

Article

Of Pomo Academicus, Reconsidered

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Abstract: This article considers the relationship between what would generally be viewed as a postmodern perspective and the rise and multiple use of the prefix “post” by those arguing that we are finally beyond certain oppressive political, cultural and social issues, and dynamics, such as the racist and sexist ideologies that have historically permeated and plagued our nation’s institutions, including higher education. Many of those who champion the prefix “post” assert that they offer us a narrative, description and framework of a post-racial and post-feminist era that they want us to acknowledge and embrace. I, however, claim that such a utilization and imposition (as opposed to the more generous sounding “offer”) of the various “posts” that we have been presented with are, more often than not, precisely little more than reactionary moves to reestablish and reaffirm the very type of thinking and structure that *we* have allegedly moved beyond.

Keywords: postmodernism; humanities; thinking otherwise; cultural left; social conservatives; teaching

1. Introduction

The postscript to my book, *Managing to be Different: Educational Leadership as Critical Practice*, was titled: *Of Pomo Academicus*.¹ It was intended to evoke a number of questions regarding the very status (existence?) of anyone who attempted to be different—who dared to be otherwise—within the academy in the United States. But I was particularly considering anyone who viewed themselves or who were labeled, typically in a derogatory manner, “postmodern”, in the context of the higher education, generally, and within educational leadership specifically. This article is meant to revisit and reconsider the issue of the status and role of any postmodern professor in the US, but especially humanities professors: both those who view themselves as such, and those who now just happen to find themselves currently teaching at, what this Special Issue of *Humanities* identifies as, this “post-postmodern” moment.²

¹ Among other things, *Of Pomo Academicus* was meant to strategically and playfully allude to Pierre Bourdieu’s book, *Homo Academicus*. What I was not doing then, and not intending to do in this article is to specifically enter into a full on “philosophical” discussion of postmodernity or its roots and causes as such. I am focusing on the more aesthetic and cultural (political?) dynamics of postmodernity and consequently will not examine the important work and arguments offered by Jurgen Habermas (specifically in his, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*). Although I agree with much of what he says, as I’ve mentioned the focus of this article is, in sense, a non-philosophical one in that it is not an attempt to enter the philosophical debate that Habermas offers regarding the movement from the likes of Nietzsche and Heidegger to the “new conservatism”. I do believe, however, that such an exploration and analysis would prove an interesting and beneficial follow up to my considerations here.

² While the terms postmodern and postmodernity are used throughout the world, in the United States they have become umbrella terms that include multiculturalism, feminism, Ethnic Studies, Queer Studies, and a host of intellectual, academic and critical perspectives that challenge and threaten the many people who benefit from the very political and cultural institutions questioned by these various positions (aka postmodernism). While postmodernism has a very strong connection to Contemporary Continental Philosophy, often identified as “poststructuralism”, in the United States today, postmodernism is essentially viewed as a hodgepodge of ideologies threatening American values. It is this perceived threat that, I argue, motivates the evolution of the “post” discourse being espoused by social conservatives who otherwise shun all things postmodern associated with undermining traditional American cultural and political hegemony.

