1971-1986), as well as the administrations of and popularity of Donald Trump (at the national level) and Ron DeSantis (at the state level, jockeying for national attention and influence) in the United States, raise the level of these risks to potentially lethal ones.

Shewonda: What's Sociocultural Writing Projects Got to Do with Transgressive Pedagogy?

My Haitian cultural identity and gender shape my pedagogy.

When it comes to applying certain pedagogical principles that center on race, class, and gender, there are significant challenges, risks, or obstacles we face in our role as Black educators. We engage in education as a brave practice, as it involves confronting prejudice, advocating for change, and challenging oppressive educational practices. While Black feminist pedagogies have made progress to improve systemic structures in institutional spaces for marginalized students, these foundations remain threatened and face resistance. Emerging education policies in Florida "attempt" to tear down the transgressive pedagogical work put toward academic freedom. I emphasized "attempt" because by implementing sociocultural writing projects in my writing classroom, I reject political agendas that force educators to ignore issues of race, class, and gender. Sociocultural writing projects allow students/writers to access knowledge about different facets of history and society. Access to knowledge does not solely depend on or come from teaching materials but also on guiding students to recognize that their experiences contain valuable insights that contribute to history, heritage, and culture.

As a transgressive pedagogy, I implement sociocultural writing projects because students center on the interaction between society and culture, which enables their experiences and insights to be part of the knowledge creation process. Undergoing the research and writing process, students come across historical contexts crucial to understanding how those events influence their current cultural and societal practices. These projects challenge traditional educational norms and promote social justice, allowing students/writers to think independently and find their unique voices. When I plan my writing courses, I employ strategies that enable students to grasp the reasons behind my commitment and desire for them to engage in transformative writing processes and practices that happen through sociocultural writing projects.

I analyze the writing project Feminist Zine for Social Action to discuss the connection between sociocultural writing projects and transgressive pedagogy. Generally defined, zines (/ziːn/ ZEEN; short for magazine or fanzine) are personalized booklets that amplify or voice diverse personal and political narratives and social issues. Further, zines "demonstrate the interpenetration of complicity and resistance; they are spaces to try out mechanisms for doing things differently— while still making use of the ephemera of the mainstream culture" (Piepmeier 191). However, at the same time, "they aren't the magic solution to social change efforts; instead, they are small, incomplete attempts, micropolitical. They function in a different way than mainstream media and than previous social justice efforts" (Piepmeier 191). Zines are a powerful medium through which marginalized communities record their stories, disseminate underrepresented stories, and organize collective efforts for awareness and change. As a feminist practice, zines offer a unique and accessible platform for individuals whose narratives are often underrepresented or overlooked in mainstream discourses. I emphasize to students that creating a feminist zine does not necessarily label them as feminists but allows them to engage in and make sense of feminist principles. What defines their zine as feminist work is the alignment of its content with feminist principles and practices to improve the quality of life for marginalized voices.

I assign the zine project to my Writing as Social Action (ENC3354) students as their first project (project name: Feminist Zine for Social Action). In Rhetoric and Writing II (ENC1102), wrapping up the semester, students remix their cultural essay into a zine (project name: Cultural Identity Zine). Starting the semester with the zine, the goal is for students to make sense of how their identities intersect. Concluding with the zine, the aim is for students to articulate how they want their culture to be represented—they create narratives of representation. In this discussion, I emphasize transgressive principles when students start with the zine project. Therefore, my analysis focuses on my ENC3354 writing course. Despite zines being an old feminist and political practice, this genre of writing and activism is fading with new generations. Before we start the project, I take a poll asking who has heard of zines. In ENC3354, 3-4 hands go up, and in ENC1102, 0-1 hands go up. We need to assign feminist zines more often in the writing classroom because the content of the zine showcases stories, words, artwork, photography, poetry, and other creative mediums that show the intersection of marginalized identities because "the social divisions of

class, race, gender, ethnicity, citizenship, sexuality, and ability are especially evident within higher education" (Collins and Bilge 2), which is noticeable at FIU. So, when writing projects guide students to realize how their intersectionality shapes their interactions within institutional spaces and influences how others treat them, they are empowered to take proactive steps to enhance their college/campus experiences.

