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Coping with a Fear of Language:
My Experiences With Writing about Self and Culture on Daedalus

In the spring semester of 1996, I taught a sophomore class entitled “Multicultural Autobiography.” My students and I explored the intersections between identity and culture both in the literature we studied (autobiographies and autobiographical fiction produced by people not of the dominant culture both in terms of race and sexual orientation) and in our own lives. The University of Houston, where the class was taught, has an incredibly diverse student body; in the two sections of the course (each with about 27 students) there were men and women of Mexican, African-American, Puerto Rican, Salvadorian, Korean, Greek, white South-African, Jewish, Argentinian, Guyanese, Pakistani, Indian, Vietnamese, Filipino, Iranian, and Caucasian backgrounds. Most of them were between 18 and 20, though a couple were older. At least 25% of the students were first generation Americans or recent immigrants. One was openly gay. Three spoke of themselves as born again Christians. Another identified himself as a “New Transcendentalist” (I have yet to figure out exactly what that was). We used this incredible opportunity as a sort of microcosmic America to explore both our differences and our sameness.

One of the ways I decided to foster this process was by asking the students to keep a class journal on a Daedalus integrated writing environment. They came into the computer lab three times during the semester (independent of class time) and each wrote from a paragraph to a page in response to a question I had posted. These questions were personal and asked them to evaluate their own lives in addition to the literature they were reading in class. They were (1) how does your culture/gender construct your identity; (2)

how do visible signifiers such as dress/skin color affect the way people see you, and (3) what do you like/celebrate about your culture(s)?

This class journal experience was in part intended to add a more personal, self-evaluative element to the course. I was operating out of the idea that the students would connect more with the literature we were reading if it could somehow be made relevant to their own experiences. Because the University of Houston has a core requirement of two semesters of sophomore English, and only two of them were declared English majors, most of them were there because they had to be. Many of the students have said they were more comfortable with math and science than English and writing. I wanted to somehow bridge that gap and make English more accessible to them. A course dealing mainly with autobiography seemed to be the perfect excuse to “get real.” I think for the most part this was successful, although in my class evaluations (not on-line) it was revealed that some were a bit uncomfortable with the crossing of the line between personal and academic that I had attempted to make a part of the class.

Much of the current literature about on-line discussions has tended to focus on their capability to “help quiet students find a voice” or their tendency to remove responsibility from the speaker because s/he is faceless. I found this both to be and not to be the case in my class; some students felt freer (one “outed” himself as a Protestant white male), others were more inhibited. When I set up the Daedalus journal I also imagined that virtual space might be a safer place than the classroom for the students to work out volatile issues such as race and sexual orientation among themselves. I must admit that in the back of my mind was a goal that is not particularly fashionable these days when teaching is supposed to be removed from moral issues: I wanted my students to become less racist and homophobic by being exposed to other(ized) people. I had an idea that the Daedalus experience might give them a way to talk to each other removed from the immediacy of visual signifiers of race and that that might somehow deepen the level of their conversation. However, at least one student reacted negatively to this

attempt to make things safe. It seemed for Kristina Koutsoudas that the on-line experience had a tendency to shut down her ability to express herself rather than free it up. As part of her response to the first question she wrote:

I could have said many things about culture and gender but I have a more pressing question on my mind -- why are we having this conversation on the computer? I felt really weird when we were told to do this -- what happened to face to face communication? I am as willow-backed as any person can be at times, but on this issue, communication, I stand firm. There is so much that goes unsaid in a conversation, that is expressed in through body language, tone, etc. that gets lost in this format. We are not just rational beings -- there are other senses and don't tell me no because I can just about safely bet that everyone in the class has some sort of stereo equipment to listen to music -- music is not rational -- the structure of music can be explained rationally but not the existence of its being -- it's completely a mystery -- aren't we? Why not be excited to find out what we are?

