

Teaching Poetry Is a Dangerous Profession

-- to a student who finds *One That Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* as "dangerous," "appropriation" & "unfit" for classrooms

Excellent point! You're sharp and smart. Your white brilliance blazes a path to claim your power, bringing down authority, history, canon, civilization...

Same things that Mao's Red Guards shouted at their teachers and professors during the Cultural Revolution.

You are mad that I use *One That Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* to teach the capstone workshop. You think it threatens you with the subjugation of women, and it appropriates the Native voice. You believe it should be banished from classrooms, because the author is a sexist and racist pig, just like Plato, Nietzsche, Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound, Gary Snyder, Sherman Alexie, Junot Diaz...

I applaud your courage. This is how old canon is destroyed, and new canon established, as the Red Guards destroyed all the infrastructures in China overnight, including my family, my school, my college dream. I had just finished my second grade, in the elementary where my mother taught music and dance, and I watched her being thrown down on the floor, hauled up on the stage, her hair shaved by her students, then paraded around the city on a truck. This is what Nietzsche did, in one week, writing his *Twilight of the Idols* in his feverish destruction of Plato, Socrates, Hegel, Schopenhauer...teachers he adored then destroyed in order to grow as an independent thinker, writer, philosopher. And he did become one of the most influential, canonized philosophers.

This is also what Ken Kesey did, breaking the psychiatric ward, the symbol of order, hierarchy, power, patriarchy, race, gender, sexuality, institution, capitalism, corporation, empire...personified by Nurse Ratched. Yes, the nurse is a she guarding the patriarchal order and executing the systemic oppression. She goes beyond the gender and sex, just as Ken Kesey's vision is beyond his era, like Plato, Li Po, Confucius, Laozi, Shakespeare, William Blake, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, James Baldwin...

The issue you raised is about power.

What is power?

In nature, it is energy, force and capacity that moves with speed, changing things chemically, biologically and physically.


For humans, power is the capacity to influence others or the course of events.

For society, power is a system that allows the dominant class to control the oppressed others.

Power desires absolute power, like nations desire dictatorship, be it democrats or republicans, capitalists or communists. Otherwise there would be no need to have law and congress to tie down the administrators' hands.

This is the western concept of power.

In the East, in the eastern philosophy, power is relevant, changing, fluid by nature. It runs like water, current in a river.

In fact, the word power is 权, in Chinese character, a tree on the left, a hand on the right. 3000 years ago, it was carved on the bones as , an egret arriving on the sprouting tree in early spring, ready to dance, make love, make nest and make offspring. So for Chinese, power comes from nature's symbiotic dance and balance.

In a classroom, you say I have authority over you, because I give you grades.

But that power is conditioned, tied down by many factors: 1. Whether you choose my class; 2. Class dynamics (you have absolute power to make my life miserable in a classroom by saying you feel unsafe); 3. Your evaluation and Rate My Professors; 4. Your word of mouth to "recommend" my course...

But all the above pale against these factors: race, money, language.

You're white, I'm yellow; you're white American, I'm yellow immigrant; English is your mother tongue, I speak with funny accent and grammar; you pay a quarter million dollars to take classes with me, and that makes me your client, you my master.

You study linguistics. You write poetry. You know the power of words. You know this would be the last time I'd teach the capstone because the Chair told me I'm not qualified even though I'm the only person who writes and publishes in all genres, the most published and awarded author on the campus. You know the Provost told me to my face that I'm the worst teacher on campus, even though the waiting list to study with me is long, and people beg to get into my classes, and many take 2-5 classes with me; even though I expanded the creative writing program ten folds; even though three of my students are teaching in the department as my colleagues, and many won national awards, become professors. But nothing matters because of my skin color and my immigrant status. If just one student said she would not recommend my classes to other students, if I gave just one student B+ for disrupting class, putting her military boots on my desk to show her white power, lying on the floor to block students from entering the classroom, attacking POC students with vicious comments, blackmailing me for money and better grade with Title IX report and lawsuit, then I am done.

What kind of power would you say I have?

This power relation is implicit, invisible, inaudible, unspeakable yet everywhere, because it is built within the system, to make sure certain race and class get the best

education and power through dominance. The academia is built upon insanity, illogic, discrimination, patriarchy, patriotism, unjust, mediocrity, herd mentality, while selling itself with humanity, diversity, independence, freedom. Academia is intrinsic with hypocrisy, double standard, and discrimination.

