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ABSTRACT

This paper, written in a highly personal style, follows the "docustory" model first employed in "Communication Education" in 1993 when the journal presented a series of 13 docustories from various scholars in the field--each tried to articulate "When Teaching Works." The paper is a partial attempt to value the experiences of the newly transitioning assistant professor, someone who is attempting to birth her "graduate student soul" into a new body, a new role. In many ways, the paper is an exploration of what whiteness studies, as an exploration of the interstices of power, privilege, and disenfranchisement, might mean for teacher-scholars at work in communication theory. The paper illustrates, through six vignettes, one particular assistant professor's life as a member of the communication faculty at a university. (NKA)

Resisting Racism, Classism and Other "Isms": The Challenges of Whiteness Studies Scholarship for Communication Pedagogy.

by Deanna L. Fassett

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Resisting Racism, Classism, and Other “Isms”: The Challenges of Whiteness Studies
Scholarship for Communication Pedagogy¹

Or

Cassandra: Tales from the Field

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Mmmmmmm...yes. Holding the coffee cup in both hands, Cassie thinks, “finally... warmth.” She adds creamer—a little packet of the french vanilla. She stirs, sips, but instead concentrates on trading each cooling coffee cup for fresh as the morning’s meetings continue. Because of the unseasonably warm fall outside, the conference room inside has an arctic chill, or at least that’s the rumor. Someone reasons that this has something to do with steam heating—maintenance has to wait until it’s full-blown winter outside before they can turn on the heat, otherwise a warm spell could turn the building into a sauna. “I’d take my chances,” Cassie thinks, trying to decide when she might sneak away from the conference table for more coffee.

Her attendance at this meeting is something of an accident; the department chair suggested she might like to learn some of the most current university system-wide questions/concerns/debates/debacles. Plus, there’d be a free lunch. Knowing this would be an excellent opportunity—as a brand new Assistant Professor, her colleagues often joke about how so many rules and regulations were put into place before she’d been born—Cass bundled up in the wee hours of a precious Saturday morning, hopped the subway and rekindled her love affair with coffee.

The Chancellor’s office had asked communication faculty from across the state to meet, ostensibly to achieve consensus on a lower-division curriculum. It seemed like a pretty good idea; a common series of courses would make it so a community college student in the northern part of the state could easily transfer to a school in the southern part. Moreover, the Chancellor’s office representative tentatively offered, “plus, if you

do this now, then we won't have to decide these matters for you later." Coffee long cold, Cass digs her hands deeper into her wool jacket—her perennial conference companion—and sighs to herself, "this is going to be a long meeting."

Her chair had been right about meeting "the big kids" in the field. They're all here, swaddled against the constantly blowing vents by their eccentricities and agendas. One of the first folks to respond to the Chancellor's charge—an established professor from down south—has taken charge of this meeting; she issues a challenge to the ruffled masses: "We could look at this as something we're being forced to do, or we can look at this as an opportunity to set an example, to set out our sense of what it means to study communication." Cass' mind races—"Wow, a set of core courses that says what we're all about! Oh, we could really do SOMETHING today... We could put a spin on communication that says skills aren't what we're all about, that we do cutting edge critical work..." As Cass gnaws on her cuticles, she keeps thinking, "...but can I say this here? Nobody knows me... But maybe this is what I want to be known for, for speaking my mind. But maybe that'll just make me some kind of 'radical,' a target..." Still fidgeting, Cass begins jotting a list in her notebook: communication theory, multicultural communication, communication criticism...

The chairwoman, after clicking through her series of PowerPoint slides twice—a real professional affair, lots of colors, easy to read—finds a space to make a list of the "foundations" of communication programs. She writes "public speaking" at the top of the list—"of course, we can't say that someone's gotten a degree in communication, if they haven't taken public speaking—it's the most basic thing we've got." People around the room nodded and wrote "public speaking" at the tops of their lists. She continues, "I can't believe there're still programs where they don't make their students take public speaking—really...how can they call themselves communication departments?" Attempting to curtail a bloody cuticle massacre, Cass switches to pedaling her feet under the table. But, when her foot begins to hammer a bit at the edge of her table, the grumbly looking man next to her begins to stare, his coffee sloshing a bit from cup to saucer. Willing herself to stop, Cass resumes writing in her notebook: "what about me?" Cass never took any of the "old saws" of communication—not persuasion, not interpersonal, not intercultural (at least not in the traditional sense), and certainly not public speaking.

