



## CHALLENGING NORMATIVITY: EXPERIENCES IN QUEERIFYING THE CLASSROOM

Desafío a la normatividad: experiencias de Queerificación del aula

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### KEYWORDS

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### ABSTRACT

*As English Studies researchers and teachers, our experience has shown that there continues to exist an urgent need to incorporate gender as a reading tool of literary texts to foster a non-discriminatory and equality perspective. Given the many advances in gender equality that have been achieved as well as the rising backlash against such progressive moves that spread through Europe, our proposal is based on the “queerification of the classroom”, a notion defined as a transgressive initiative that effectively and systematically incorporates the deconstruction of normativity and fosters resistance to socially constructed assumptions about normativity and deviance.*

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### PALABRAS CLAVE

LGTBIQ+  
Enseñanza  
Género  
Etnicidad  
Masculinidades  
Privilegio  
Normatividad

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### RESUMEN

*Como investigadoras y docentes de Estudios Ingleses, nuestra experiencia ha demostrado que sigue existiendo una necesidad urgente de incorporar el género como herramienta de lectura de textos literarios para fomentar una perspectiva no discriminatoria y de igualdad. Dados los muchos avances en igualdad de género que se han logrado, así como la creciente reacción contra estos movimientos progresistas que se extienden por Europa, nuestra propuesta se basa en la “queerificación del aula”, una noción definida como una iniciativa transgresora que incorpora sistemáticamente la deconstrucción de la normatividad y fomenta la resistencia a los supuestos construidos socialmente.*

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## 1. Introduction

The struggles for gender equality has reached significant mileposts over the last decades in many places in the world. In the European context, for example, the European Commission has made substantial progress by introducing equal treatment legislation; gender mainstreaming or the integration of the gender perspective into all other policies; and specific measures for the advancement of women (Gender Equality Strategy). Thus, equality and non-discrimination constitute core values that appear in different Treaties and the Charter of Fundamental Rights. While different members show varied degrees of legal frameworks in order to enshrine such fundamental rights, the European Commission presented the “list of Actions to Advance LGBTI Equality”, a groundbreaking policy framework to combat discrimination against LGBTI people (European Commission, 2019). Such relevant advances in policy clash against the rising discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, and sex characteristics that persists in the EU (European Commission, 2019).

However, we also know that genuine gender equality is far from being a reality. The Eurobarometer surveys of gender equality and the pay gap, however, show that gender equality is still a distant objective in the European context. As Vera Jourová, the commissioner for Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality, contends: “Women are still under-represented in decision-making positions in politics and the business world. They still earn 16% less than men on average across the EU. And violence against women is still widespread. This is unfair and unacceptable in today’s society. The gender pay gap must be closed, because the economic independence of women is their best protection against violence” (European Commission, press release, 2017). In the U.S. context, thinkers such as Susan Faludi have similarly asserted that despite all the advance, full equality between women and men is far from being a fact. As she argued in *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*,

In the years since feminism’s revival in the early 1970s, American women have sped across so much ground that we can scarcely recognize the lives our grandmothers lived. We have won so many contests, leveled so many barriers, that the changes wrought by the women’s movement are widely viewed as irreversible, even by feminism’s most committed antagonists. Yet, as women near the finish line, we are distracted. We have stopped to gather glittery trinkets from an apparent admirer. The admirer is the marketplace, and the trinkets are the bounty of a commercial culture, which has deployed the language of liberation as a new and powerful tool of subjugation. Under its thrall, American women now are in danger of fulfilling the oracle’s prophecy—keeping their lives but losing themselves. (Faludi, 2006, p. 18)

Likewise, Michael Kimmel in *Angry White Men* affirms that even though the “arc of history points toward greater equality. Slowly, yes, and fitfully. But definitely” (2017, p. 12), he has also witnessed a shift towards rising anger in American (white) men’s attitudes. If the history of white middle-class U.S. masculinity had been a long struggle with self-made manhood in which men had been driven to prove their masculinity at every stage, the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries has witnessed this anxiety transform into anger, even rage, which accounts for a visible backlash in gender equality:

While many American men drift toward greater gender equality—sharing childcare, developing cross-sex friendships, accepting women’s equality in the workplace and in the professions—there is also a growing vitriolic chorus of defensively unapologetic regression. American men have probably never been more equal with women, and many American men have never been angrier. (Kimmel, 2017, p. 9)