Quite correctly, I think she is saying that the way I had set up the computer journal was asking people to talk about identity in a way that reduced it to something less than complex. After thinking about it I realized that I very much agreed with her criticisms. Are we not handicapped in a conversation where things other than language are brought to bear on what is being said and should we not, when we are discussing race, have every advantage that we can use to prevent miscommunication? Kristina ended her journal entry by asking the other students if they felt the same way she did, but no one picked up the discussion. I think this was in part due to the fact that her entry was the last in the session, and although I had asked the students to return and read over the whole discussion a few days after they had made their entries and add more, I do not believe they often did. (Most of them worked full- or part-time jobs and were involved in extra-

curricular activities.) This seems to have been another limitation of my set up -- much good discussion was probably missed.

Perhaps the thing that for me, who as an instructor had as one of her main responsibilities teaching students to express themselves clearly in writing, overrode concerns such as Kristina's was that the Daedalus format has such an interesting link to the writing process. I believed that the students might learn things about themselves that they had not really thought of until they had to write them down. For me writing has always been the way I figure things out: the "I don't know what I think until I see what I say" school of intellectual endeavor. I also simply wanted to give them practice in written self expression without the pressure of grades. I had some idea that what they were doing might translate in their formal essays; actually, I ended up finding the on-line discussions much more thoughtful and well written than their class papers.

The last thing that attracted me to the Daedalus format was the idea that students were working collaboratively on a long document that was a type of collective record/statement of their experiences in the class. The perspective from which I taught the class was that what we were doing had larger implications; we were working out a way to create what another of my students, Roberto Matsumura, called "the new culture." This "new culture" celebrates its diversity; in a way it seems constructed in opposition to the diverse but racially tense and segregated Houston my students and especially their parents had grown up in. It is a youth culture; my students had a tremendous sense that things were changing for them and that the world they had to operate in did not draw the lines as clearly as it had in their parents' days. Many of them were dating people of other races, and quite a few were the result of racially mixed marriages. In class I would talk about the "new culture" as replacing the old melting pot metaphor (where everyone turned into some kind of American stew and lost a lot of their distinctness) with a salad (where we get to be in the bowl next to each other but still retain our individual integrity). I liked the fact that Daedalus provided the opportunity to create an actual document that

reflected the small version of the “new culture” that each class had become as well as our process and our struggles.

It seems relevant to mention here that my pedagogy is based on collaborative learning model that is influenced mainly by Kenneth A. Bruffee’s book *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority of Knowledge* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993) and my experiences in an experimental program, called the Scholars Community, with which I have taught for the past three years at the University of Houston. (The S. C. provided me with access to its computer lab and the invaluable assistance of the lab coordinator, for which I am eternally grateful.) The program was designed to build community among commuter students at a large urban university where they might otherwise have been isolated and lost in the shuffle. One of the sections of my autobiography course was made up of students who had been in the Scholars Community for one year and therefore knew me (maybe 75% had been my students before) and the other students. Surprisingly enough, I do not think this made much of a difference in our on-line discussions, although the classroom atmosphere of the two classes was substantially different. The Scholars students were warmer and more unified; the other class was more reserved and divided.

What I learned from doing the class journal was that my students realized far more than I, as a member of dominant culture, how the complex constellation of issues surrounding race, culture, and gender affects them. They taught me a lesson: within our diversity there are circles and circles of more diversity and that our attempts to name ourselves and others (Hispanic, African-American, Asian, White) often mask both our cultural and individual complexity.

On-line discussions of race, gender, and culture are a delicate balance between control and freedom for the instructor who initiates them. I ended the class regretting that I did not ask the students to have a “free” class journal session (i.e., one not directed by my questions). I had the idea that I would have then really found out what was important

to them. But then I realized that I had structured the whole Daedalus experience for them in terms of my own boundaries: they did not write under pseudonyms, and each of the questions had been preceded by a sort of cautionary preface asking them to respect each other. I made this decision before the class began because I had heard a story from a fellow instructor who had had pseudonymous on-line discussions that had often become violently racist. So really there would not have been the possibility of a “free” discussion given the parameters I had set up. It was not that I did not trust my students; it was that I did not trust language itself. We are still looking for words that we can use to talk about race and sexual orientation -- words that will not offend but that still allow for sincere communication. This is an incredibly volatile and painful process, but it is perhaps the most important thing that my students and I explored in our on-line discussions.