I would like to consider the relationship between what would generally be viewed as a postmodern perspective and the rise and multiple use of the prefix “post” by those arguing that we are finally beyond certain oppressive political, cultural and social issues, and dynamics, such as the racist and sexist ideologies that have historically permeated and plagued our nation’s institutions, including higher education. Many of those who champion the prefix “post” assert that they offer us a narrative, description and framework of a post-racial and post-feminist era that they want us to acknowledge and embrace. I, however, claim that such a utilization and imposition (as opposed to the more generous sounding “offer”) of the various “posts” that we have been presented with are, more often than not, precisely little more than reactionary moves to reestablish and reaffirm the very type of thinking and structure that *we* have allegedly moved beyond. Just as many social-conservatives have highjacked the notion of political correctness, and now employ this term in the name of racist, sexist and homophobic positions, and in the name of liberty and freedom of expression, there are those within (and certainly outside) the humanities who have coopted the notion of moving beyond once widely-held positions, for example, the “post-modern” or “post-colonial”, in an effort to re-inscribe the very imperialistic positions said to no longer be influencing or infiltrating our work and politics, on and off campus. In short, I want to argue that the Right has merely “post-ed”, so to speak, their positions, and in so doing, expects, in fact, actually demands, that we accept that the US, and its many public institutions, are now beyond the need for the anti-racist, feminist and anti-capitalist criticisms of a prior time—we are, they claim, over and beyond it all (and therefore should be done talking about or evoking such criticism—that is, we should now be silent regarding that history³). The Right points to the election of Barack Obama, the rise of *the female* CEO and the collapse of the Soviet Union, as well as China’s complicated entrance into the market, as proof that we are now in a post-racial, post-feminist and post-capitalist era (capitalist, as formerly understood anyway⁴). As a result, the staking, as it were, of all these “posts” has been effectively much more an effort to rebuild and reinforce an infrastructure of oppression than a genuine engagement with moving beyond the historical legacy of racism, sexism, homophobia, class elitism and the many other biases that remain in operation today, in and out of the classroom, and on and off the campus across the United States.

2. Discussion

By revisiting (and therefore reconsidering) the very status of Pomo Academicus within the academy, and specifically within the humanities, I want both to show the resistance to thinking “otherwise” and to emphasize the profound importance of the scholarship and teaching of those working in such a manner (that is, of those I have identified as working *otherwise*). I would also like to assert that such teaching is necessary to promote the much-quoted ideals of a liberal arts education, which today are mostly just mouthed and have been, often enough, typically abandoned, and, are more often than not, targeted for elimination by education reformers attempting to “corporatize” education from kindergarten right on through graduate school—to make it, supposedly, more accountable, efficient and productive. Bluntly put, my argument, in large measure, is an appeal to those committed to the traditional values of the humanities to embrace such educators as Pomo Academicus, and, by definition, the very superfluous role such educators play in the marketplace (of ideas). Such a role is, to my mind, to be understood as a political and ethical stance against the utility and complicity of the post-racial, post-feminist, and yes, the post-Marxist professoriate populating colleges and universities across the United States claiming to objectively teach their subject matter, as they, in fact, do little more

³ Think here of Jean Baudrillard’s *In The Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, and the cynical (nihilistic?) stance advanced by Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History*—that is, the promotion of our being in a *post-historical* moment.

⁴ Zygmunt Bauman’s *Globalization: The Human Consequences* offers an engaging and persuasive argument regarding the capitalism and capital itself is transformed in the age of “globalization”, that is, in the post-industrial dynamics of capital.

than train⁵ the next generation of their students for the high-skills jobs allegedly awaiting them upon their graduation.

Twenty-five years ago in their important book, *Postmodern Education: Politics, Culture and Social Criticism*, Stanley Aronowitz and Henry A. Giroux noted the following:

Institutional racism, a permanent feature of many of our systems of public order, education, labor, and criminal justice, is today exacerbated by economic uncertainty. World economic restructuring and its effects on working-class lives has produced more overt racism among those white workers who, metaphorically, rub shoulders with blacks and Latinos typically locked into insecure economic niches or in the second economy [1].