The anger Kimmel refers to, and which he further explores in relation to Donald Trump’s election, is a visible marker of some public discourses that unapologetically endorse discrimination in its multiple variants and adhere to a right-wing agenda. Kimmel has analyzed the demographics of this phenomenon and his breakdown is that contrary to the stereotyped perception these men are not necessarily Southern, rural, less educated or residents of exurbia:

angry white men are everywhere geographically! I look at some groups, like the extreme right wing, who might tend to be more small-town, exurban. Many are suburban, from those sprawling suburbs that extend far into what used to be ‘rural America.’ But many of the men I discuss – say men’s rights activists or fathers’ rights activists, or the men who are violent against women, or guys who go postal – come from all over the country. (Kimmel, as cited in Karlin, 2013)

The diversity of this male anger results from a perceived growing loss of entitlement and privilege among white men, i.e. a sense that the benefits to which they long believed themselves entitled to have been snatched from them, that “the system is stacked against them. Theirs is the anger of the entitled: we are entitled to those jobs, those positions of unchallenged dominance” (Kimmel, 2017, p.48). Ethnicity (being white) and gender (being men) make up the framework to construct this sense of entitlement. The current backlash against feminism and what Kimmel refers to as a “vitriolic chorus of defensively unapologetic regression” (2017, p.48) gives proof of Pease’s notion of “regressive change” (Mellström, 2017, p. 1) and urges us scholars and social agents to produce research that yields to valuable insights that can be transferred onto actual social change.

As Flood, Dragiewicz, and Pease argue, gender equality policies and actions often face resistance and backlash, which can be broadly defined as resistance to progressive social change (2018, p. 8). Thus, while the term 'backlash' was articulated in 1970, the structural pattern to which it refers has prevailed in social change and contests throughout history and specifically, progressive efforts to change social and economic arrangements may elicit pushback:

backlash is a response to actual or perceived challenges to existing hierarchies of power. It is a reaction against progressive social change that seeks to prevent further change from happening and reverse those changes already achieved. A typical feature of backlash is the desire by some proponents to return to aspects of an idealized past in which structural inequality was normalized. . . Backlash is a reaction against emancipatory political objectives, rather than the reversal of established hierarchies of power. (Flood *et al.*, 2018, p. 8)

There may be different definitions of backlash and resistance ranging from a broader understanding of the term, referring to any form of interference in or challenge to diversity initiatives in organizations; 'doing nothing' to preserve the status quo (for example, insufficient gender training, understaffing or under-budgeting); or organizing public resistance by anti-feminist men's and fathers' groups. While such examples of resistance hinder the progression of real gender equality, the existence of backlash is in itself a sign of progress, it is the actual success of progressive policies and their visibility what spawns a counterreaction (Flood *et al.*, 2018, pp. 8-9). The existence of backlash exists in relation to a corresponding sense of entitlement to certain rights and privileges.

In the Spanish context, the incorporation of the gender perspective -both in the field of methodology and as an object of study- has been part of university curricula since the end of the 1990s, when Post-structuralism entered strongly into universities in the United States and the United Kingdom. At the institutional level, however, it is only recently that institutional initiatives are being carried out to incorporate gender mainstreaming. For example, the Equality Unit of our university, Universitat de Barcelona, encouraged a revision of the teaching plans of the subjects taught in all the schools with the intention of providing a diagnosis of the presence of the gender perspective in university teaching. Similarly, the 2021 Xarxa Vives report entitled "The gender perspective in teaching at Xarxa Vives universities" offered an extensive and detailed analysis of the incorporation of gender at undergraduate level and concluded that there exists a very restrictive gender approach in the curricula (2021, p. 18). Based on the conclusions of the study, the Xarxa Vives identifies priority actions for the promotion of equality policies and one of them is the increase in gender education in undergraduate studies in a compulsory or fundamental way, incorporating this dimension as an essential pillar in university education and in all disciplines (2021, p. 53).

As English Studies researchers and teachers, our experience has shown that there continues to exist an urgent need to keep a non-discriminatory and equality perspective in our practices. Given the many advances in gender equality that have been achieved as well as the rising backlash against such progressive moves that spread through Europe, our proposal is based on the "queerification of the classroom". In other words, as a transgressive initiative that effectively and systematically incorporates the deconstruction of normativity and fosters resistance "to the regimes of 'the natural' and 'the normal', and their violence, that is, to all the normative ideas that indicate what is considered weird or deviant, sick, strange, 'abnormal', in relation to our behavior, our sexual and gender identity, our corporalities and appearances (or gender expression), our relationships, families, etc." (Trujillo, 2022, p. 19, our translation).