The single thing that struck me the most when I was going over the transcripts of our Daedalus discussions was how much time was devoted to trying to define what culture was. This deep concern with cultural self-definition and the language used to negotiate the issues it entails will be the focus of my examination. There were many more wonderful things that went on in the 75 (single spaced) pages of transcripts, but as I am restricted by space and time concerns, I am unable to address them all. Besides, I think this is the area where my students, albeit in a very gentle way, took me to task for the fact that in the classroom I was using the term culture in a way that betrayed my naiveté about multicultural issues, although I had, of course, set myself up as the ostensible authority. I find it interesting that the space created by the Daedalus format was where they chose to do this rather than in the classroom. However, I will refrain from making any critical conclusions about on-line discussions from this experience. Indeed, I am uncomfortable trying to fit my students’ writings about their own cultures into some kind of analysis-created box. What follows here is an attempt to trace the issue of cultural self-definition through their writings. I try as much as possible to let the students speak for themselves.

As mentioned before, when I set up the class journal I gave it a sort of caveat that I saw as designed to keep them from being racist. It appeared on screen at the beginning of every discussion and read as follows:

Hello students. Welcome to your class journal. Please consider this your space to carry on the discussions begun in class. Feel free to say what you will with this one caution: respect the person(s) with whom you are debating. A discussion of the self and culture often brings up passionate feelings/beliefs. This is great, but this passion must be somewhat tempered for the discussion to be productive. Please sign your name to your entries and have fun.

When I read it over now, I realize how much anxiety I had about starting a discussion about race with my students, not just on-line, but in the classroom as well. But at least there I had the literature of the class to rely on as a source for the statements I was making. I could say, “Gloria Anzaldúa says such and such about her struggles with her Mexican heritage” without having to place myself, a middle-class, white woman with a designer education who grew up in Salt Lake City, Utah (one of the least diverse places on earth), in a position of authority. This is what I meant when I said that I began this class journal experience out of a kind of innocence. This course was actually the first time in my life I had really attempted to talk with people of other cultures openly and frankly about racial issues. I had, since moving to Houston four years ago, a lot of opportunities to interact with a diverse group of people but I had not (and I think this is a pretty common experience) talked much about race for fear of saying something offensive. One of the things my students and I often discussed in class was that when you interact with someone, race is supposed to be invisible; it is taboo in a way to reference your difference from the person with whom you are conversing. This is perhaps a way we have worked out to exist in a multicultural society, but I think it puts a lot of pressure on

language when we do have to talk about race or culture, often making communication more difficult.

A case in point: about three-fourths of the way through the semester, while we were talking about *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* in the classroom, a student was struggling to ask a rather uninformed statement about African-American people when Monique Scipio, the only African-American student in that section, burst out, "I know you're all looking at me to see if what you're saying is O.K. and I'm tired of it. Why don't you just ask the question?" In another instance a Black student, Tricia Owens, who was in the other section of the course, came up to me after class and said she had noticed that I visibly struggled in my attempt to move between the word "Black," which was the term used by Malcolm X and "African-American," the term which I perceived to be the more correct, inoffensive term. "Why don't you just say Black? We don't mind."

These anecdotes serve to illustrate the tension over language that I and my students were experiencing going into our Daedalus experience, and are probably what lead to my call for them not to be passionate in their written expression, a request I will never repeat. However, this tension over language out of which we were operating becomes more interesting when seen in relation to the way my students revised my use of the term "culture" in their class journal questions. Remember, the first question I asked them was, "How does your gender/culture construct your identity?" What I was expecting as a response was a nice discussion of how identity was indeed a construct (a point which was very important to me as the "good postmodernist," but probably not as important to them) and therefore something that changed and was in flux throughout a person's life. What I got instead was an outpouring of attempts to negotiate the fact that I had assumed that my students could identify themselves as part of one "culture" (and I think I meant race) in my question. Most of them were at that time in their lives trying to figure out where they stand in terms of the many cultures they belong to, so the question as I had phrased it proved extremely difficult to answer.

