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What does social justice look like in the United States? Critical reflections of an English language classroom in a field trip

Abstract

This paper witness a field trip of a group of English learners and the instructor at a historical site in the United States of America. The purpose of this trip explores a question, *What does "social justice" look like in the United States?* Drawing from the nepantlerx concept, the author describes a conversation between the students and the teacher in a field trip and discusses how the field trip has changed their students and the teacher as a result of it.

Keywords: Anzaldúa, nepantlerx, racism, English language classrooms

On the way to find social justice

We are on the train and are super excited. This is the first time our group, the adult English learners and me as their instructor, have visited the Center for Civil and Human Rights (CCHR) in Georgia, United States of America. One week before this trip, we read Jim Crow laws in our English language textbooks; however, the textbook's information did not satisfy our curiosity to understand what *social justice* means and looks like outside the classroom. We, the outsiders of the so-called *land of opportunity,* have wanted to know this country's history as much as we can. That is why we are now so excited to share expectations before the field trip.

While sitting on the train and observing the students, I am reading "The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader," edited by AnaLouise Keating (2009). Since I followed Anzaldúan philosophical visions, I have considered myself a nepantlera. Nepantleras is a term coined by Gloria Anzaldúa to describe those "who live within and among multiple worlds and, often through painful negotiations…to develop a perspective from the cracks" (Keating, 2009, p. 322). Through my teaching and research work, I have argued that immigrant English learners, myself included, are nepantleras, or the "bridge-builders" (Trinh & Merino, 2020, p. 157). We nepantleras are continuously negotiating and shifting our identities and perspectives toward linguistics, gender, race to push us to think about nation-less, border-less, and fluid connections with/for each other. We bridge builders are living, studying, thinking, teaching in a state called *nepantla*, an in-between-ness space where we are able to "see doubles" of one another's perspective (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002, p. 549). In my writing and this space, I will use nepantlerx (singular) and nepantlerxs (plural), using "x" instead of "a" or "o," to refer to person/people/entit(ies) in a nepantlerx state to disrupt gender binaries in Spanish language traditions and encourage gender-neutral linguistic usages moving forward.

Recently, there has been an increasing number of studies in implementing the nepantlerx concept in language education (Yazan, Rudolph, & Selvi, 2019), bilingual education (Venegas-

Weber, 2018), teacher education programs (Prieto & Villenas, 2012), and everyday learning practices (Lizárraga & Gutiérrez, 2018). A common thread of the nepantlerx pedagogy is to open a space of possibilities to engage in *uncomfortable* conversations with the teacher and students. This conversation challenges dominant ideologies, transforms teaching and learning methods in predominantly white culture and school system, and leverages new identities as part of our learning/teaching process.

As such, I use this trip as a continuous attempt to apply decolonizing nepantlerx practices with this student population. Decolonizing nepantlerx practices, as I argued elsewhere, are rooted in an idea of creating a dialogic space built on the foundation of trust, openness, criticality, and appreciation of/by/for/with English learners/bridge-builders/nepantlerxs in the classroom, aimed toward questioning and transforming a *self*. From this perspective, I hope this trip will serve as a bridge for me to build connections and understanding between my students and me, among the classroom peers, and between us and social and historical events in the United States. Specifically, both the students and I have expressed our wishes to continue a conversation left off in the school, i.e., *What does "social justice" look like in the United States?* Therefore, this trip will serve as an enactment of decolonizing nepantlerx practices where the students could question, challenge, inquire, and reflect on our personal experiences to connect with the U.S.'s history. This trip's goal was to create a space of trust and criticality where the students could see double from each other's perspective, aimed toward questioning and challenging a self's perspective toward the Other, i.e., the African American population, in this country.

Before joining this trip with us, I would like to notice a few things to the readers. First, this paper will not follow academic writing rigidity because I refuse to write an essay in a colonial way as I share a story (Pentón Herrera & Trinh, 2021; Trinh, 2018, 2020a, 2020b). There is not the so-called "methodology" in this paper because "the process of storytelling cannot be rushed, cannot be westernized and academized" (Trinh, 2020a, p. 13). I want to stay true to who I am as a Vietnamese

scholar, researcher, and storyteller in this space. Second, I am asking for your patience to explore emotions and feelings with us. There are phrases that I will keep as they are because I do not want to correct my student's grammar and expressions; I hope you appreciate our wishes. We will use the present tense, a grammatical lesson we have learned from the English language textbooks, to engage you in this experience. I hope you can witness the moments of truth from our discussion and are now ready to walk into the site with us.