And, as I now write this article, we are witnessing the racist rhetoric, along with the various forms of immigrant-baiting/blaming and the identification of specific groups (religious and ethnic) as the causes of and for the financial instability and the overall national insecurity of the United States today. Regardless of the outcome of the 2016 presidential campaign, it appears that the Republicans, especially Donald J. Trump, have formally and officially presented the American electorate with their own “post-reasonable” discourse, and have in the process clearly and squarely undermined any legitimacy to the claim that we live in a genuinely post-racial, post-feminist, post-patriarchal or post-capitalist epoch. Consequently, we are faced with the odd circumstance of considering the dual, and contradictory, narratives emanating from the Right which simultaneously announce (that is, post—as in “tweeting” or otherwise putting things into circulation) that we, as a nation, are beyond the legacy of racism, sexism, class-elitism, and that the United States is now unfairly burdened (not by racism, sexism and class-elitism but) by those who insist that racism, sexism, and class-elitism still exist, in any systemic or institutional way. Of course, there are, the Right would admit, always “individual nuts”—as exemplified by the massacre in Charleston, South Carolina in the Spring, 2015—who act out, and in the process reenact and reaffirm our nation’s violent past (our *pre*-post modality). So, sadly, our alleged evolution into the era of the “post” is apparently a complex and vexed moment of many reactionaries asserting a *predetermined*, *preordained*, and *prescribed* national narrative, a *posthumous* attempt, to still *prevail* in the culture wars that the Right presumed they had all but lost. In some ways, it would appear that the evocation of the prefix and language of the “post” by the Right is actually little more than an angry (and even vengeful) *postmortem* of the death of the America they loved that occurred for them in the 1960s.

3. Experimental Section

Oddly enough, the “death of America” in question is a death that the Right continues to mourn and, at the same time, refuses to fully accept or understand. The America they have lost (to feminism, to the civil rights movement—promoting racial, gender, and sexual equality to the continued erosion of white male privilege generally, that is, to postmodernism, as understood in the United States) is a United States that gets mythologized. It is a United States that has gotten mythologized from its very inception, namely, a United States as the land of freedom and manifest destiny for all (of course, the “all” here has always been historically exclusive). Thus, there is a longing for an America (that, in fact, never existed), and a collective desire, on the Right, to resurrect their “dead America” in order to restore it (however mistakenly and more and more desperately) to its alleged past grandeur. Perhaps such efforts are best encapsulated by Donald Trump’s mantra: “make America great again”. And while some may balk at the connection between the vociferous Donald J. Trump and the call for the return of the metaphysics (that is, the myth of *being* free and equal) that determined and guided the United States for so long, I want to argue that postmodernism caused an existential crisis for the Right; and now the

⁵ As I have argued elsewhere, and especially in my book *Reclaiming Education: Moving Beyond the Culture of Reform*, while under certain circumstances it might be acceptable to talk about “training” students, it is much more important to emphasize that we are in fact teaching and educating them and not training them (we train athletes and dogs, we educate students).

loud cry for *their* lost nation is directly linked to the pain and suffering they have endured since its death (at the hands of the pernicious postmodern *others*).

In many ways the various assaults on multiculturalism, queer studies, feminism, ethnic studies, that is to say again, on postmodernism, have occurred under the guise of reforming education, and rethinking the value of the liberal arts, and the humanities specifically. This is so for numerous reasons,⁶ but I would like to focus here on the connection between the so-called “lost America” lamented by the Right and the liberal arts (the humanities). It is a connection that the Right makes by singling out the humanities as being an important, if not the, source for the critique of what bell hooks identifies as “white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalism”,⁷ that influences so many and their thinking about race, class and gender, and has led to the “death of America”. As Richard Rorty notes in his book, *Achieving Our Country*, there emerged in the American Left a “cultural left”, one that specifically takes on the violence (both symbolically and physically) of racism, class elitism and sexual/gender prejudice, and the historical stigma of being cast into a group view as either inferior or deviant:

One of the good things which happened in the Sixties was that the American Left began to realize that its economic determinism had been too simplistic. Sadism was recognized as having deeper roots than economic insecurity. The delicious pleasure to be had from creating a class of putative inferiors and then humiliating individual members of that class was seen as Freud saw it—as something which would be relished even if everybody were rich.

With this partial substitution of Freud for Marx as a source of social theory, sadism rather than selfishness has become the principal target of the Left. The heirs of the New Left of the Sixties have created, within the academy, a cultural Left. Many members of this Left specialize in what they call the “politics of difference”, or “of identity”, or “of recognition”. This cultural Left thinks more about stigma than about money, more about deep and hidden psychosexual motivations than about shallow and evident greed [2].