In order to incorporate this approach as a critical reading tool of literary texts, we embrace the notion of queer as an adjective, as a movement, as an action and as a verb (Trujillo, 2015) with the aim to Queerify the classroom, the knowledge, the methodologies, the contents and the approaches so that we can better address the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. As Luhman points out, Queer pedagogy must go beyond incorporating Queer content into teaching plans in a simplistic way (1998). It is necessary to question, refute, and read critically to dissolve the binaries, and it is precisely the Queer gaze that allows us to transgress the limits (Luhmann, 1998). The ultimate goal is to offer a learning space that promotes thinking from another perspective, from a new place. Karen Kopelson reminds us: "Queer is a way of knowing, not a knowledge to be acquired" (2002, p. 54).

We firmly believe in this necessary, relevant, and viable proposal for various reasons. First, because it improves our teaching quality. There is no doubt that a broad view, avoiding essentialisms and partial interpretations, is always synonymous with improving the quality of the debate that takes place in the classroom. In addition, it helps us to a) carry out a deconstruction of the normative models of gender, sexuality and ethnicity and b) deepen our knowledge of the history and representation of society, including those sectors that had been silenced because of their sexual options. In this sense, we highlight the relevance of cultural representations-literature in the present case-for the analysis of inequality. Thus, while a significant quantity of the most important work in masculinity studies, for example, has been characterized by sociological approaches by scholars such as Raewyn Connell, Bob Pease, Jeff Hearn, Michael Kimmel, or Victor Seidler, the field of the humanities and has demonstrated the key role of the analysis of cultural representations in the dissemination of images of masculinities ever since the

1990s. As Floyd and Horlacher argue, sociological approaches will benefit from the incorporation of approaches focusing on cultural representations since the arts constitute indispensable epistemological media that reflect the complex interaction between life and its representation (2017, p. 6). The review of the literary corpus in terms of LGTBIQ+ or the incorporation of theoretical readings from these fields in the classroom becomes an optimal way in which our students see themselves reflected and challenged to denaturalize patterns that have been historically validated as unique. Active critical thinking helps us dismantle these patterns to think more and challenge preconceived assumptions about gender that many times are based on sexist assumptions given the patriarchal context we live in. Let us remember that a curricular choice is never a neutral space, as Sandra Harding (1996) points out and, for this reason, when we teach a subject based on a list of texts with an LGTBIQ+ perspective or that allow for a Queer reading, we try to avoid universal truths in order to generate an open debate with various points of view that help us take a turn towards the deconstruction of essentialism and knowledge situated in a particular narrative, what the philosopher Donna Haraway calls “situated knowledge” (1988).

