
TASSEOGRAPHY: READING POST-RACIAL RESISTANCE TO
TEACHING

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Opening her essay, “Confrontation and Pedagogy: Cultural Secrets, Trauma, and Emotion in Antioppressive Pedagogies,” Ann C. Berlak asks:

How is it possible for many white students and students of color to be present in a university classroom where they read about, see videos documenting, and engage in activities that demonstrate the pervasive and ubiquitous realities and effects of institutional and personal racism, and yet fail to become engaged with racism at a deep emotional and analytical level?¹

In the passage above Berlak seeks to address fundamental problems with resistance to teaching difficult subjects with the goal of increasing student’s understanding and empathy with anti-racist pedagogy. In an effort to respond to her own question, Berlak suggests using the experience of “trauma, erasure, mourning and expression of feelings in classrooms”² as part of the process to grapple with the challenges of resistance to teaching. Berlak reaches this conclusion after an invited guest speaker’s anger with racism stirred the students’ dormant emotions on the subject.

The appearance of the Tea Party on the political landscape further compounds the pedagogical challenge in higher education that Berlak describes. In my view, in an escalating atmosphere of hostile indifference precipitated in part by the Tea Party,³ students face further barriers to responding to issues of racism and to becoming more engaged at a deep emotional and analytical level. Adding to these concerns, the idea of using anger as a catalyst is premised on the idea that one person’s emotional vulnerability, similar to the guest speaker in Berlak’s class, must be the conduit for the reciprocal response from the audience. This sacrifice is that which is necessary for others to be emotionally invested or to *get it*. This construct is unappealing because the emotional free ride, could potentially leave the humanity of the speaker unattended and overlooked, in a Kantian sense.

¹ Ann C. Berlak, “Confrontation and Pedagogy: Cultural Secrets, Trauma, and Emotion in Antioppressive Pedagogies,” in *Democratic Dialogue in Education: Troubling Speech, Disturbing Silence*, ed. Megan Boler, 123-144 (New York: Peter Lang Press, 2004), 123.

² *Ibid.*, 123.

³ The Tea Party refers to the contemporary libertarian and conservative populist movement in the United States.

The focus of this paper is to develop a progressive philosophy of praxis that challenges, what I will argue is, a post-racial resistance to teaching about racial injustice. Post-racial resistance to teaching can lead to forms of enlightened racism and sexism⁴ in the classroom. In this essay, I develop and extend the use of the metaphor of tasseography as a critically analytical practice to consider the impact of Tea Party politics on higher education teaching pedagogy. By considering forces that help to construct and frame certain forms of student ideology, particularly Tea Party rhetoric, tasseography emerges as a way to read the sediments of popular discourse. The philosophy and practice of tasseography provides a means to interpret, understand, and analyze the significance of the Tea Party for post-racial resistance to teaching, deconstructing its relations of power and racist ideology. As such, tasseography as a critical practice can offer ideas and solutions around creating and sustaining progressive classrooms. Progressive classrooms are spaces for critical consciousness⁵ to flourish. Critical consciousness encourages students to link real life situations with critical thinking and theorizing rooted in transforming student and social inequality.

TASSEOGRAPHY AS A PRACTICE

Tasseography may seem a dubious philosophical approach to interrogate Tea Party rhetoric and its effect on the educational environment. Tasseography, the practice of reading tealeaves or coffee grounds to determine a course of future action, does not clearly indicate a philosophy of education. However,

the world of scholarship/knowledge is a world of freedom, populated by individual minds bound only by laws generated by reason itself. This is the world of speech and writing, in which minds speak to themselves and others. In this world all ends can be submitted to critical evaluation as long as the rules of argument, evidence, and consensus-seeking are obeyed.⁶

Tasseography as a quasi-religious art, divination or practice resonates across geographical, political, and linguistic borders. Partly responsible for this is “the significance of the ubiquitous, cross cultural and historical pervasiveness of tea, coffee and sediment reading,”⁷ which practitioners of

⁴ These are sophisticated forms of racism and sexism that can appear to be less overt in their preference for exceptionalism and assimilation.

