

## “Confronting the ‘Mess’”

# Embracing Vulnerability

ALEXANDRA B. REZNIK

AS A STUDENT AND INSTRUCTOR OF AMERICAN LITERATURE, I've been reading texts that engage with the American Dream for as long I can remember. In high school, I was obsessed with F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and its narrative of self-creation and destruction. But then I attended an all-women's undergraduate college, where, in learning how race, class, and gender interact with power, I came to see narratives of the American Dream not as stories of individual successes and failures, but as reflections of patriarchy, access, and white privilege. I've come a long way since then: my dissertation research explores how African American women celebrities navigated power systems in the nineteenth century—or, put differently, how they achieved their own American Dreams in the face of systemic oppression.

My research is informed by my students' reflections on how systems of power, including those of the college classroom, have rendered them invisible and silent. As a hopeful future faculty member, I'm interested in how faculty and administrators can ensure change in higher education so students can empower themselves—a key topic of AAC&U's recent annual meeting, “Can Higher Education Recapture the Elusive American Dream?” At the meeting, I was pleasantly surprised to attend a keynote panel titled “Identity Matters: Realizing the American Dream.” The panelists affirmed

that an awareness of the role identities play in navigating power systems is critical in supporting students' pursuit of their dreams.

Providing effective leadership and mentorship to students often requires an understanding of power systems and a focus on amplifying marginalized voices. As a queer white woman, in my years as a graduate student, I've found that attention to voice is essential, but also messy. Yet as Donna M. Lanclos reminds us, “Confronting the ‘mess’ of people's everyday practice is a necessary first step towards more effectively connecting people to the resources they want and need.”<sup>1</sup> The “mess” of my own pedagogical journey

reflects the various resources I draw upon to work inclusively with students in the classroom as I try to support them in achieving their dreams.

### **Facing our privilege, relinquishing our authority**

A true, genuine awareness of our identities and how they affect power dynamics across our interactions requires consistent diligence and is never complete. Awareness of all the facets of one's identity, and what privileges those entail, is necessary to foster an inclusive space where all students can develop their own voices—an integral skill for students striving to achieve their dreams. When I undertake any professional activity—working with students, creating assignments, drafting advertisements for events, or planning meetings—I ask myself how what I'm doing is amplifying others' voices and countering oppression. In addition, no matter what the context, I enter any space with an openness to learning new perspectives and ideas.

But sometimes I fail to “confront the ‘mess,’” and as a result, I mess up. During the first year of my doctoral studies at Duquesne University, I was selected to mentor a new MA teaching fellow, a black woman who had less teaching experience than I did. I quickly became aware of the power dynamics at play between us. At the start of the semester, I had expected to use many texts that I had previously cotaught with my own mentor, who was white. But when my mentee and I began to review a lesson plan that included a rhetorical analysis of Martin Luther King Jr.'s “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” she began to cry. I didn't know what to do. Instead of asking her what she needed

---

ALEXANDRA B. REZNIK is a PhD candidate in English at Duquesne University and a 2018 recipient of the K. Patricia Cross Future Leaders Award, presented at the 2018 annual meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

### MY VIEW

**A true, genuine awareness of our identities and how they affect power dynamics across our interactions requires consistent diligence and is never complete**



Alexandra B. Reznik,  
AAC&U Annual  
Meeting

to teach this text in a predominantly white classroom, I explained the rhetorical triangle to ameliorate the situation.

In class, when it was her turn to go over the text, she froze. I promptly took over and finished class; I later consulted the director of first-year writing, but I failed to relinquish my authority and enter a messy conversation with my mentee. For the rest of the semester, I struggled to face my own limitations or come to terms with how my privilege allowed me to more easily perform confidence in that classroom of white students

and in the university at large. Eventually, my mentee trusted me enough to productively speak back to me, resisting our potentially oppressive power dynamic. I'm infinitely grateful to her for mentoring me, but I also recognize now that it is my responsibility to educate myself about my own racial privilege—a point that I often share with my students.

**Challenging our privilege,  
amplifying marginalized voices**

As I have worked to amplify students' voices and honor their experiences and knowledge, I have learned to adjust how and what I teach based on the context. In fall 2016, I was invited to teach the first-year composition course in Duquesne's new Africana Learning Community.

During my first five years of teaching, I had taught the documentary *Wylie Avenue Days* to predominantly white classes to counter the stereotype of Pittsburgh's Hill District as a decimated, dangerous place. Every semester, my students would learn a history never taught to them—that the Hill District is a community that struggles in part because it was cut off from the rest of Pittsburgh's downtown by the Civic Arena. My approach to teaching *Wylie Avenue Days* has developed over time as I've become a more experienced and confident teacher.

My class in the Africana Learning Community was primarily composed of students of color from the local community. Unlike many of my former students, these students already knew the negative story attached to the Hill District and understood its material effects. In class, as students shared their expertise and experiences, I learned that one student knew Chris Moore, the film's producer and narrator, from a high school journalism program he had attended. Thanks to him, Moore visited our class, where he answered questions that the class had drafted collaboratively and engaged in discussion with students about the current challenges that Pittsburgh's black communities face. Ultimately, Moore provided professional development and networking opportunities to the students, inspiring them to get involved with local organizations.

**It is my responsibility to  
educate myself about my  
own racial privilege**

connecting course texts and their own experiences. The posts, as well as student-led class discussions, amplified the presence of civic responsibility in students' lives and gave them a means to challenge systems of privilege.

By the end of the course, students embraced examining their privilege and considering ways to challenge systems of oppression in writing and discussion. I felt a certain comfort in interacting with this diverse group of students (consisting predominantly of women of color and white women but including a few men) who let down their guard to discuss privilege and oppression. That experience prepared me to work with students who weren't initially so open, a dynamic that arose in the next course I taught.