In that sense, you have absolute power over an immigrant poet and professor like me, because you are white, I'm yellow.

On this lily white campus, I never feel safe, because every day my colleagues and chairs would tell me: Ping, you are fiction, not poetry, you're not qualified to teach poetry; Ping, teach poetry, because we have three fiction writers; Ping, you're not qualified to teach capstone any more. Let Pete teach it, because he can teach poetry better than you, even though he doesn't write poetry. Ping, organization is not your forte. Ping, did you steal my cups and plates and pens? Ping, why are you throwing your tantrums around? Ping, grow up! Ping, you're the worst teacher we've ever had! Ping, don't you dare even think of comparing yourself to a white male colleague. Ping, know your place! Ping, come to my hotel room tonight for a glass of whisky. Ping, you are not a Chinese. Ping, you're definitely not a Chinese woman!

My very existence on the campus, as a woman, as a poet, as a Chinese woman poet, as a Chinese woman poet who refuses to know her place, is a threat to this insane, implicitly racist system.

Now let's talk about money, the foundation of capitalism, corporation, freedom, justice. Money runs like water, always flowing towards profit, and profit is already implicitly exploitation, to different degrees. By nature, money wants absolute freedom for the so called free market. But that's an illusion. Money requires power to make money, big money. A free market is always supported by military, government, economic, legal, cultural and physical domination. Throughout history, there was slavery, feudalism, capitalism, industrialization, colonialism, corporation...Free market is never free.

What does it have anything to do with education, you ask? Creative writing? Teaching? Your protest against Kesey?

Nothing and everything. First, how much is your tuition? \$66,000 a year and growing? Can you afford it? Of course not! Only the superrich and Chinese pay for this sucker's tuition, not because every Chinese is a crazy rich Asian! No! Chinese save every penny for their children's education, and American academia knows how to milk that blood money. Such high tuition has greatly changed the nature of education, which is supposed to be democratic, just and free by nature, but is turned upside down by the tuition. Education becomes a business, a profit machine, a corporate, its presidents CEOs, its professors employees, its students clients.

That changed the nature of education inside out.

On the surface, education represents power, as the west believes that knowledge is power, which implicitly commercializes and politicizes academia, where education

is carried out, sold and bought for business and power structure. But since education is about learning, and learning is intrinsically about the mind and body, memory and emotion, about process and experiences through trials, which renders learning and teaching in the realm of biology, consciousness, psychology, neuroscience, which demand that education be a democratic process, i.e., learning and teaching demand democracy, equity, equality, adventure, taking risks, making errors, independent thinking and expression, creative and critical thinking and experiment, in another word, academic freedom, freedom of speech, emotion, expression, exploration... in that realm, learning and teaching are the same difference. Learning ignores power, hierarchy, dictatorship, money... Learning loves debate, discussion, expression, idea exchange, play, joy. It loves making mistakes and learning from them. It loves process, loves questions, visions, imaginations, challenging, passion. It doesn't give a damn about profit or power.

It's a constant head to head clash with the academia infrastructure, the admins, the finance, the business, which wants to fix learning in the frame of business, money and power. Out of the clashes come the rules, unions, AAUP, tenure systems, all the slogans and mission statements to keep academy from slipping into the spin of corporation, at least on the surface.

Who really has power?

Well, not the professors. We give grades, true, but we are bound by your teaching evaluations, rate my professors and words of mouth the admins use wantonly for their political agenda. Not McMurphy in *One that Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, who is a white male, but is locked up in the psychiatric ward, in the hands of Nurse Ratched. In the corporate academia, money speaks: those who pay tuitions (except for the Chinese), those who the system is designed to benefit, those know how to play the game, those who point fingers at others, those who shout the loudest, those whose skin is lilywhite.