Rorty draws our attention to what the “cultural” Left accomplished against the background of arguing for a more old-school “politically” engaged Left (namely, working with unions, labor in general and to battle against economic inequality). That is, what he identifies as the cultural Left he clearly places within the confines of the “academy”: with people doing work on the “politics of difference”, “of identity”, and the politics “of recognition”. These are academics who are teaching feminism, queer studies, multiculturalism, ethnic studies, that is these are the humanities professors who under the term postmodernity have chosen to “teach otherwise”. And, although Rorty expresses appreciation for the work that the cultural Left has done to call attention to the violence and stigma attached to being identified as “other”, and for lessening such violence and stigma he in the process identifies (albeit with gratitude and acknowledgement) such postmodern academics as the political (i.e., cultural) force behind the transformation of America. So, even a “sympathetic” identification of such professors squarely places them at the scene of the crime, the “death of America”. Since the evolution of the cultural Left, we have witnessed the culture wars—the Right’s attempt to reclaim America and condemn the “radical leftwing” (read postmodern) professors transforming the United States.⁸

With this acknowledgment of the political power of, to use the term Aronowitz and Giroux gave us, “postmodern education” comes the backlash and anger of those whose traditional values have been challenged, abandoned and superseded. As a result of viewing the liberal arts and the humanities as real threats to the status quo (of privilege and exclusivity), the Right has pushed hard to take politics

⁶ See my *Reclaiming Education: Moving Beyond the Culture of Reform*.

⁷ See most of bell hooks’ books, but especially, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*.

⁸ For a more thorough and engaging analysis of stigma and the dynamics of politics see *American Shame: Stigma and the Body Politic*, edited by Myra Mendible.

out of education, insisting that educators teach “facts” and not opinion (however contradictorily and hypocritically they may do so). We have encountered the demand for and emphasis on teaching information that is deemed vital to the proper training of students (the future workforce) of America, needed in order to keep the United States competitive with the highly skilled, better educated and much cheaper labor to be found across the globe, from China to India, and from Vietnam to Kenya. One of the many ways we see “education reform” getting promoted is by way of social conservatives and corporate leaders advocating (again, however contradictorily or hypocritically) science, technology, engineering and math (typically known by the acronym STEM). By championing STEM programs and, at the same time, moving to defund much of public education at all levels, the social conservatives and corporations of the United States believe they have a shot at revitalizing the America they believe to have been undermined by the cultural Left (Pomo Academicus), and in so doing, also have a chance to reclaim their special standing within the nation. They believe this despite the fact that many scientists are among the harshest critics of the US involvement in the Middle East, assert the reality of global warming, protest the restrictions placed upon stem cell research, disagree with the Right on other hot-bottom scientific and social issues. So, in addition to the attacks on education in the age of postmodernism and the advocacy of “unbiased” information, the Right has also, as I have asserted, “post-ed”⁹ their claims and counterclaims in an effort to diminish the impact of the postmodern (and scientific) critique of traditional values, a critique that complicates the (believed to be) once simple truths held so dear by the Right.

The rise and influence of postmodernism/postmodernity can be witnessed on many fronts: from architecture to film, and from cuisine to literature (consider the buildings of Frank Gehry, Stanley Tigerman, Maya Lin and Daniel Libeskind, the films of Woody Allen, “Deconstructing Harry”, and Sophia Coppola, “Lost in Translation”, the restaurants of David Chang and Andy Nasser, and the books of Don DeLillo, David Foster Wallace and Edwidge Danticat). Also consider, more generally, the rethinking and reconsidering of aesthetics, ethics, logic and politics that postmodernism, and the professors who have promoted it, have put into motion—all of which is important and profound. That said, however, we must, sadly, acknowledge that we are also experiencing an historical moment full of hate and rejection, and not just within the United States. Around the world, teachers and students have been targeted (especially females, young and old) for challenging and or breaking with tradition, and sadly too often suffering violence in one form or another because of their commitment to thinking differently about themselves and the world (what I earlier called teaching and thinking otherwise), what bell hooks refers to as “teaching to transgress”, that is, to go beyond the strictures and limits of oppressive thinking and behavior; and what many humanities professor understand to be the purpose of a liberal arts education.