⁵ See Paulo Friere, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Continuum, 2005).

⁶ Jane Flax, *Disputed Subjects: Essays on Psychoanalysis, Politics and Philosophy* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993), 81.

⁷ “Tasseography Tasseomancy: The Mona Lisa Method of Tea Leaf Reading,” Tasseography, retrieved from <http://www.tasseography.com/history.htm>

tasseography suggest “may be related to the primal human desire for understanding the self.”⁸

Tasseography grew in popularity during the 1830s as a practice of leisure “just as psychological analysis grew...but the practice distinguishes itself from amorphous fortune telling, mystical, occult or other magical activities.”⁹ Specifically, tasseography is not an application of magic, but rather a tool for tapping into the subconscious by applying meditation to pattern recognition and symbols. In appealing to the ways of life in which tasseography inheres, this paper is within a Jungian tradition. Jung reminds us that in our explorations of the human psyche one would

be better advised to abandon exact science, put away his scholar's gown, bid farewell to his study, and wander with human heart throughout the world. There in the horrors of prisons, lunatic asylums and hospitals, in drab suburban pubs, in brothels and gambling-hells, in the salons of the elegant, the Stock Exchanges, socialist meetings, churches, revivalist gatherings and ecstatic sects, through love and hate, through the experience of passion in every form in his own body, he would reap richer stores of knowledge than text-books a foot thick could give him, and he will know how to doctor the sick with a real knowledge of the human soul.¹⁰

Jung is calling on reflection and meditation on the human condition from the various on-the-ground locations of where it unfolds. In classroom practice this awareness is the kind of knowledge that is necessary to begin to investigate and solve problems. This kind of holistic approach to knowledge acquisition is critical in such a paradoxical time of glaring contradictions. Barack Obama's election as the first African American president signaled to some the hopeful notion of a post-racial United States. Yet, his election has also, not surprisingly, been met with a host of reactionary forces, which demonstrate the persistence of race and racism. The Tea Party has been the manifestation of the most visible racially polarizing element. It is this paper's task to “*read the tea leaves* of the Tea Party movement,” if you will. In particular I consider what is suggested by the settling of the Tea Party's sediments and sentiments on to the university scene.

THE ORIGINS OF THE MODERN TEA PARTY

Although Tea Party rhetoric is not monolithic, it is sufficiently cohesive, I would argue, to be the inspiration for the continued rise of neo-

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Carl Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology* (Cambridge & London: Routledge, 1999), 246-247.

conservative ideology in American society. Neoconservatives represent a complex assemblage of different tendencies, many of which are in a tense and unstable relationship to each other.¹¹ Despite this, neoconservatives are primarily concerned with freedom from government interference, personal responsibility, and the free market.

Modern Tea Party advocates state that their roots are in the revolutionary spirit of the formation of the United States, “the self-reliant, liberty-guarding instincts of the Founders’ era.”¹² Specifically, tea partiers reference the Boston Tea Party of 1773, when members of the Sons of Liberty disguised as Mohawk Indians dumped imported tea in the Boston Harbor in protest of unfair taxation. The original or Boston Tea Party, since providing a crucial historical turning point leading to the American Revolution, has continued to inspire U.S. citizens. However, name aside, the modern Tea Party has more of an ideological connection to the Populist movement of the 1800s.

Populism is a recurring political tendency, usually appearing at times of economic stress and cultural dislocation.¹³ The 1800s Populist movement was a reaction to the crop-lien system. In this arrangement farmers would be given what was needed to maintain production through a lien on crops, for which a farmer might pay 25 percent interest.¹⁴ As the process of farming became more mechanized, farmers struggled to manage overhead costs. Farmers had to borrow excessively from banks. Farmers who could not pay saw their homes and land taken away. Those who could not pay became tenants. By 1880, 25 percent of all farms were rented by tenants and the number kept rising.¹⁵ The financial crisis amounted to a form of enslavement for farmers of all ethnicities. This situation was particularly disastrous for the laboring class. As a result, the Cleburne Demands¹⁶ were drafted, representing a critical call for reform inclusive of regulation in banking, taxation, railroads, fair wages, and protections for workers’ rights.