Iris Cuevas began her entry with,

Okay, here's the deal. I am the most confused girl in this class. I come from a family where there is no pure bred anything. I am third generation Puerto-Rican, European, West African, Mexican, Columbian, and of course Indian. I was born with blond hair, light skin, and light brown eyes. I was raised with mainly Mexican influence, however, I don't speak Spanish and only understand 25% of it and, this is going to kill y'all, I hate Mexican food.

Iris responds directly to the fact that she has been asked to define herself monoculturally by writing her own self-definition. Later in her entry she says that she feels she is unable to speak to the question of culture since her family does not have one. This section of her response seems to react to two things: one, the fact that the writers I had chosen for us to study identified themselves as mono- or bicultural (Mexican-American, Chinese-American); and two, the fact that we had just finished reading Sandra Cisneros' *House on Mango Street* which had generated a lot of class discussion about gender roles in Mexican culture.

As for culture I have no comment due to the fact that my family isn't ruled under one specific culture. My father explained to me that being this Tex-Mex-i-Rican mix was nothing . . . It only meant that I was an American. So when everybody is talking about their lives I just sit back and thank God I never had to wait hand-and-foot on any males in my family . . . it's weird compared to some of these culture stories told in class.

Many of the Hispanic female students in the class identified with Cisneros and told about their own difficulties with traditional gender expectations; this is what Iris refers to as "culture stories." What I am interested in is the way she turns the term "culture" away from the meaning I had given it originally, in the class journal question and in the

classroom, and makes it into a sort of humorous expression of her frustration at being asked to tell a “culture story” of her own.

A similar instance of the term’s being turned around happened in Elizabeth Symeonidis’s entry, which followed Iris’s.

To Claire, my fellow classmates, and especially to those that have had a class on culture before (like I have), I THINK THAT I AM ALL CULTURED OUT!! I have all of this diversified information in my head. So much different information and opinions that I don’t really know what I think about it anymore. Before college I don’t even think I thought about my culture very much. It was just the environment of my life. Now that I’ve analyzed it so much and have found so much oppression and turmoil, I really think I’d like to retreat back to my youth where my identity and culture were simple and not so confusing.

Happily for my peace of mind, Elizabeth immediately amended her entry saying, “never mind, I think I just lied. Yea, life was simpler before, but when it comes down to it I kinda like the fact that I am able to analyze it to know much more. And reading everyone else’s entries in this journal sure shines a light on a lot of neat stuff that people are neglecting to share with others in class.” Elizabeth’s “ALL CULTURED OUT” became a sort of introductory refrain for many of the students who wrote after her. I would like to read it as an expression of the aforementioned tension caused by constantly having to talk about racial issues rather than an expression of disgust with the class.

Another student, Irene Serpas, chose “ALL CULTURED OUT” as a way to end rather than to begin her long journal entry in which she too struggles to define her culture in a way that reflects the difficulties of being a hyphenated American when people want to define you as being from one culture or another.

I am Salvadorian-American, but I’m like half and half; maybe not even that but more like 75% American and 25% Salvadorian?? I was born and

raised here in Houston. And I get the same question Monica mentioned (or somebody did); what are you? I most often get labeled Mexican and I usually respond back Hispanic.

The entry Irene Serpas attributes to Monica is Martha Rocha's. Martha said, It's funny how we're almost always labeled as either Mexicans, Hispanics, White, African-American, etc. I'm saying it's funny because for example, I tend to get labeled Mexican. But like Anzaldúa, I'm my own self. Remember how she said she is kind of in between? How she combines both languages and how the American and Mexican cultures tend to get annoyed by it? Well, sometimes I feel that way. Sure I may get labeled Mexican. Sometimes it's even easier to say, "Yes, I'm Mexican." Anyway what I'm trying to say is that culture really does change the identity of an individual. I can say from personal experience that I'm neither Mexican or American. I'm my own self but I have taken from both cultures what, in my own judgement, are the best qualities of each culture and constructed my own.