In her notebook: “can’t students get these skills via cultural criticism? analysis? theory?” The man next to her stops staring and gestures for the chairwoman’s attention—“what about argumentation and debate?”

She looks up to see the chairwoman enter this into her computer. In all her scribbling, Cass hasn’t seen the list grow to include communication theory, interpersonal communication, argumentation, intercultural communication and, of course, public speaking. Finally flushed with heat, Cass raises her hand: “I wonder...” A pointy man sitting behind her cuts her off—perhaps the chairwoman was pointing to him?—to add “I like what we’re accomplishing here—we’ve got all the important stuff. But, I wonder, why do we have intercultural up there? Don’t we usually teach that at the upper division level?”

The chairwoman clicks back to the chart showing what each university offers at which level. Cass tries again, “Excuse me, but if the point is to be proactive, perhaps we should look at this list as something people can use—that people will use—to define the field, to decide what to create in terms of course offerings.”

“Ok,” the pointy man, unwilling to release his protective hold on his coffee cup, makes wet, caffinated gestures with his points, “but I thought the point of this was to develop a list of common core courses. It doesn’t make sense to list what we don’t offer. Intercultural is fine and all, but most students already have to take a course of it for their GEs—we should focus on where they need to get into our programs.”

Cass’ notebook: “So all students need is one course in intercultural and they’re experts...”

The chairwoman stands up from behind her computer and begins to stretch—fingers to toes, fingers to ceiling—“So, it seems like we need to take a vote on whether or not to include intercultural communication as part of this list. What I’m hearing people say is that, of course, intercultural communication is important, but that perhaps it doesn’t make sense to offer this as a core course at the lower division level—Cass?”

“Yes, I guess I’d like to remind everyone that just because a course isn’t offered at the lower division level, doesn’t mean it doesn’t need to be. Or, since we’re drafting a document that’ll be distributed far and wide, we have the option of taking intercultural off the list, but underscoring that issues related to cultural diversity should be infused

across all introductory communication courses.” Satisfied, Cass takes her seat again—coffee, coat and cold forgotten.

The people around her resume debate: the community college instructors fight for intercultural, as it’s already a part of their course offerings, a couple of other professors agree with the “impassioned plea” for greater cultural sensitivity but feel constrained by their particular departmental cultures, and still other professors say that the field, as it is, is already “doing that,” paying attention to culture, no need to put it in writing. “Well, I suppose it’s pretty easy for a room full of white people to dismiss issues of cultural politics out of hand,” Cass hisses into her coffee cup. The people around her glance her way—did they hear her?—but the meeting is drawing to a close for the day; they’ll pick this up again at the next meeting—where would everyone like to eat tonight?

While everyone is discussing the relative merits of Greek versus Thai food, Cass grabs her bags—“Too damn heavy! Oh, many, many more papers to read before I sleep tonight...”—and slips out the back door. Walking back to the subway station, Cass catches herself reciting moments from the earlier debate, but with far greater vigor and frustration. “Of course, intercultural is important—so important that one GE class reveals all! The decision about when and how to teach about cultures is cultural! Nothing but a room full of white people making decisions about who and what counts and deciding that argumentation or public speaking is more important than trying to explore power and politics and oppression...uhh...” She notices that people are starting to give her a wide berth... More silently, she wonders whether she was right to speak up. “Maybe I’m making a big deal out of nothing. What do I know anyway? I’m just getting started. Oh man, I wonder if people heard what I said at the end?” Her adviser always said that the half-life of unprofessional behavior is a pretty long time; but was what she said unprofessional? Or just unrefined?

In her notebook: “Well, Cassandra, it seems as though you have something to write about for your conference paper...”