## **2. The Study of Inequality and its Representation: Intertextuality and Privilege**

We cannot conceive of a queerification process without an intersectional perspective; that considers different axes of inequality, as articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991). Similarly, the analysis and questioning of inequality is intrinsically related to the analysis of the construction of privilege and the way in which it is perpetuated (Requena-Pelegri & López, in press). As Pease explains, social and political inequality literature has not adequately addressed the processes by which privilege is reproduced by and through the daily practices of privileged groups (2013, p. 3). From this perspective, discrimination has been analyzed by focusing on the structural nature and individual practices but leaving out the ways in which privileged members’ behavior is socially reinforced and normalized (Pease, 2013, p. 4). Drawing on the intersectional nature of the different sites of privilege we may inhabit, the articulation of privilege as the other site of oppression places Western dominance, class elitism, white, patriarchal, heterosexual, or able-bodied privileges under scrutiny and contributes to the critique of dominance (Pease, 2013, p. 4; Requena-Pelegri, 2021, p. 47). Focusing on those who benefit most from existing social divisions and inequalities and thus emphasizing the structural basis of discrimination, the study of privilege lays bare the sense of entitlement members of privileged groups may show as to the privileges they enjoy (Pease, 2013, pp. 3, 15). A starting definition of privilege could be Bailey’s, who states that “the word privilege is used to refer to systematically conferred advantages individuals enjoy by virtue of their membership in dominant groups with access to resources and institutional power that are beyond the common advantages of marginalised citizens” (Bailey, 1998, as cited in Pease, 2013, p. 109). As Pease contends, we live in a world that is structured along the relational divisions of class, race, gender, sexuality, and other social categories. Social inequality including economic inequality, status inequality, sex and gender inequality, racial and ethnic inequality and inequalities between different countries has been widely documented (2013, p. 3). However, Pease’s thesis is that social and political inequality literature has not adequately addressed the processes by which privilege is reproduced by and through the daily practices of privileged groups (2013, p. 3). An example of this would be how discrimination has been analyzed, i.e. by focusing on the structural nature and individual practices but leaving out the ways in which privileged members’ behavior is socially reinforced and normalized (Pease, 2013, p. 4). The same point on the invisibility of privilege as one of its key features is made by Kimmel and Ferber: “privilege is far less visible to us than its absence; when we are discriminated against, it is much more painfully obvious than when we belong to the groups that benefit from that discrimination” (As cited in Pease, 2013, p. 13). To bring the focus to the workings of privilege, Pease identifies its basic characteristics, among them: Invisibility (most privilege is not recognized as such by those who have it); Normativity (the reproduction of privilege and dominance does not demand the intent of individuals, since privileged groups become the model for normal human relations); Naturalization (gender, race, sexuality and class are regarded as flowing from nature); Sense of Entitlement (members of privileged groups believe that they have a right to be respected, acknowledged, protected and rewarded); Complicity (a person is complicit in injustice if she or he benefits from it (even if she or he did not seek that benefit). The application of the LGTBI+ perspectives to the textual analysis of literary texts allows students to become aware of the notion of privilege and the ways different forms of privilege operate in their lives. Thus, privilege constitutes a (troubled) intersectional experience since privileges are constructed in relation to inequalities of age, class, education, ethnicity/racialization or gender (Crenshaw, 1989; Pease, 2013). These dimensions may qualify the benefits derived from the patriarchal dividend on account of other forms of discrimination. Such complexity in the experience of privilege avoids a binary, clear-cut understanding of privilege as just the other side of discrimination.

### **2.1. Deconstructing Privilege: Heteronormativity and Whiteness**

Gender, like race, carries with it an array of assumptions about the specific features that conform each gender within a binary system. In this paper, we apply the notion of queerification to two examples, those offered by James Baldwin and Toni Morrison. In particular, the necessary integration of race, gender, and sexualities as



essential elements in order to critically interpret a text as well as integral parts of a cultural identity, along with social class, sexuality, and other vectors. What does it mean to include a work by James Baldwin or Toni Morrison in a course syllabus, but then omit any reference to race or gender? The hierarchy of race is certainly an invention, a social construct. Nevertheless, as Toni Morrison puts it, “there *is* culture, and both gender and ‘race’ inform and are informed by it” (1988, p. 164). Teaching literature from a Eurocentric perspective, that is as “raceless” and “universal,” may result in undervaluing that literature as well as the work and the author. Thus, it is through intersectionality and the project of queer ethnicities that we can, as educators, develop teaching plans that provide deeper and other meanings of canonical works of literature that challenge essentialism and deconstruct stereotypical representations. As Linda Garber states, “queer cannot be discussed in terms of sexuality or gender alone, because it is not through sex and gender alone that we live our complex lives” (2003, p. 128). Thus, we understand queer ethnicities as the interrelationship between race/ethnicity studies and queer studies. As Elisa Glick writes, the project of queer ethnicities is valuable in that it does much more than extend notions of race and ethnicity to queer studies, or extend notions of queer theory to ethnic studies; the project of queer ethnicities is “redefining the terms through which both LGBTQ and ethnic studies are conceptualized” (2003, p. 124).

When incorporating the project of queer ethnicities in our teaching practices, we may encounter resistance as we strive to view the classroom as a depoliticized space. However, we must ask ourselves: to what extent are we undervaluing academic material, and specifically literary works, that are all raced, gendered and sexualized by silencing those signifiers? Are we not already politicizing the class if we choose to omit race, gender and sexuality from the textual analysis? Moreover, it is essential that our classroom becomes a space where students feel safe and represented. As educators, we must be aware of our student’s own subjectivities, that is, the different identities that encompass race, ethnicities, gender, sexualities, religion, and class.

In theorizing what she terms “engaged pedagogy,” bell hooks open an interrogative space for exploring how our public selves as teachers and our private selves intersect and potentially overlap in the classroom:

Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. The empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks. Professors who expect students to share confessional narratives but who are themselves unwilling to share are exercising power in a manner that could be coercive. (1994, p. 21)

Although hooks’ claims are self-evident, the notion of an equally open exchange between students and professors might disrupt traditional classroom dynamics. Nevertheless, as educators, it is our responsibility to navigate the classroom space in a way that does not replicate hegemonic models where the teacher is the central site of power and authority in the classroom. By facilitating a mutually open exchange and linking personal narratives to academic discussions, we can enhance the understanding of specific literary works as well as provide students with a safe space to express freely their identities.