Breaking down The Zine Project

The Project and Objectives

In the *Feminist Zine for Social Action* project, the writing prompt asks students to craft a zine that explores the intersections of their race, class, gender, sexuality, and the various forms of oppression that collectively impact their experiences and existence in the world. (Refer to Appendix 2 for the project instructions). My objective in assigning the zine project is to prompt students to engage in *critical thinking* and *self-reflection* to explore aspects of their identities to understand the various dimensions of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic background, and more to understand how these aspects influence their thoughts, beliefs, behaviors, and interactions with others. Critical thinking and self-reflection practices actively include students in transgressive teaching by helping them make sense of what they already know and have experienced. bell hooks describes the thinker as someone who sees thinking as an action. The (student) thinker's thoughts are "where one goes to pose questions and find answers and the place where visions of theory and praxis come together. The heartbeat of critical thinking is the longing to know—to understand how life works" (hooks, *TeachingCritical Thinking* 7). In this project, students must critically think and reflect on their experiences to bridge concepts of identity with their real-world implementation. By the time students complete this assignment, they discover the who, what, when, where, and how of things, which are the sociocultural factors that influence and shape their identities. While creating their zine, they recognize critical *social locations* and begin to make sense of both their individual or a group's social positions within the hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality, as well as other significant social hierarchies like age, ethnicity, and nationality (Weber 24). Students/writers acknowledge the who, what, when, where, and how of things and name their identities through the writing process, and ownership happens. Recognizing ownership of their identities becomes fundamental to self-expression within a cultural collective.

Assigned Readings for Foundational Building

My students start the semester by reading two chapters from Lynn Weber's book *Understanding Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: A Conceptual Framework.* They read Chapter 1: "Defining Contested Concepts," to define and understand concepts, including race, class, gender, sexuality, oppression, and social location. To recognize that oppression manifests differently

in different social arenas, Chapter 1 helps the students understand how ideologies, politics, and economics further complicate how these concepts intricately shape how individuals experience the world. Next, they read Chapter 10: “Envisioning Social Justice.” They analyze the social actions Mamie Mobley, Emmett Till’s mother, took to get justice for her son’s murder. They see how race, class, gender, and sexuality systems can lead us to act for social justice—which further helps them understand why the personal is political. After being introduced to these contested concepts, they realize that these concepts always intersect when talking about social action, so to make sense of this realization and name it, they read Chapter 1: “What is Intersectionality” and Chapter 5: “Intersectionality and Identity” from *Intersectionality*, by Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, and as a class we watched Kimberlé Crenshaw’s TED Talk *The Urgency of Intersectionality.* To understand the writing genre of a zine and the complexity of identities, they read Chapter 4, “We Are Not All One”: Intersectional Identities” from *Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism* by Alison Piepmeier. These course readings help them understand intersectionality as “a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experience” (Collins and Bilge 2) and how, as an analytical tool, it drives social action and social justice. They recognize how the intersection of these socially contested constructs leads to inequitable circumstances that shape individual experiences in the broader world. Together, these readings provide a framework for creating their zine.

Transgressive Principles Practiced by Students/Writers

Students engage in various feminist pedagogies, such as intersectionality, critical thinking, self-reflection, critical consciousness, storytelling, and ethical considerations, while crafting their zines. Through a deep understanding of intersectionality, students/writers ensure that their zine content acknowledges the complexities of lived experiences and considers how various forms of discrimination and privilege overlap. Students identify and critically analyze the oppressive social and cultural factors perpetuating inequality, discrimination, and injustice during critical consciousness moments. The stories they choose to share in their zines serve as potent tools for sharing lived experiences and amplifying the voices of marginalized communities.

Sociocultural writing projects not only empower my students to prioritize their personal experiences but also equip them with the ability to write effectively across various academic disciplines. Through this approach, I have seen my students gain greater cultural awareness as researchers and writers attentive to multiple human experiences. As my students become more familiar with writing across the curriculum, there is a transformation in how they learn to approach topics with cultural sensitivity. They become more aware of the potential impact of their words and ideas on individuals from diverse marginalized or cultural backgrounds—a vital aspect of cultural awareness.

Why do we need sociocultural writing projects?