* * *

“Seriously Jo, this thing is getting to be a pain in the ass... Are you sure you can’t come?” Calling Jody to whine about faculty life is becoming habitual; though he’s becoming less sympathetic with each call. Cass tries hard to remember how much she hated looking for a job—all the preparation, all the hurry-hurry-waits, all the uncertainty. Sure, she’s happier now; if she still feels like a grad student, at least she’s better paid. Already some of the most loathsome parts of the search process—trying to feel like an expert when you’re still fighting with your adviser over your data, getting psyched up over a job interview only to find out they brought you out just to make hiring their temporary lecturer seem more legit, not knowing if next year you’d be living near your folks in Colorado or flying solo in Wisconsin—are fading into the background. Whatever her problems are as an assistant professor, surely they’re better than graduate student problems—at least she’s sure that’s what Jody thinks—but they don’t feel that way to her. And lately, she’s been drowning in kindnesses—appointments, activities, projects, opportunities...

“Well at least someone invited you to be on a panel...” Jody begins.

“Yeah, yeah, I know, but putting this thing together is really tough.”

“Isn’t it always?”

The conference panel submission is nearly always an eleventh hour accomplishment, and a difficult one when your friends are about your age, disciplinarily speaking. Cass readjusts her cat so she can see her notepad again, “Yeah, but this time it’s a different sort of pain in the ass. I mean, people are really friendly... Even the people who say they can’t participate are quick to out their friends who do work with critical theory, whiteness studies, you know. I’ve no shortage of potential participants, but the list of who’s actually going to this conference is getting shorter and shorter...”

“Sorry friend, I already told you...I’m in dissertation hell ‘til my adviser tells me otherwise...”

“No, I know. It’s not that. It’s not that people are busy either. It’s weird. It’s like people are boycotting this conference. I wish I knew more about the organization. I just know that whenever it comes up, people say they won’t be going to Idaho this year.”

“Well, I can think of a lot of reasons not to go to Idaho, can’t you?”

“Yeah, but that’s not it. It seems like a nice pretty resort—like Lake Tahoe or something—and you’d think folks wouldn’t have supported having it there, if they weren’t up for skiing or seclusion or something, right? It seems better than Cincinnati, and you’re going there...”

“Uh—no I’m not—dissertation hell, remember?”

“Ok, ok, but do you see my point?”

“So it’s not the location...”

“Well, in a sense it is... I keep hearing rumors that people aren’t going to Idaho because it’s racist—you know, hate crimes and militia and all.”

“Interesting...how do you hold a conference in a place that isn’t racist?”

“I don’t know... I just know I’d skip the whole thing except I’m new there. I don’t want people in my department to think I can afford to skip a regional conference. Come on... maybe your adviser wouldn’t notice if you sent just a little paper?”

* * *

Tuesday: three classes, different students, similar discussions.

9 AM. Communication Theory. “So, shall we begin with general impressions of the reading?” Gnawing on one of her cuticles, Cass waits for a response. Carrie, a young white woman who aspires to teaching (and who is, in many ways, sensitive to the potential frailties and foibles of classroom discussion), is first to respond—“I thought this reading was really powerful. I never really thought about how someone’s skin color could make someone scared. Well...,” she pauses, “...I never really thought about someone being scared of white skin.” Cass had asked students to read *Whiteness as Terror*; hoping that bell hooks might make clear some of the complexities, some of the severity she could not. She wondered how students might respond: ambivalence? anger? guilt? fear? hate? pain? relief? No doubt some of these and unknown others besides... She was living one of those moments she’d tried in vain to describe to her students—a moment of vulnerability, a moment where politics and pedagogy intertwine, a moment where she could make a difference in how people see the world around them for better or for worse. No matter how hard she tried, she just couldn’t get her students to

understand that there is no master recipe for success in the classroom—what moves or engages some, entrenches or wounds others; you can only be true to yourself. “That’s a nice observation Carrie; I’m glad you’re trying to adopt a new perspective. What other sorts of meanings or observations did you all find in the piece?”

Nathan raises his hand. All semester Cass has been unclear on how to read Nathan—young, white, affluent, very bright, argumentative, perhaps a debater? She nods to Nathan.