¹¹ Michael Apple, *Cultural Politics and Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996), 45.

¹² Jonathan Rauch, “How Tea Party Organizes Without Leaders: By Embracing Radical Decentralization, Tea Party Activists Intend to Rewrite the Rule Book for Political Organizing,” *National Journal Magazine*, September 11, 2010, retrieved from http://www.nationaljournal.com/njmagazine/cs_20100911_8855.php

¹³ Gary Gerstle, “The GOP in the Age of Obama: Will the Tea Party and Republican Establishment Unite or Fight?” *New Labor Forum* 19, no. 3 (2010), 23-31.

¹⁴ Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States 1492-Present* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003), 284.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 284.

¹⁶ The Cleburne Alliance in 1886 drafted the first document of the Populist Movement, the Cleburne Demands, asking for protection from abuse by capitalist and elite corporations.

While these efforts seem to represent commonality with the modern Tea Party, it is the more ominous side of the populist movement that the Tea Party redeploys. As Berlet writes:

Populist movements arise in a variety of forms to construct some measure of perceived stability and safety through collective action. Whether these movements ultimately gravitate to the right or left is unpredictable. When they move to the right, however, they often develop into a dualistic xenophobic force that demonizes and scapegoats target groups. The outcome is aggression, discrimination, and violence.¹⁷

Since being fused with the Democratic Party in 1896, populist movements have consistently shifted rightward. Although there were 1930s populist movements like the Union for Social Justice and Share Our Wealth clubs, modern populism has increasingly fed on fear and paranoia. The resurgence of the silent majority of the later 1960s and Reagan's 1980s gave new life to racial resentment and the rise of conservative populism.

Between disenchantment and disappointment the modern Tea Party began as a series of small networks. Frustrated with George Bush's Republicans and bitterly resentful of President Obama's election in 2008, many conservative groups began mobilizing through internet social networking sites. Networking sources like *Top Conservatives on Twitter* and *Smart Girl Politics* were abuzz, particularly on February 19, 2009,

When...journalist...Rick Santelli aired a diatribe against the bank bailout...The next day, the networkers held a conference call and decided to stage protests in a few cities just a week later. No one was more astonished than the organizers when the network produced rallies in about 50 cities, organized virtually overnight by amateurs. Realizing that they had opened a vein, they launched a second round of rallies that April, this time turning out perhaps 600,000 people at more than 600 events.¹⁸

The members maintain that the party is an organization of the people without an official head, simply concerned citizens who wish to restore hope, honor, and America to Americans. Since its inception Tea Party ideology has gone through various shifts, making it difficult to distinguish a coherent set of ideas. As Bernstein noted,

¹⁷ Chris Berlet, "Taking Tea Parties Seriously: Corporate Globalization, Populism, and Resentment" *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology* 10 (2011), 11-29.

¹⁸ Jonathan Rauch, "How Tea Party Organizes," *The National Journal Magazine*, retrieved from http://www.nationaljournal.com/njmagazine/cs_20100911_8855.php

When it comes to the Tea Party's concrete policy proposals, things get fuzzier and more contradictory: keep the government out of health care, but leave Medicare alone; balance the budget, but don't raise taxes; let individuals take care of themselves, but leave Social Security alone; and, of course, the paradoxical demand to not support Wall Street...let the hard working producers of wealth get on with it without regulation and government...but also make sure the banks can lend to small businesses and responsible homeowners in a stable but growing economy.¹⁹

In my view, what appears to synthesize and provide cohesion to its members however is at its core a fundamental resentment. This resentment expresses itself in policy proposals to limit immigration by ethnic groups and the goal to rid the United States of racial and religious undesirables. This attitude has most often been understood as the response to the decline of the social state that once offered support through policies and necessary safeguards against economic recession. More deeply, this response speaks to the increasing anxieties of a rising cultural pluralism implicit in the Age of Obama.