You have all the power one can get: beautiful, young, smart, ambitious, white. The system is made for people like you, and you know how to play the system with your cards: feminism, appropriation, gender, sex, student, liberal ideology, power. You're the perfect tool to handle people like me, and you know it. You know my place in the department, at college, the lowest, the most scrutinized and hated and trampled upon. The department secretary told you and other student workers to watch me when I enter the office, to make sure I don't "steal" anything like cups and plates. You didn't have to take classes with me, but you did, three times in a row, as a student, a poet, a TA. You know I'll give you everything I have. You know I have a record of discovering talents and bringing out the best out of each student. In my workshops, you got poems published, started your own journal, hung out with the poets you could only dream of meeting: Gary Snyder, Paul Hoover, Sherman Alexie, Layli Long Soldier, who came to the campus because of me. You like power, and know how to get it, and you have gotten everything you can out of me, you think. Now you come again, with a mission to bring me down, just the way you brought down your classmates, who came to me utterly broken, brilliant poets, talented

neuro-scientist, creative entrepreneur, one checked into a mental hospital, one quit school, one expelled, one broken, and other bodies you left behind.

Now you come to me with a mission from the admins: to bring down the immigrant professor who dares teaching poetry with English as her second language, who treats all students as equals, despite their race and nationalities, who defends philosophers, poets and writers like Plato, Nietzsche, Whitman, Blake, Alexie, Kesey, Snyder, who publishes more than her white colleagues and gets more awards, who refuses to play the obedience game with white power, who dares to say no to her white colleagues' advances.

You come to my home, eating my food and recording my words for the admins, the female chairs and provosts who serve the white president, the way the head nurse guards the psyche ward, the symbol of society, for the white male power.

I smile and feed you with my best food, the way I fed thousands of students at my home, on campus. You can't get what they need to kill me. So you ask to meet again, "just two of us, at a quiet place, and really talk."

You want to scoop out my brain the way Nurse Ratched scooped out McMurphy's brain.

But you should know I have protections: truth, conscience, history. Behind me stand Confucius, Laozi, Sunzi, Jesus, Plato, Aristotle, Nietzsche, Blake, Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson, Whitman, Pound, Gary Snyder, Louise Gluck, Ai Weiwei, Sherman Alexie, Ken Kesey...they're flawed, yes, but they risked and sacrificed their lives, names, comfort for what they believed in. You may call us however you want: losers, sexists, appropriators, racists, rapists, anti-Semites, crazy, paranoid, erratic...You and your classmates may call me on my birthday, tell me I'm getting old and ugly, and urge me to commit suicide...You stalk me on social media, calling me maggots, go back to CCP shithole to eat their shit...but our ideas and conviction and courage live on. Yes, we're nailed on cross, chased around, persecuted, spat upon, poisoned, burnt alive, exiled, starved to death...but we stand, and will stand, through time.

You want power. You want fame. You want to become the canon. The tragedy, however, is embedded in the moment one becomes a canon, as the next wave comes and destroys the old, as Nietzsche is now widely criticized and rejected for his misogyny. Did he foresee what was coming to him, in the peak of his intellectual fame and power, the brain tumor, the strokes, the dementia, the syphilis, the never fulfilled desire and love...the judgment from future generations? Did he try to be perfect, all round, all self-righteous? Did the fear to be judged stop him from writing and destroying the foundation with his hammer? Does it mean he should be cast into the abyss, his work never read or discussed?

Did Plato, Socrates, Hegel and Schopenhauer foresee what was coming to them from Nietzsche?

Did Ken Kesey foresee what was coming for him from you and your classmates?

Did Mao foresee what was coming after the Cultural Revolution?

If they did, and if they feared, trembled and stopped thinking, writing, risking, then there would be no philosophy, no literature, no vision, no civilization. There would be no Confucius, Laozi, Shakespeare, William Blake, Walt Whitman...all of them could be accused of patriarchy, sexism, appropriation, even racism. They could be dismissed as crazy, sick, renegade, dangerous, losers, rebellious, insubordinate...In fact, many of them were burnt alive, exiled, poisoned, laughed at, imprisoned, died in poverty, misery, despair, disillusion, poison, disease, insanity...

Since they were visionary, since they were poets who could see past, present and future, they knew what was awaiting them, alive and dead, but they did it anyway.

Thinking has always been a dangerous act. So is reading and writing. So is teaching, especially when the teacher wants to train and inspire passion, independence, creative thinking, courage, resistance, and persistence, and train students fearless and fierce, instead of teaching safety and comfort.

Safety and comfort equal mediocre, thinking within the box, following the old path, being correct and perfect every step, all the time.