The final deliverables develop through Sociocultural writing projects in different modes, including languages and dialects, carrying cultural identity and history. The practice of assigning sociocultural writing projects is critical because the products the students produce in different modes in different languages carry their cultural identities, their histories, and the oppression(s) that their families went through and the current oppression(s) they're going through. Sociocultural writing projects serve as knowledge repositories that document histories, cultural practices, and resistance movements that might be overlooked or erased elsewhere. The deliverables from sociocultural writing projects become dynamic archives, preserving the richness of cultural diversity, and serving as a testimonial space to capture social action. So even if the education system bans books or censors what sorts of topics or issues are discussed in class, the one thing they can't do for certain is take away our lived experience. Implementing writing projects that ask students to write about their culture and lived experiences, as a form of activism, keeps circulating the knowledge/information that the education system is trying to censor.

With sociocultural writing projects, we continue storytelling practices and pass on cultural heritage. Through sharing methods such as peer review or even organizing student conferences that showcase their work, students are exposed to other stories and experiences. Further, with student permission, their final products are shared with students who take the class after them, and those students see their stories and engage with their peers' histories and cultures. Sociocultural writing projects are acts of social justice for South Florida educators and learners. Sociocultural writing projects are powerful pedagogical tools and a movement to keep the dominant culture from silencing marginalized voices and experiences in institutional spaces.

As We Transgress

As our forebears in Haiti, the United States, and worldwide resisted and found ways to thrive amidst conditions intended to extract from them or even eliminate them, so too are we learning to sharpen our capacity for sitting with the discomforts that come with practicing civil disobedience and other risk-taking. This is what supports the possibility for us and our students to survive and thrive amidst the assaults on our right to think, speak, and write freely.

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Appendix 1

Boilerplate Language for Syllabi about Ungrading

Some of the recurring comments and questions that many of my faculty peers and I have had for one another are: we love the idea of un-grading in theory, but how does it work? How do we put the concept into practice? Here is some language that I've been using in my syllabus, particularly since at this juncture, we are still operating within a system that requires grades:

Throughout this course, we will be working with an evidence-based approach known-as "Un-grading" (i.e., undoing the traditional grading process).

Instead of the traditional process where the professor assigns grades, **you will assign yourself a final grade based on an evaluation process that tracks your completion of assignments, your engagement in overall course activities, and the personalized learning plans (PLPs) you establish for yourself.** This alternative approach is intended to eliminate the focus on earning points or seeking praise. Instead, this approach emphasizes the importance of investing in your learning experience to develop the capacity to identify meaningful goals, learn how to assess yourself along the way including determining when you have reached your goal, recognize and remain responsive to feedback, be open to employing intervention strategies, and ready to implement an alternative approach when appropriate.

For the work you submit, you will receive different types of feedback, which I will also refer to as **offerings.** These offerings will be general comments to the class at large based on student submissions; at other times, they will be specific comments directly addressed to you from me or a peer in the learning community.

The only points I will assign to the work you submit is a single point in the grade book for each submission.

The submission marks will look as follows:

- ***-I will*** assign a point value as a marker that you DID ("1-pt") or DID NOT ("0-pt") practice the assigned activity by submitting an assessment

Therefore, **do not distract yourself with the Canvas Letter grade, since *this is NOT* the final grade that I submit to the Registrar's office** on your behalf at the end of the term for reporting on your transcript.

Always remember that your course grade will be based on self-evaluation of the work you complete, in consultation with offerings from me and your peers, as well as rubrics provided throughout the course.

The PLPs, offerings from me and your peers, and related self-assessments will be tools that help you remain clear on some nuts and bolts of the process, allowing you to conclude by the end of the term about whether or not you have reached your goal. You will submit your conclusion in an Assignment called: "Assign Yourself a Final Grade" which I take into consultation, and generally follow, when it is time for me to submit a letter grade into the university system.

Throughout the term, I aim to communicate with you as explicitly as possible about the process to ensure that there are no surprises at the end of the term and that you have confidence in the work you completed and the grade reported on your transcript.

NOTE: Failure to submit a specific letter grade recommendation *and* supporting information as outlined above may result in an Incomplete grade being entered for the final grade. Incomplete grades that are not addressed promptly revert to an F after two semesters (including the summer term). Skip the hassle and complete the steps in this assignment or ask questions if needed along the way

For more info on this approach to grades, see:
"The Case Against Grades" by Alfie Kohn, https://www.alfiekohn.org/article/case-grades/ "Teaching: Notes on the Thought of Luce Irigaray" by Tomoka Toraiw, https://criticallegalthinking.com/2015/04/13/teaching-notes-on- the-thought-of-luce-irigaray/ "How to Ungrade" by Jesse Stommel, https://www.jessestommel.com/how-to-ungrade/