Another poignant cultural self-definition was Merissa Weiss's:

I am many "cultures" all rolled into one. I am Jewish, Hungarian, Polish and American. This concept about belonging to a "culture" is very baffling to me. In one of my Anthropology classes my instructor tells me that I am the majority "white race" and I have never felt this way. I am first and foremost Jewish and my instructor claims that this is a religion and not a race. Well, my answer to that was that if you asked any person on the street what are they (and the happened to be Jewish) they would reply "I am Jewish." This concept of culture is only used by people to separate themselves from one another.

Merissa's strong reaction to my request that she define herself in terms of one "culture" was an extreme but common reaction to that first class journal question. Even my Caucasian students, whom I had expected would have difficulty locating their culture, since dominant culture seems to disappear behind its omnipresence, surprised me. Robert Jeffries wrote,

So when everyone is proud of their culture and calls themselves African-Americans, Mexican-Americans, or Asian-Americans, etc. I feel left out because I am ?-American. I feel devoid of culture yet, overwhelmed with it. I have no true culture yet I have everyone's culture. A little part of every culture is in me because of my lack of a true culture.

Although Robert, as I expected, had difficulty pinning down his "true" culture, I like the space he is in. Instead of reacting to his definitional difficulties by rejecting other cultures (I am an American because I am not Mexican, I am an American because I am not Asian, etc.) he tried to take on the other cultures and insert himself into what I previously called "the new culture," a modern, diverse America.

The responses to the second class journal question, "How do visible signifiers such as dress/skin color affect the way people see you?," carried on the definition of culture begun in the entries responding to the first question, though the word "culture" itself was not in the question. Once again my expectations were that the question would lead to a discussion of how visual signifiers of race (both clothing and hair/skin color) can be manipulated, thus making the idea that race is a construct evident. My students, because they had had to learn early on how to negotiate appearance-based racism, knew already that race was a construct, and that by changing their dress they could change the way people reacted to them in terms of their race as well. Martha Rocha said,

When I dress raggedy, people notice too. If I have to buy more paint or supplies at Home Depot, I don't change into nicer clothes because its a waste of time. On the way I might stop to pump gas in my car. Here is

where people might think, “Oh she’s just another one of those crazy cholo girls!” I don’t mind that people see me as a symbol of a “bad thing.”

Only I know who I am. I like to see people surprised after finding out I’m not obnoxious or a gangster. But, this also alienates me sometimes. If people see me as obnoxious or conceited, it’s hard to make new friends. If people see me dressed like a gangster, only the wrong people will want to talk to me.

Quite a few of the students wrote about the risk someone not of dominant culture runs of being misunderstood by dressing a certain way. Bridget McCauley honestly admitted, “If I see a tall black person I would first assume that he or she is a basketball player. If my mother sees a group of kids in baggy pants and hooded shirts she assumes it’s a gang, especially if they are a minority group.” Carlos Garcia, who by no means cuts an unintimidating figure himself, wrote,

Another thing, like I say, if I was at payphone in the Fifth ward I would be more prone to be scared of a Hispanic or Black male coming up to me than I would be of a White male. (Remember, I am Hispanic.) I could be completely wrong and be jacked up by the white guy. I really don’t know why I take this point of view.

Tricia Owens pointed out the very real world consequences that would await her, an African-American woman, if she changed her conservative style of dress.

Basically, I would love to wear my hair naturally, without chemicals to make it straight. Possibly dread-locks or an Afro. Also I would wear scanty clothes, or a robe like dress and outrageous shoes. I would adorn myself with colorful jewelry. How would people judge me? Possibly a hippie that loves pot or a reject from Africa, flamboyant or maybe just a lost soul. Whichever way I was perceived, I wouldn’t be able to get a job, rent or

buy a decent home, or even walk down the street without being gawked at. Unfortunately, a first impression is a lasting impression.

Jessica Martinez also spoke of the way clothing and hairstyle changed her racial signification.

I've been told I look like a kid, a twenty-something, professional, Middle-Eastern, Asian, etc. I don't mind because it strikes up conversation and people aren't normally rude. Someone said once that I looked Mexican when I had long, straight black hair. But now, because of the way I dress and my very short haircut, I don't strike people as anything in particular or distinct. When I asked what they thought I was (ethnically), they said they didn't know, it was just that my clothes and personality stood out over the rest. I took that as a compliment, but now I see some truth to that.