#### **Cycles of discomfort, courage, and transformation**

In fall 2017, I discovered again that I needed to revisit what, how, and why I was teaching with a different set of identity positions in mind. Following my invigorating world literature course, I decided to focus my first-year writing course solely on Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade*. While many students enrolled in the course were open to encountering new ideas and were excited to read work by black women scholars, some were more skeptical. I will always appreciate one uncomfortable interaction with a student who, during a meeting to discuss a paper he was writing for the course, said that he didn't understand what *Lemonade* had to do with him as a white guy from New Jersey. After taking a breath, I explained that *Lemonade* amplifies a black woman's experience, and that one way white people can counter racism is to listen to that experience without judgment and learn from it what we can. The

student and I then engaged in a conversation where we were both open to learning within our discomfort. I have found that this messy work doesn't scare students away; in fact, if students feel like they are genuinely listened to, they are willing to come back for more.

As educators and administrators, if we are going to support students' pursuit of their dreams, we need to release our ideas about wielding complete authority and our positions as content experts. This process will look different for each of us depending on our individual identities; for some, like me, it will require grappling with our own privilege. If we are going to make liberal education relevant to students in the twenty-first century, we need to honor the fact that students arrive at our colleges, universities, and classrooms with valid experiences that have shaped who they are and the skills they bring to the table. Our role as educators is to help students realize the potential that they already have. I believe that the only way to genuinely support students is to be open to one's own mistakes and failures, and to model for our students how to use those mistakes as powerful opportunities for development. Vulnerable moments are scary and painful—and sometimes they involve being wrong. But in those moments, the most meaningful relationships and personal transformations happen. □

To respond to this article, email [liberaled@aacu.org](mailto:liberaled@aacu.org) with the author's name on the subject line.

#### NOTE

1. Donna M. Lanclos, "Ethnographic Approaches to the Practices of Scholarly Communication: Tackling the Mess of Academia," abstract, *Insights* 29, no. 3 (November 2016), 239.

#### PHOTO CREDITS

Cover, Pages 7, 9, 12, 15, 16, 30, 31, 33, 38, 39, 46, 51, 53, 54, 57, 58, 59: Mike Ferguson ([www.mikefergusonphoto.com](http://www.mikefergusonphoto.com))

Page 11: University of Rutgers–Newark

Page 18: Hollins University

Pages 21, 22, 24–25, 26–27: University of Wisconsin–Madison/photos by Jeff Miller

Pages 29, 34: Goucher College

Page 37: California State University–Fullerton

Pages 45, 47, 48: Brookdale Community College

To provide other models for students to reflect on how they navigate oppressive systems of race, class, and gender, I invited other community members of color from diverse backgrounds to speak with the class. The connections students formed by networking with these visitors led them to internship opportunities at start-up companies in Pittsburgh. In reviews of the class, students said they appreciated that I centered their experiences in an inclusive and productive way—something many noted they had never encountered before.

Structuring class in this way required me to relinquish some authority within the traditional instructor-student model. At the same time, it allowed me to foster an inclusive community where everyone participated in, and was accountable for, their own meaningful learning.

### Empowering students

One aspect of empowering students involves providing opportunities to practice discussing the dynamics of power and privilege. I planned my spring 2017 course, “Who Run(s) the World?": Power and Performance in World Literature, with this outcome in mind. While I had designed the course to amplify women’s and girls’ voices, I wanted to make sure the students felt that their own voices were heard and important. I opened the class with a few value statements:

1. Privilege exists, and it resides in systems and individual experiences.
2. Oppression exists, and it resides in systems and individual experiences.
3. Our work in this class will be guided by an understanding of human beings as shaped by the interaction of different social locations—race/ethnicity, indigeneity, gender, class, sexuality, geography, age, disability/ability, migration status, religion, etc.
4. The personal is political.

I discussed what these statements meant to me and why they are important to shape a classroom that will be genuinely inclusive, and students reflected on what they expected from the course: to grow as writers, but also as young professionals and citizens.

To meet these goals, I created opportunities for students to develop their voices and to hold each other accountable. For example, students wrote blog posts and collaborated with me to revise their essays before publication. Through these posts, students taught their peers and me about social issues and organizations by

## K. Patricia Cross Future Leaders Award

The K. Patricia Cross Future Leaders Award recognizes graduate students who show exemplary promise as future leaders of higher education, who demonstrate a commitment to developing academic and civic responsibility in themselves and others, and whose work reflects a strong emphasis on teaching and learning. The award honors the work of K. Patricia Cross, professor emerita of higher education at the University of California–Berkeley, and is administered by the Association of American Colleges and Universities. Following are the recipients of the 2018 award:

**Kelsey Boyle**, Chemistry, California Institute of Technology

**Adrianna I. Celis Luna**, Chemistry and Biochemistry, Montana State University

**Tony J. Cunningham**, Clinical Psychology, University of Notre Dame

**Anahid Ebrahimi**, Mechanical Engineering, University of Delaware

**Darla Ida Himeles**, English, Temple University

**Rishi R. Masalia**, Plant Biology, University of Georgia

**Alexandra B. Reznik**, English, Duquesne University

Nominations for the 2019 award are due Monday, October 1, 2018. (For more information, see [www.aacu.org/about/crossaward](http://www.aacu.org/about/crossaward).) The recipients will be introduced at the 2019 annual meeting, where they will deliver a presentation titled “Faculty of the Future: Voices of the Next Generation.”



*Left to right: Darla Ida Himeles, Alexandra B. Reznik, Kelsey Boyle, Adrianna I. Celis Luna, Elizabeth Barkley, L. Lee Knefelkamp, Rishi R. Masalia, Tony J. Cunningham, and Anahid Ebrahimi*