“First, I’d like to say that I liked reading this essay...” The class pauses, knowing a “but” will follow; there’s always a “but.” “But I don’t understand how this counts as contributing new knowledge to Communication. Isn’t this just her opinion? You can’t prove or disprove someone’s opinion.”

Cass considers how to proceed. “Would anyone else like to respond?” Of course, everyone is looking at her to see how she will respond. “That’s a good question, Nathan. Let me ask you though: is, say, quantitative research any less opinionated?” A couple students in the room, the folks who’ve already had the research methods course no doubt, begin to squirm.

But Nathan smiles, “Ok, I see where you’re going—any sort of researcher is gonna pick and choose, so everything’s opinionated... But at least the quantitative stuff tries to be objective. hooks isn’t even trying.”

“Point taken. But...”, Cass looks around the room trying to get a sense of whether folks are still listening, “don’t you think maybe hooks has earned the right?”

Carrie is nodding and writing furiously in her notebook, pen in one hand and highlighter in the other.

But Nathan still stares, “but here’s the deal—what makes hooks story more valuable than mine? She can’t disprove my opinion any more than I can disprove hers.”

“Wanna bet?”, Cass thinks. “But Nathan, maybe the point isn’t to prove or disprove... Maybe there’s something else to knowledge, no?”

* * *

2:30. Communication in the Classroom. “What’s the big deal? I don’t understand why I can’t just enjoy a movie—why does everything have to be about something? Can’t it just be fun?” Kevin is getting frustrated. “Like, when I go to the movies, I just want to be entertained.”

Cass nods, “yes, you know, I like to be entertained too—like I’ve seen all the Lethal Weapon movies, for instance, and those aren’t great art or political treatises or anything—but I guess I want to make sure I pay attention to what those movies are saying about people, about human relationships, about, say, the potential role or value of women, or stereotyping, or...”

Carrie, eager to moderate, suggests, “well, maybe it’s just that once you see the hidden messages in movies, it’s hard to enjoy them.” But Kevin won’t accept this friendly amendment—“but it’s not like the filmmakers intend to say teachers are victims or schools are totally violent.”

“Wait a minute—the beginning of the film tries to establish legitimacy by saying ‘a teacher wrote this movie.’ Plus, we looked at the web site info and the director specifically frames this as a movie so that parents can see what schools are ‘really like.’” Cass has screened the movie 187 for her students, so she can see what they see in the film, to see if she can help them see the “seams.”

“Ok, but that’s just this one movie. Not every movie has a message. And maybe they just put the violence in the movie ‘cause it creates suspense...”

“Well, I see your point, but I guess I have to ask... Does the issue of whether the filmmakers intend a particular message relieve them of their responsibility for that message?” The class stares. A couple students shake their heads. “No? How come? Deidre?”

Deidre, an elaborately coifed student in the back of the classroom, pointedly offers, “‘cause they’re still gettin in our heads.”

“Well put. What sorts of stereotypes does this movie promote?” Cass nods at Kevin, “intentionally or not?”

“That Mexicans are violent.”

“They’re in gangs.”

“That machismo is bullshit.”

“That students are wild and teachers have to save them. Like that missionary thing we talked about—how Garfield is set up like some kind of vendetta-Christ.”

“That teaching steals your soul—you know, how Ellen throws her certificate in the trash or how Garfield is ok with killing.”

“And,” Cass adds, “my favorite is that we don’t see anything about how this school gets funded... How come we don’t get to see how this school treats its honors students at the expense of the kids and teachers stuck out in the portables? How come we see the barrios but not the gated communities?” Students stare. “It’s not that I need to see those necessarily, but it’s that I need to know how this—if we’re to believe it’s true—how this came to be... how what we’re doing, even right now at this university or in our communities or in our homes, helps to make this sort of violence possible.”

Carrie raises her hand, “But isn’t this all really difficult to see?”

“Yes, and these filmmakers don’t make it any easier for us to see it. And, if we can’t see it, then how can we change it?”