Why would you want to pay a quarter million dollars to learn that?

Is there such a thing as being right all the time? Being perfect?

Is the Bible powerful? Is Shakespeare beautiful? Yes.

Are they flawless? No!

Is it possible to find a book timelessly and globally flawless?

Not even the Bible! Not even Shakespeare!

If you pick them apart, you'll see the books are full of hate, wrath, jealousy, revenge, women's subjugation, discrimination, even bigotry, along with love, compassion, forgiveness, wisdom.

Are you going to demand that Bible and Shakespeare be correct and perfect?

In death, maybe. No, death is actually the beginning of life, the signature of change.

The very nature of life is the constant making and unmaking, as the non-stoppable cycle of dance, and our reflection, reaction, emotion to it, our signature and foundation as human, our self-awareness, our consciousness and conscience as poet, writer, musician, dancer, artist, scientist, thinker...

It is embedded in the Chinese word for power: 權—權—权—quan.

Is it possible to point a finger without three fingers pointing at oneself?

Is it possible to reach power with eyes wide open and a heart still bleeding?

Along with all the canons in literature, philosophy, science, spirituality?

A teacher stands in an impossible space/time, the way a walker stands on a tightrope, an arrow still in the air, a baby uttering its first cry, a patient exhaling its last breath.

Which is an inherently impossible position, but the impossibility is exactly why we teach and learn, why arrows arch, why birds fly, why death and life happen.

Is there such a thing: a lotus floating in air, without roots or muck?

How does a teacher empower students while teaching them how to disempower the very authority that she represents?

How does a teacher teach Renaissance, Medieval, Shakespeare, 18th, 19th, 20th and modern canons? Almost every book subjugates women and the other races.

How does the teacher not get destroyed in the process?

Teaching is a dangerous profession.

Teaching poetry is the most dangerous of all, as it must reach into the muck of humanity, to bring back lotuses.

Especially if you're a woman, a woman of minority, a woman of minority immigrant, a woman of minority immigrant speaking English as a second language and teaching poetry in a "broken" syntax, in a space where the majority is privileged, in a time when a liberal arts college still seeks very hard to be "diverse."

How do you live/teach, when white male professors tell you that "you're lucky your breasts are not ruined yet by rearing children, that keep them the size and never let them grow into water melons?" And when you refuse to go out with them, they look so hurt: "I can't believe it! I'm tall and blond and smart. Who are you?"

How do you live/teach, when white male colleagues and admins invite you to their hotel rooms, homes, give you whiskeys, dinners, books, then tell you to "take a shower" and "brush your teeth" so you're clean enough to be kissed and fucked? When you say no with a smile, they yell: "You're a maverick, renegade, insane, treacherous, paranoid...You don't know your place. You are not Chinese, not a Chinese woman! You're the worst teacher the college has ever had!" Then they work day and night to banish you from academia...?

How do you live when they boast their privilege to your face: "As a man, I know I can get away with many things that women can never get away with"?

How do you live when you're constantly judged by your look: not feminine enough, not professional enough, not mothering enough, not tough enough?

How do you teach when one negative student evaluation can destroy your career?
And when you reach 100% positive evals, the admins implant students in your class
whose job is to bring you down?

When Provost says your 13 books are not equivalent to a white man's essay?

That you must never ever even dare think of comparing yourself to Him?

That you' haven't worked hard enough?

That you'll never be good enough no matter how hard you work?

To your face that is an open window to your soul?

That the speaker is a white female? Then another white female? Just like you?

What kind of subjugation would you call it? Race?

How do you remain standing still, on the rope, in this howling wind?

How do you clap with one hand and make thunders?


It's not a Koen, but a goal for us to ponder and reach, as human, artist, scientist, as
conscious/conscientious being with free will...

That's what I teach, how I teach, and why I teach

So that someday, you, and your friends, will ponder and pause before you raise your
lily fingers at people like me, the "losers," "degenerates," "immigrants," "feeble
minds," "the others," with your lily white privileges.

Every day and every time, since I staggered onto the campus in 1999, with a 2 year-
old toddler in my hand and 3-week-old infant on my breasts, a uterus bleeding from
a Caesarean section, a heart burning with love and conviction

That still bleeds and burns without apology.

And that is my dance with the tree and bird. That is my power—.