I think the truth to which she is referring to here is a realization that she is uncomfortable with the insult veiled in people's judgment that because of her professional appearance, she does not look Mexican.

Another current of this second discussion was the fact that many students felt that people wanted to pigeonhole them in one race based on their physical appearance, much as I had unwittingly asked them to align themselves with one culture. April Tabangay wrote,

And about race, I've always been described as a, 'short little Asian girl.' I don't have a problem being identified as Asian or better yet an Oriental, but what particular nationality I am is a different matter. When people first look at me they think Vietnamese or Chinese. I've even gotten Malaysian sometimes. For some reason, the Philippines is just not on the map. It's funny when people start talking to me in Vietnamese and others ask me to translate Chinese or Japanese symbols for them. But it gets annoying after awhile. Oh well, that's what we [Filipinos] get for being so multicultural.

Celeste Headley echoed April's sentiments:

The one thing that really chaps my hide is "Are you Chinese or something?" I don't know exactly why those five words make me cringe but they do. I mean why can't people just ask what ethnicity you are? I know people aren't trying to be rude, but that's how it feels sometimes. Another thing that some people assume after they find out that I am "or something" (1/2 Korean, 1/2 White) is that I automatically know how to cook all of these wonderful stir fries and such. This doesn't bother me or anything; I think it's pretty funny since the only thing I can make well is lasagna, cakes, and cookies.

Celeste's insistence that she has a strong American side as well as a Korean one was a common thread among many of the entries. It was also present in the answers to the third question: "What do you like/celebrate about your culture(s)?" By that point I had clued in enough to add the "(s)." My students took the third question as an opportunity to continue their definitions of their cultures on a much larger scale. Many of them, like Celeste, were very engaged in the act of creating for themselves a space between their American and their other cultures. Wael Al-Dasher wrote about the Auto Show and the Houston Food Festival, rather than anything about his racial culture. Once again, my students very gently taught me about myself and my expectations. Monique Scipio said,

Being in America has allowed me to see that life is different from the life I lived in Guyana for eleven years . . . I am fortunate to be able to say that I belong to two different very different cultures, different in every aspect of their existence. I can't wait to experience more of both. It's been pretty interesting so far.

Many of them, like Monique, were excited about their cultural status, and say their multiculturalism as a source of strength. For Monica Garza,

Being born in the US has been my opportunity to grow up as a responsible, open-minded individual with the opportunity of gaining an education as well as more of an equal perspective than the Hispanic culture affords. This experience has also given me access to different cultures and people I can learn from. I agree with Dawn about having control of ourselves. We can manipulate and create our own future with the help of opportunities that are available to us.

Indeed, for most of the students, America's multiculturalism was the best thing about it. Dawn Fortner's entry (referred to above) began, "I love the ability, responsibility, and power we the younger generation have to create a future for ourselves [. . .] we are shown the prescribed boundaries of our current existences by and then given the opportunity to react to them, whether by submission or rebellion. We have choices," and ended, "I also like how diverse my culture is [. . .]. We are the same, but very different. This has taught us tolerance and understanding. We are compassionate to those who differ from us because we are aware of everyone's sense of individuality."

In a final evaluation, the Daedalus environment became for my students, despite my instructions to the contrary, a place for passionate self definition. It also was the place where we worked out many issues of language not necessarily because we were anonymous but because we were writing, and because of that (consciously or unconsciously) were more aware of words.

The experience also taught me about the distance between the answers I expected from my students and the answers that they gave, and what I perceived my students to be learning from the class and what they perceived themselves to be learning. The first day of this current semester, Iris Cuevas came back to visit my class (I was teaching the same one again) because she said that she missed it. One of my present students, still deciding what to take, asked her what she liked about the class. I expected her answer to be

something like, “I learned about racism and other cultures and how to create a new multicultural society.” She said, “You learn a lot about yourself.”