Witnessing injustice

"What is 'segregation'?" a student is asking me while the melody of the song *We shall overcome* is playing in a dark room. The images are striking us with powerful visualizations. Some are reading a "Freedom Riders" sign; others are reading "White Men Rest Room" under Jim Crow Laws while the other is reading "Brown v. Board of Education." The students do not look for a definition of segregation anymore; they are piecing clues and historical evidence to expose themselves to the historical context where they can "read the word and name the worlds" (Freire, 2000, p. 61). As Freire (2000) acknowledges, "the most important point is to understand literacy as the relationship of learners to the world" (p.173). Likewise, in the decolonizing nepantlerx pedagogy, I am trying to open a space where the students can see themselves as "markers of literacy" to explore knowledge beyond the classroom (Lizárraga & Gutiérrez, 2018, p. 41). As such, I silently observe how they make sense of the real-life literacies from historical events. Some are translating for their peers, while others are using the pictures to understand the context. The students are pushing the boundaries of knowledge in the English textbooks by connecting the dots and learning from peers to understand literacies in the real world.

We are transitioning from room to room. We are sitting in a row to watch a video that shows school segregation. We are sitting in the Montgomery boycott model. We are taking notes from the video on the wall and are copying a Martin Lurther King Jr.'s quote that says, "No one

really knows why they are alive until they know what they'd die for." We continue to walk quietly without saying a word. We are getting cold, not because of the air conditioner, but because of the bloody events left on the Black people in U.S. history. The scars, the wounds have never been healed for them until today. In the fracture of moments, I sense my students see what social *in*justice means. We are bearing witness to racism, inequality, Whiteness, and segregation with our own eyes. We are witnessing social injustice from different visualizations; one of those is a video showing people marching in solidarity. We had little time in class to discuss these historical events due to the heavy workload of working on grammatical assignments and rushing to finish a unit off. Besides, there is not much space to reflect on race and racism in an English language classroom (Motha, 2014). Therefore, we want to use this time to reflect, re-/un-learn, and speak up about what we are thinking about U.S. history. We are walking out of the museum, gathering in a circle, and being ready for a de-brief.

Seeing double

"How are you feeling?" I break a moment of silence. The students are still holding their thoughts and emotions after leaving the last room. "Let's sit down and talk about this experience," I continue. One student burst into tears. I let their emotion go. I do not know what to do with a mixture of feelings and emotions: rage, hopelessness, frustration, you name a few. I am feeling word-less to describe how I should react to the situation. One student shares she empathized with African American students as they were not welcomed in school, which relates to her son's isolation in school due to his skin color, accent, and lunch box. Another student shares her frustrations of being misjudged due to her accent as well. Another peer agrees with her peer as she shares how she is careful in wearing a hijab in public, linking the experience to racism in the United States.

I am listening to them attentively. My students themselves are the receivers of racism in this country, as well. They use their personal lives to make sense of the historical events in the museum.

After listening to their expressions, I want to shift the conversation to see how the perspective changed after engaging with this powerful experience. I thus ask, "How did your perspective change after this trip?" A student asks, "Should I use the term 'Black people' or "African Americans' because I do not want to either misuse the term or show disrespect to them?". I ask what he thinks; he responds, "I don't know, but I will ask them first. I want to show respect to them and ask them which term they want me to use." Then, a student shares, "As I mentioned earlier, my son is isolated at schools. One day, he told me that he had lunch with his friends. I was happy because my son finally found friends. I asked him how they treated him. He said he had an African American friend whom he has never spoken to, but my son insisted that his friend is "dope," I don't know what that means, but I was happy because my son found a friend. At the same time, I started to think about why skin color matters. We are people of color, too." Another student chimes in, "I know what you mean. I used to be afraid to sit next to African American people on the train. But the experience today has opened my eyes. I could relate to them and their experience. I felt really bad."