In my observation, the Tea Party ideology is the basis of an open attack on progressive educational practice and policy. On a broad scale, political concern for social justice and educational opportunity have been replaced by concerns for free markets operating as a form of social Darwinism. By extension in higher education, also under attack are educators who see education as a practice of critical thinking, freedom, and access, particularly for marginalized groups and those in poverty.

In the face of these challenges in the Age of Obama, how do educators create and sustain classrooms that confront racism, sexism, and other variables of inequality when the very idea of resisting them is viewed as unnecessary because social problems and poverty are the result of individual failings? In other words, how can educators seek to provide space for academic discourse that addresses *real* issues and the consequences on *real* lives in a contested space of post-racial fatigue?

POST-RACIAL FATIGUE

While post-racial fatigue might generally describe the guiding animus of the Tea Party, it ironically recognizes the unsettled matter of racial politics in its insistence on a particular racial worldview. Post-racial fatigue results from the perception that society is beyond race and race either no longer matters at all, or it does not serve as a material factor in determining resources and life changes. Resultantly any race-centered discussion is forcefully

¹⁹ J.M. Bernstein, "The Very Angry Tea Party," *New York Times*, June 13 2010, retrieved from <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/06/13/the-very-angry-tea-party>

rejected. Despite the history of race and gender based inequality, the election of Barack Obama symbolically ended race as a critical marker and, in theory, eradicated racism from the contemporary United States landscape. This belief has allowed some whites to oppose civil rights remedies and advocate for race-neutral policies because, in their view, society has transcended the racial moment, or civil rights era.²⁰ Though the shift is sociocultural, this post-racial fatigue is linked to:

other material and political forms of retreat by leveling the moral playing field between whites and groups of color.... To mark this “progress,” liberal to radical whites who were formerly sympathetic to the plight of the racialized understrata and deferential (at least superficially) to the understrata’s normative definition of equality and discrimination, are now freed by “progress” to no longer subjugate the way that they see and live race. On this playing field, whites may pursue their group self-interest and participate in defining equality on their terms in the name of “unity.”²¹

As Giroux has noted, this produces an intellectual vacuum “at different levels of American society that cultivates ignorance, limits choices, legitimizes political illiteracy and promotes violence.”²² Increasingly, the effects of post-racial fatigue are becoming more visible in the nation’s schools and university classrooms, “where students are urged by some conservative groups to spy on their professors to make sure they do not say anything that might actually get students to think critically about their beliefs.”²³ While the embrace of corporate culture by many colleges and universities in addition to a general climate of anti-intellectualism are part of this discussion, my focus remains on how educators can provide space for discourse that addresses *real* issues and the consequences on *real* lives in a contested space. In this effort, I join Berlak in asking how is it that students can remain so disengaged in matters of racial justice at a profoundly deep and emotional level?

In fairness, I recognize that students are coming to terms with self, identity, and the political universe “in a media scape and public sphere that view criticism, dialog, and thoughtfulness as a liability.”²⁴ In addition, developments such as the Texas School Board of Education’s revision of social studies curriculum in favor of a conservative approach and Arizona’s dismantling of Ethnic Studies curricula attempt to limit what little students may

²⁰ Sumi Cho, “Post Racism,” *Iowa Law Review* 94 (July 2009), 1595.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 1595-1596.

²² Henry Giroux, “The Disappearing Intellectual in the Age of Economic Darwinism,” *Truthout*, July 12, 2010, retrieved from <http://archive.truthout.org>

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

know before they even enter college classrooms. This potentially means that both students and educators may suffer from a state-sanctioned historical amnesia.

These shifts are not altogether new. Thirty years ago in Philadelphia, Mississippi,²⁵ stating the South will rise again, Ronald Reagan revitalized the politics of white supremacy through the mantra of states' rights as he began his quest for the White House. Using the rhetoric of states' rights over federal authority, Reagan was reestablishing control of the national discourse, a discourse that many on the right felt had been weakened by failed foreign policy and a domestic agenda that catered too much to liberal tendencies. A key site of struggle was education. Resistance to be inclusive of marginalized groups and their cultural perspectives was articulated as a defense against threats to established American ideals and concepts. As a result, challenging the teaching of a common identity was akin to challenging national harmony and unity.