It is not only through our teacherly position, as it were, that we can promote a queer pedagogy in the classroom, but also through the academic materials that we choose to teach. It should be part of our pedagogical mission to introduce students to literary works by canonical authors that, on the one hand, eschew static, stereotypical, and heteronormative representations of African American subjectivities and, on the other, provide students with analytic tools to help them identify and interrogate notions of privilege and hegemony both in and outside the classroom setting. As James Baldwin pointedly articulated in his 1963 talk to teachers, the whole purpose of education is precisely to question the society in which one is being educated:

The purpose of education is, finally, to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black, or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not. To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity. (1963, pp. 330-331)

Contesting hegemonic and heteronormative representations of black subjectivity, the works authored by James Baldwin and Toni Morrison offer an opportunity to both teach African American Literature through a queer theory lens and to establish alternative models of black subjectivity as well as masculinity. In some of their most intriguing works, both authors subvert and deconstruct hegemonic and racist notions through their literary renderings of black masculinities. Both Baldwin and Morrison’s works present a pervading critique of binary systems that reproduce stereotypes and essentialist notions of black humanity. For example, teaching Baldwin’s most venerated novels *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) and *Giovanni’s Room* (1956), or even his non-fiction such as “The Male Prison” (1954) or “Here Be Dragons” (1985), enable an organic integration of queer ethnicities in our teaching plans. Though the careful analysis of these texts, students are exposed to homoerotic underpinnings and overt and complex representations of homosexuality that challenge the system of binary oppositions that form dominant discourses on race and sexuality. Baldwin not only illustrates those binary oppositions, but he also “ends up deconstructing them from subversive and innovative perspectives” (Armengol, 2012, p. 674). In his

brilliant assessment of Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, Armengol defines how Baldwin's novel encapsulates the project of queer ethnicities: "While whiteness has traditionally been opposed to blackness, and even as heterosexuality has usually been constructed in opposition to homosexuality, *Giovanni's Room* undermines such false oppositions by revealing ... their interrelatedness and mutual dependance" (2012, p. 674).

Although Morrison's work does not necessarily deal with homosexual desire as Baldwin does, her work also poses a challenge to the system of binary oppositions that shape the dominant discourses on race and gender. Though her diverse and multifaceted representations of black subjectivity, and specifically of black male characters, in some of her most acclaimed novels, such as *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Beloved* (1987), *Home* (2012), or even her recently republished short story *Recitatif* (1983), Morrison envisions alternative models of black subjectivity that are deeply committed to their growth as individuals and actively reject systems of domination. In analyzing Morrison's fiction, it is essential to consider her representation of familiar ties and gender relations. As Mar Gallego argues, "by redrawing" distinctions between male and female, "Morrison substantially contributes to advancing and resignifying constructions of both African American masculinity and femininity" while, in turn, providing a "reconfiguration of both gender relations and familiar ties" (2014, p. 164). Indeed, Morrison's representation of familiar ties present "a blurring of the distinctions between men's and women's roles" challenging traditional family structures, such as the patriarchal nuclear family (Washington, 1991, as cited in Gallego, 2014, p. 165) as well as monolithic categorizations about gender and race.

#### 4. Conclusions

Integrating the project of queer ethnicities (and therefore ethnicity, gender, and other identity markers like sexuality, and class) in our teaching practices and the textual analysis of literary works written by James Baldwin and Toni Morrison as canonical authors provide richer and deeper meanings of reading literary texts while, simultaneously, deconstruct stereotypical categorizations and defy essentialism. Through the intersectional project of queer ethnicities, we can develop teaching plans and teaching practices that on the one hand, question heteronormative and monolithic representations of black male subjectivity, as developed in this article, and, on the other hand, engage in the pedagogical mission to promote alternative models of subjectivity that reject hegemonic and racist notions to thus promote gender and racial equality. By reassessing teaching plans and practices, we can introduce students to literary works that promote healthier, more inclusive, and enriching representations of cultural identities that subvert and deconstruct static and binary categorizations about gender and race. From this perspective, we may argue that a reading that fosters a deconstructive practice result in a challenge to normativity and the status quo, thus paving the way for transformative models that can be successfully incorporated into the students' lives.

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