A student then responds, "I feel we share the same situation with African American people in this country. Look at the situation right now. Look at how we were asked to go back to our country. I have no country to go back to, and I think African American people had no country to go back. Worse, they have experienced segregation in education, in public transports, in using the restroom, etc." A student links to the comment where she feels unsafe sitting on a train wearing a hijab. Another student shares, "That is how I felt when I sat in the Montgomery bus. I felt fear coming from the video events, but I also experienced the protestors' strong will in them. It was a powerful experience."

"These are powerful reflections to me," I respond to the group. "I think we are all very brave today to talk about this experience and expose our prejudice and thoughts to the group. Thank you for trusting your friends and me when you shared your perspective. First, I want to say I

hear you; I see you; I appreciate you. One small thing I want to add to this reflection is that we all have biased and discriminatory thoughts toward each other and those whose skins are non-White. And it is never too late to recognize our own internalized racism toward the Other, especially marginalized groups in the society, in this case, the African American population. We are all the victims of racism in a predominantly White system. However, if we learn how to unlearn and question the knowledge that centers Whiteness in our textbook, in our everyday life practices, in our thinking, we can break a chain of inequity in this society. Every change should start with a self." I pause and then continue. "I think we should pause right here. I would like you to hold on to this moment, this feeling, this emotion, this rage, this frustration, this connection, and then write about it. Explain to your peers why you had this feeling, what lessons you have learned and what you will need to do next after this trip. Use a quote or a picture from the site to embed in your reflection paper. Please share with your friends in the next class. Sound good?". After that, we are leaving the site; the song, *We shall overcome,* is still playing. The lyrics remind us that we will walk hand in hand together to continue this fight against racism in this country together, regardless of the barriers.

"We'll walk hand in hand; we'll walk hand in hand

We'll walk hand in hand someday

Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe

We'll walk hand in hand someday."

Discussion and Final thoughts

More than two decades ago, Anzaldúa and Keating (2002) acknowledge, "Twenty-one years ago we struggled with the recognition of difference within the context of commonality. Today we grapple with the recognition of commonality within the context of difference" (p. 2). Although the context was twenty years ago, this quote remains timeless and stays true to the current political climate when the violence to the Other (i.e., African American people, People of Color, immigrants,

among other marginalized populations) has not changed before, during, and after the Trump presidency. Every day, the news has shown us an increasing number of accidents caused by police brutality and multiple racial attacks on people who are perceived as "different." Those people, myself included, are living in the margins of life-and-death boundaries in this country due to our differences. As for re-reading and re-examining the story, I question myself, *1) What does social injustice look like to my students and me?* and *2) How did decolonizing nepantlerx pedagogy change us after the field trip?* I will use a limited space of 4,000-word-with-all-inclusive *Personal Perspectives* section to examine the pedagogy before closing this journey together.

To begin with the first question, I acknowledge I was not critical enough to address my students' concerns. The field trip occurred as I was a novice teacher who was learning how to teach two years ago. I wrote this reflection to see to what extent I have grown since then. Unfortunately, I was not prepared to teach and address race and racism issues in an English language classroom. Thus, the conversation was uncomfortable, emotional, and difficult for me to respond to students' inquiries and problems. However, I chose to expose myself with discomforts with my students at a historical site because I wanted us, who identified as English learners, immigrants, and/or nepantlerx(s) in the United States, to grapple with and see through political and personal struggles with each other. As Anzaldúa and Keating (2015) posit, to bridge the differences, we need to "dismantle the identity markers that promote division" (p. 77). The "division" that emerged from the discussion is the preconceived notion of "us" versus "them" binary, where the racist structural system is created to separate and segregate marginalized peoples in the U.S. society. This binary is dangerous in a sense that has silenced us to avoid discussing racism and social inequity in the English language classroom, leading us to think we are *no-one* to discuss this issue with one another. By avoiding this discussion, we perpetuate the social injustice, strengthen the White supremacist and racism that continue to mislead English learners' perspectives toward African American peoples and

other marginalized populations. By avoiding this discussion, we create and sustain injustice, assuming that racism does not exist and will not happen to us as long as we are working hard, staying silent, and compliant with what society asks us to do. The silence and ignorance of social inequity and injustice need to be named, explicitly discussed, and critically addressed, even though the students and the teacher need to engage discomforts in the conversation and discussion.