Historian Arthur Schlesinger noted that the locus of institutions and cultures in the United States are derived from European values, customs and traditions, and therefore it was fitting that these core ideas should be taught as a common national identity.²⁶ While Schlesinger and supporters of this perspective acknowledged the contradictions of this view with the history of genocide among people of color and other marginalized groups, they nonetheless argued for a core group of values based on an Anglo American Protestant foundation.

As a corrective and alternative to European universalism, African American Studies, Women's Studies, Cultural Studies, and Ethnic Studies programs and departments were efforts to provide gender-specific and ethnocentric-specific curricula to offset the one-sided worldview of teaching championed by Schlesinger and others.²⁷ During the 1960s and 1970s, when these alternatives to European universalism began to take shape, a counter-revolution occurred as well. Although not a monolithic movement, the pattern of the counter-revolution was often overt hostility. This hostility was marked by various means of challenging the academic legitimacy of these new disciplines and forms of pedagogy. Most often, these alternatives were charged with being nothing more than gender and racial cheerleading that balkanizes education.

²⁵ In 1964, this was the location of the murder of three civil rights workers, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner.

²⁶ See Arthur Schlesinger, *Disuniting America Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998).

²⁷ Molefi Asante and other Africana philosophers suggest African-centered as a quality of thought and practice rooted in the cultural image and human interest of African people. Ethnocentric here implies cultural pluralism following this Africana philosophy.

Since the period in the discussion above, and the close of the conservative Reagan presidential years, the criticism and apathy for gender-specific and ethnocentric-specific curricula have continued. Although these views have remained they have not been as overtly expressed. However, the dawning of the Age of Obama has given rise to a more vocal and open resistance to educational as well as cultural pluralism. Economic uncertainty and job scarcity have resulted in a retreat. This retreat results in a return to viewing the increased presence of diversity, in its many manifestations, as the source of the problem. Diversity excess and the increased visibility of marginalized groups in positions of power created the context for Arizona, Texas, and Florida to enact Tea Party-inspired changes. As a consequence, educators are in various capacities asking the same questions as Berlak.

To meet this challenge, I propose tasseography as a reflexive practice that helps to develop in students the ability to critically hear, think, theorize, and apply. The work of several philosophers of education informs the theoretical framework of this proposed pedagogical practice. These theorists are tacit *tasseographers* in their approach to education. To enact this practice, educators need to create assignments and elicit classroom responses that target the source of thoughts, which are feelings. This practice connects with Dewey's philosophy, in that the educator must provide actual conditions out of which ideas grow. Thus the learning environment should reflect a community of real social relationships²⁸ that construct practical means of problem solving.

In addition to Dewey, tasseography can be read into the calls from hooks, Green, and Weems. As hooks notes, "as teachers we can create a climate for optimal learning if we understand the level of emotional intelligence in the classroom. That means we need to take time to assess who we are teaching."²⁹ Before any such assessment can begin teachers must first practice this themselves, which "means that teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students."³⁰

In our present historical context, tasseography encourages educators to be mindful of not only the content of Tea Party rhetoric but of the essence of the emotion fueling them. It is an appeal to both the imagination and the intellect, which is a duality that should be at the core of teaching and learning. Building on this concept, Weems notes that:

the imagination and intellect are inextricably linked; they

²⁸ See John Dewey, *Ethical Principles Underlying Education: The Third Yearbook of the National Herbart Society* (Chicago: National Herbartian Society, 1897).

²⁹ bell hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking Practical Wisdom* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 19.