As Martha C. Nussbaum asserts in her book, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*:

When we ask about the relationship of a liberal education to citizenship, we are asking a question with a long history in the Western philosophical tradition. We are drawing on Socrates’ concept of “the examined life”, on Aristotle’s notions of reflective citizenship, and above all on Greek and Roman Stoic notions of an education that is “liberal” in that it liberates the mind from the bondage of habit and custom, producing people who can function with sensitivity and alertness as citizens of the whole world. This is what Seneca means by the cultivation of humanity. The idea of the well-educated person as a “citizen of the world” has had a formative influence on Western thought about education: on David Hume and Adam Smith in the Scottish/English tradition, on Immanuel Kant in the continental Enlightenment tradition, on Thomas Paine and other Founding Fathers in

⁹ Consider the onslaught of trolling and tweeting of attacks that have come from individuals and organizations from the Right.

the American tradition. Understanding the classical roots of these ideas helps us to recover powerful arguments that have exercised a formative influence on our own democracy [3].

Even if one may quarrel with some of the ways Nussbaum frames the notion of her understanding the meaning and purpose of education, her explicit embrace of the liberal arts as a process that “liberates the mind from the bondage of habit and custom” perfectly encapsulates why social conservatives and corporate America want desperately to reform education, and to move as far away from “liberating” anyone from the “bondage of habit and custom”. This is why we have been enduring the culture wars, a struggle of liberation versus uncritical acceptance of (a certain) tradition. What’s useful about Nussbaum’s articulation of liberal arts education is, in part, her noting the “tradition” of challenging ourselves through critical examination of precisely the “givens” we inherit or otherwise accept. In so doing, Nussbaum connects the very notion of tradition with questioning and challenging tradition itself—something the Right refuses to consider.

Yet, despite the acknowledgment and support of such thinking and teaching by prominent academics such as Martha C. Nussbaum, Richard Rorty and many other humanities professors including Andrew Delbanco and Mark Edmundson, the Right has successfully called into question the very values of such teaching and thinking, making various accusations about the moral consequences of critically reconsidering and rethinking of, as Nussbaum puts it, liberating oneself from the “bondage of habit and custom”. Some two thousand years after his trial, we continue to hear from those in power, what Socrates heard, namely, that his teaching was itself impious and endangered all of Athens (but especially its youth) from losing its moral anchor. And, if this strikes some as little more than “liberal” hyperbole, I suggest that even a quick inventory of the many recall attempts and successful court rulings that prevent and or hinder people from thinking and being otherwise should offer ample evidence that the Right cannot and will not “tolerate” difference. (This intolerance of difference may help explain the outrage and disrespect toward the presidency of Barack Obama throughout his tenure, starting with his inauguration and perhaps culminating with Republican House member Joe Wilson’s infamous “You lie!” exclamation, shouted out during Obama’s 2009 health care address to congress.)