Second, when the students expressed their concerns as they were the receivers and the perpetrators of racism, I sensed a shift in their understanding of themselves and African American peoples. By sitting with each other, we had the opportunities to rethink the binary ideology, re-examine if the skin color matters (i.e., the kids were sharing meals during lunchtime), and critique why we are afraid of sitting next to the African American people. As a result of critical reflections, our ideologies are scattered into pieces to examine the truths and understand what social injustice looks like in real life. It occurs right in our mindset and actions. Tensions, conflicts, and contradictions happened when we were sitting in a circle for critical reflections; however, we chose to engage in uncomfortable discussions with each other to disrupt our binaries and the existing systematic racism of this country—together.

From what happened during the discussion, I could see how students exposed insider/outsider positions simultaneously, moving back and forth between their positionalities to examine their perspectives and actions. As they were struggling, debating, discussing, thinking about the differences and us/them binary, they "overturn the definition of otherness" (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2015, p. 81). This movement, for me, is an enactment of those who live in the nepantlerx state, allowing the students and myself (as an English learner and teacher simultaneously) to "negotiate the cracks between world" (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2015, p. 82). From the negotiation, we all could learn how to reconfigure who we truly were in this contradictory, systematic racist society in the United States and where we will head to afterward. As we were doing so, we were doing

justice for our *selves*. Even though we did not discuss the conversation deeply at the site due to the lack of knowledge of myself as the teacher back then, I could see this was an important step for us to continue to work on challenging the preconceived notions, the self's biases, aimed toward transforming our actions moving forward. In other words, I believe this trip was not a total failure; instead, it was necessary to critically reflect and examine our own selves moving forward.

As coming to this discussion stage, I am convinced that decolonizing nepantlerx practices have moved us (i.e., the students, the teacher, and perhaps the readers) to think differently. This pedagogy's core values center on the change of self where each student thoughtfully provided their critique, courageously talked about their opinions, furiously embraced and overturned the definition of otherness, and critically questioned what injustice looks like in this country. The decolonizing aspect of this pedagogy aims to challenge the Western meta-narratives, inquire about dominant ideologies, sought to change one individual and collective sel(ves) as a result of it.

Decolonizing nepantlerx practices aims to construct a critical and trusting dialogic space through collective and individual experiences. Joan Scott (1992) explains the relationship between experiences and identities in which we are not "capturing the reality of the objects seen, but trying to understand the operations of the complex and changing the discursive process by which identities are ascribed, resisted, or embraced" (p. 33). By sharing the story, I want to demonstrate the complexity of the discursive process where students discussed their struggles of understanding the Others and themselves. As sitting in a circle, we allowed ourselves to express our thoughts to see double each other's perspectives. We were brave in complexifying our thoughts to think critically about what it means to bridge differences in society. We opened the gates of our personal and political conflicts to invite others to critique; we "risk being wounded" (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002, p. 3) to recognize our thoughts to build a trusting and critical dialogic space. After the conversation, even though the students did not name or call themselves nepantlerxs, I am convinced they were

because nepantlerxs "speak in tongues—grasp the thoughts, emotions, languages, and perspectives associated with varying individuals and cultural positions" (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2015, p. 82).

As I am about to close this paper, I am grateful for your patience in joining us on this trip and listening to us. This trip connects us, teaching us how to recognize our differences, name our biases, and discuss social injustice with each other. I admit this field trip, in specific, and this decolonizing nepantlerx pedagogy, in general, is complicated, uncomfortable, and messy, but its results are rewarding and transformative, at least for me while I am working on this reflection to see my growth in thinking. Further, by bringing these practices in discussing racism and injustice with students, I aimed to decolonize the school system curriculum, especially in English language classrooms where the textbook's content still favors Whiteness, colonialism, and imperialism (Motha, 2014; Smith, 1999). I admit this work is heavy, but we, the teachers and students, are not alone. We will fight this fight together. We shall continue to enlighten and empower one another to see through and go through struggles together; because we are an activist in our own space. We shall build a community to remind one another that we are not just a *no-one* in this country. We shall shine for who we are and where we come from. We might not have the gun in our hands to fight back police brutality or racist comments, but we have chalks, markers, pens, which are the best weapons we ever have, so we can write, teach, love, and share stories with each other. We are not alone in this race. We shall continue to stand up together, hand in hand marching and following what history and ancestors teach us. As Anzaldúa and Keating (2002) remind us, "By focusing on what we want to happen, we change the present" (p. 5). To change the present, let's start with self!

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