³⁰ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 15.

develop simultaneously and, I suggest one is not possible without the other.... It is a mistake to separate imagination, intellect, will and emotion. We learn with our whole mind... [This] philosophical approach to teaching as an art centered around creating a loving, culturally relevant community where language, customs and historical backgrounds, of all students are respected, welcomed and viewed as a valuable aspect of each student's knowledge base.³¹

By critically reading Tea Party populism, it is possible students can understand an identity politics at work. It is crucial that students grasp that beneath the guise of reform, it is mostly anger with the changing cultural landscape of the country that prevails. Thus tasseography targets the identity context of the rhetoric. For example, Grady Warren articulates this frustration as he warns President Obama of his bid for the White House in 2012:

You have declared war on the white man in America—putting the wants and needs of moochers, leeches, looters, and criminals ahead of the producers, and the workers of America. And we don't want 15 to 20 million illiterate Mexicans and Chicanos as our new welfare society, living like rats in our neighborhoods....you, your advisers, pollsters, pundits, talking heads, have wanted to know: Who are the pissed-off people in this country? Well, the pissed-off people, sir, are the white people.³²

While it may be easy to dismiss Warren's comments as reflective of members on the fringe of the Tea Party, his views are consistent with members who are much more skillful wordsmiths. Jeannie DeAngelis expresses a more polished sentiment shared by some tea partiers when she writes

If only the first choice [for president] had been an outstanding man of color like Allen West or the spectacular Herman Cain. Both are patriotic individuals who love and recognize their country's greatness. Moreover, despite the reality of past injustices, unlike Barack Obama, Cain and West choose to dwell on the benefits of individual responsibility, unlimited opportunity, and patriotic allegiance to America.³³

These views again highlight the importance of reading Tea Party rhetoric through the lens of racial or ethnic subjectivity. Students are part of the

³¹ Mary E. Weems, *Public Education and the Imagination-Intellect: I Speak From the Wound in My Mouth* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 12.

³² Conservative Sportsmen, "Welcome to Conservative Sportsmen," retrieved May 10, 2011, from <http://conservativesportsmen.com>

³³ Jeannie DeAngelis, "The Next Black President?" *American Thinker*, February 15, 2011, retrieved from <http://www.americanthinker.com>

multimedia cultural environment where these views are expressed. Too often students are encouraged to be passive consumers. Media as a discourse not only frames the conversation. It also legitimates knowledge from particular worldviews. Tasseography, as an analytical tool, in practice equips students to critically analyze messages and develop alternative modes of seeing the world, embedded within their own cultural frames while being able to view and appreciate the experiences of the *other*.

The practice of tasseography also insists on understanding relations of power. With respect to Boler's observation about classroom dynamics,³⁴ tasseography is a process that offers the possibility of creating environments where students can center in on what is at stake versus what may be the loudest:

What needs to be understood is that higher education may be one of the few institutions we have left in the United States where knowledge, values, and learning offer a glimpse of the promise of education for nurturing public values, critical hope, and a sense of civic responsibility.³⁵

As Giroux further explains

Only through such a formative and critical educational culture can students learn how to become individual and social agents, rather than merely disengaged spectators, able to both think otherwise and to act upon civic commitments "that necessitate a reordering of basic power arrangements" fundamental to promoting the common good and producing a meaningful democracy... This means giving them the knowledge and skills necessary to make power visible and politics an important sphere of individual and collective struggle.³⁶

Tasseography, as a philosophy rooted in African-centered thought, is purposefully grounded in engaging transformative practice: "Basic to the teleology of Africana Studies is the application of knowledge to promote social change."³⁷ Calling critical attention to how difference is constructed and articulated is a fundamental counter-hegemonic possibility. It is through

³⁴ In her essay, "All Speech is Not Free: The Ethics of 'Affirmative Action Pedagogy,'" Boler notes all speech is not free and therefore do not necessarily carry the same weight particularly in hate speech in classrooms, in Boler, *Democratic Dialogue in Education*.

³⁵ Giroux, "The Disappearing Intellectual."

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ James Turner, "Africana Studies and Epistemology," in *Out of the Revolution: The Development of Africana Studies*, eds. Delores P. Aldridge and Carlene Young (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000), 63.

fashioning this pedagogical practice that students can engage the impact and source of oppressive thinking. Thoughtfully paying attention by reading the leaves of public discourse creates a space for ideological resistance to Tea Party rhetoric and post-racial fatigue.