One powerful example of the Right’s intolerance of those breaking with tradition, and thinking and teaching otherwise can be fully appreciated in the debacle of the Arizona banning of books and courses in Ethnic Studies (specifically courses on Mexican-American history and culture) back in 2013. Due to the outrage expressed by social conservatives over courses taught throughout the Tucson Unified School District focusing on Mexican-American history and culture, the Right (conservatives in the state senate of Arizona) introduced, voted on and passed House Bill 2281 in February 2013, which among other things declared that previously taught courses and programs would be cancelled and a list of “banned” books would prevent students and teachers from using any book on the list in any course; among the books listed were bell hooks’ *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* and Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Such actions emphasize the fear and loathing social conservatives have toward anything and everything that is “otherwise”, to the narrative(s) they deem appropriate. Those courses, books and educators teaching otherwise are therefore anathema to the “Right” direction and paradigm for the United States—based on the emergence and success, thus far, of Donald J. Trump as the right choice for the Republican Party (and the nation); it is clear that the anger and outraged expressed and enacted in Arizona in 2013 are being tapped as the driving force behind Trump’s campaign: he will build “the wall”.¹⁰ Whereas the focus of HB2281 was courses and books (actually, “history”), Trump is intending to ban the entire Mexican nation, once again demonstrating his “strength” and resolve, as well as his intolerance. We are witnessing something very problematic and frightening for sure; as I asserted earlier in this essay, we appear to have entered into the age of “post-reasonable” discourse and action. That Donald J. Trump has become the most recent

¹⁰ For excellent and innovative analysis regarding the imagery of “the wall”, I refer the reader to the book *Up Against the Wall: Reimagining the US-Mexico Border*, by Edward S. Casey and Mary Watkins.

symbol of wealth and power for so many Americans longing to gain entry into Trump's exclusive club is perhaps as much an expression of the pathology that comes with unfettered capitalism as it is any "real" desire to be rich and powerful.

Just as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari astutely observed in their book, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*:

There is not one of these aspects—not the least operation, the least industrial or financial mechanism—that does not reveal the insanity of the capitalist machine and the pathological character of its rationality: not at all a false rationality, but a true rationality of this pathological state, this insanity . . . [4].

We must look beyond "rationality;" we are, as I have alluded to, in an age of post-rationality, of post-reasonableness, and must now consider the internal logic and rationale of all those who are actively engaged in this "pathological state, this insanity". We must consider those "post-ing" hate and rage, those who are caught in "the insanity of the capitalist machine and the pathological character of its rationality". The negative and reactionary responses to postmodernism (to multiculturalism, to sexual, gender and racial justice, to economic fairness), the various moves to get beyond (post) race, class and gender, and the ever-growing assertion that we are all currently living in a post-racial, post-feminist, and post-capitalist (as in, "we are all capitalists, now") nation, all point to and highlight "the true rationality of this pathological state, this insanity", that we find ourselves living in and with today. Of course, it would be a very welcome state of affairs if in fact we, as a nation, had actually achieved a genuinely critical consciousness, a "liberated", to use Marth C. Nussbaum's word, postmodern rationality—a rationality of thinking and being post-racist, post-sexist, post-class elitist, post-homophobic, post-discriminatory towards all who are "different". But, we are not, as a nation, anywhere close to such a rationality, such a state of affairs, and, instead, we are presented with a post-racial discourse before we have committed to a post-racist interaction, to a post-feminist rhetoric prior to a post-sexist engagement, to a post-capitalist stance while economic inequality and injustice continue to spread and grow, globally—Deleuze and Guattari, sadly, got it right. Thus the two main reasons that we remain in our current state of being "pre-post-racial", "pre-post-feminist", and "pre-post-capitalist" are: (1) we remain a largely racist, sexist and capitalist nation, and; (2) the actual goal of being post-racial, post-feminist and post-capitalist needs to be reconsidered in light of the "pathological state" that Deleuze and Guattari call into question. That is to say, we might want to reconsider holding onto notions of "racial" identity, "feminist" positions, and "capitalist" dynamics because of the many legitimate reasons for our need to continue to critically interrogate "race" as the historical construct that unnecessarily divided us, "feminism" as the political antidote to patriarchy that still needs to be enacted, and "capitalism" as the "pathology" we need to fully acknowledge in order to address the economic inequality spiraling out of control. Depending upon who is evoking the "post" terminology and why they are deploying it, we must assume that at best the politics of the "post discourse" is complicated, and at worst it has become the cynical and manipulative rhetoric of the Right to move us beyond acknowledging and addressing the very history of oppression that defines, if not determines, much of the current state of our nation.