* * *

6 PM. Communication Theory. “Eleven. Twelve. Thirteen. Wow...,” Cass is stunned by her students, as always, though instead of delighted surprise at insightful comments or amused dismay at clever though faulty reasoning, she’s surprised by the number of cell phones she can actually see on her students. And, though she can actually see thirteen, clipped to belts and backpacks, tucked into back pockets, sitting next to notebooks and pens, there is probably more. Especially if one takes into account portable computers (two students have theirs on and running to take notes...or perhaps to play solitaire), personal data assistants, and pagers.

Her students are working through a series of frustrations they experience on a daily basis—part of an exercise Cass hopes will help students begin to consider whether and how a variety of problems in their lives might be address through communication

theory. Their list of problems is as diverse as they appear to be, complicated by age, gender, family, though, curiously, race is absent in this list.

“Roommates!” The class laughs as a student begins to describe the communication problems she has with her roommates. Another student adds family and Cass can’t help herself, “Does that mean communicating with them too little? Or too much?” A few chuckles here and there. “Seriously, what makes family a problem?” An older white man in the back of the classroom offers, “Well, not having enough time to spend with my family.” Yes, Cass understands this one. Other students continue with the list: “getting interrupted by the guys at work,” “not enough parking at school,” “not enough night classes,” “pace of life is too fast,” and “too much accessibility.” These last two get Cass’ attention—“How do you mean?”

Nearly half the class begins to speak at once, which, in a class of forty, is a bit too many for Cass to understand. “Wait—wait, I can’t hear what you’re saying...” One student, who has both a pager and a cell phone attached to his belt, suggests, “It’s too easy for people to find me. I mean, sometimes, I don’t want to know what’s going on at work.” Another student: “Just when I understand the software at work, we get new stuff; I can’t keep up!” Small conversations erupt throughout the classroom; Cass can’t hear them all, but she has the sense that most students know these problems all too intimately.

“Why not just turn off the cell phone? Get rid of the pager?”, she asks.

Cass’ students look aghast. They begin to murmur in protest—“but my Mom/Dad/Wife/Husband/Boyfriend/Girlfriend/Children/Boss/Co-Workers/Friends need to be able to reach me!”

“Wow...whatever did we do before all this new technology?” Cass is guilty of technophilia too; she loves her cell phone—it’s voice activated, it has an alarm clock, it can help her call AAA when she blows a tire. She does, however, keep hers turned off... “Outgoing calls only, thankyouverymuch.” And sometimes she wonders what people do when their cars break down and they don’t have cell phones.

She understands the technophilia; what she doesn’t understand is the allegiance students have to their forty (or sometimes sixty) hour work week jobs—jobs where their employers might well lay them off in an economic slump, jobs where they can’t get to class because their employers don’t understand why someone might need a college

degree. These are not the students she was. Or rather, they are and are not. They are bright, friendly, outgoing, eager learners. But they are also driven workers, working one and sometimes two full-time jobs to be able to afford to rent a room in someone else's condo and go to school full time. And they display the trappings of status—the cell phones, the pagers, the PDAs—as badges of honor or perhaps requests for passage.

* * *

9 PM. Home. “Hmmmmm...we meet again,” Cass muses, pouring another cup of coffee. “Ugh, like acid,” she mutters. Again it's the wee hours of the morning, but this time it's in the middle of the week, so her Saturday remains as yet unsullied—she has sacrificed her Saturdays to the Goddess-of-Tenure-and-Other-Institutional-Miracles. She has promised herself she will write her conference paper, even if it means foregoing an evening with Margaret Atwood or The X-Files. She stirs creamer and sugar into the coffee in hopes of making it—day old microwaved Starbucks—palatable, sits down at the keyboard, and begins to write.

¹ In 1993, Communication Education presented a series of thirteen docustories from various scholars in the field; each tried to articulate “When Teaching Works.” This piece follows the same “docustory” (Rosenfeld, 1993) model (though I perhaps most clearly emulate Pacanowsky, 1993); it is a partial attempt to value the experiences of the newly transitioning assistant professor, someone who is attempting to birth her graduate student soul into a new body, a new role. In many ways, this work is an exploration of what whiteness studies, as an exploration of the interstices of power, privilege and disenfranchisement, might mean for teacher-scholars at work in communication pedagogy.



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