4. Conclusions

So where does this leave Pomo Academicus? That is, where does the coopted "post" discourse of the Right, along with the many years of their attempting to legislate away the social and cultural gains achieved during the Sixties, leave those of us who are in fact attempting to think and teach otherwise, beyond, what Nussbaum called, "the bondage of habit and custom", and embrace the challenges of postmodernism? In some sense, it is fairly easy to say exactly where we are: we are some place after we all were before. We are now "post" this or that time and place prior to the influence of thinking and teaching otherwise, of thinking critically due to multiculturalism, feminism, race theory, queer studies and the many other critical perspectives that "liberate" us from "the bondage of habit and

custom”, of the habit and custom of racism, sexism, homophobia, class elitism and all the many other modalities of oppression that hold us back and harm us individually and as a nation. Those of us who are here and now attempting to think and teach otherwise, to think and teach beyond (post) the traditional boundaries previously restraining us and limiting our movement are, as bell hooks calls it, “teaching to transgress”, and therefore engaged in “education as the practice of freedom”. In so doing, humanities professors are expanding and extending the topography of ideas and ways of living, and are doing so by virtue of what “the humanities” ask us to do: to consider and reconsider the given and accepted norms.

Those of us who consciously and explicitly engage in teaching otherwise and teaching to transgress do so within the context of the Right attempting to reinstate the national narrative that postmodernism challenged and arguably successfully altered. Ever since implementation of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, the Right, in one way or another, has been “post-ing” their desire, their intention, to return our nation to a “pre-civil rights act” status—a post-civil war, and post-Jim Crow reclamation of the privileged status of a previously unchallenged ruling class (one could consider the presidential campaign in 1964 of Barry Goldwater as the birth of the contemporary conservative movement to reclaim America—a pre-postmodern expression of the anger and rage felt and voiced by those Americans lamenting the death of “their” nation). The intensity of this desire to take back America, to, as Donald J. Trump lifting a line from Ronald Reagan puts it, “make America great again”, has been strong for many years, perhaps since Reconstruction. But Trump’s punctuation of the reclamation movement seems particularly well-timed with the concurrent assault on education that has also been underway since the Sixties. As Joel Spring contextualizes it:

The reform atmosphere of the great civil rights movement contributed to the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act that did away with the restrictive immigration quota system of the 1924 Immigration Act. The new wave of immigration to the United States occurred at the same time that Native Americans, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and African Americans were demanding a place for their cultures in the public school curriculum. As a result of these demands and the problems posed in educating a new wave of immigrants, some educators began to advocate teaching a variety of cultures—multiculturalism—in the public schools.

The multiculturalism movement [however] renewed the culture wars. Opponents of multiculturalism argued that the public schools should emphasize a single culture—traditional Anglo-American culture. In contrast to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe were greeted with Americanization programs designed for deculturalization and the implanting of Anglo-American values, the new immigrants were swept up into the debate over multiculturalism initiated by the civil rights movement. [5].

And, we know from *Brown versus Board of Education*, since integrating public schools became law, reaction to undoing “the bondage of habit and custom” was and remains violent, both symbolically (think here of Arizona and HB 2281) and physically (think here of the many racial assaults at schools across the United States since *Brown versus Board of Education*). The history of violence associated with education in the United States is both long and important. It is also the case that the violence in question works both ways: education has been used as a form (vehicle) of violence against students (remember the Carlisle Boarding School, and the attempt to eradicate “Indian” culture from Native Americans, among many other examples of institutional/educational violence), as well as the long history of violence against education and educators (physical, economic and emotional). It is within this complex and complicated history and context that professors of humanities must negotiate and navigate, and rethink what they do, and how they do it, that is, teach in this post-postmodern era.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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