

Contesting Neoliberalism Through Critical Pedagogy, Intersectional Reflexivity, and Personal Narrative: Queer Tales of Academia
Jones and Calafell (2012)

Jones and Calafell (2012) detail their experiences as queer people in academia through personal narratives. Jones, a queer, white man, and Calafell, a queer, Chicana woman use their narratives and unique experiences to critique the neoliberal ideologies that infiltrate the classroom. They advocate for the use of pervasive critical/queer pedagogy and intersectional reflexivity to combat neoliberalism and promote mindfulness about the different identities one embodies and how these identities contribute to relationships with others. Jones and Calafell (2012) found that forging alliances between queer people and queer allies in the academy and being honest about oppressive identities one may inhabit, reduces the impact of neoliberal ideologies in the classroom.

To fully grasp Jones and Calafell's article, it is imperative to understand neoliberalism and the connected ideologies that pervade higher education. Neoliberalism is commonly associated with the late-capitalist economic policies of Ronald Reagan which praised the laissez-faire approach to the free market, deregulation, and lowering barriers to trade (Boas & Gans-Morse, 2009). These policies exploit vulnerable populations within society by cutting social welfare programs, foster the myth of meritocracy, and blame individuals for the systemic issues, such as racism and poverty, plaguing the nation (Jones & Calafell, 2012). Jones and Calafell (2012) argue that neoliberal ideologies that are culpable for the economic downturn in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Kotz (2002) explains "the neoliberal model creates the instability on the macroeconomic level... by loosening public regulation of the financial sector. This renders the system even more vulnerable to major financial crises and depression" (p. 66). While these policies and the associated ideologies claim to level the playing field and bring people together

through trade and technology, Jones and Calafell (2012) argue that the “digital divide and neocolonialism reinforce the longstanding hegemony of the West” (p. 964). Given the pervasiveness of neoliberalism, these attitudes “created a backlash against higher education”, suspicion of the employees and budget, and the usefulness of higher education (Jones & Calafell, 2012, p. 958). The result of this division is the privileging of certain identities and the oppression of others and an insidious neoliberal ideology that saturates society, including higher education.

Throughout their article, Jones and Calafell use critical and queer pedagogy to disavow neoliberal claims to the academy. Put generally, critical theory aims to demystify hegemonic structures, such as capitalism and Whiteness, and identify ways to dismantle and recreate these structures to make them more inclusive for all. Critical pedagogy operates under the tenants of critical theory and integrates it within curricula to educate students within a critical framework. Queer pedagogy extends critical pedagogy further to include sexual orientations outside of the heteronormative condition. Jones and Calafell (2012) purport that:

Critical/queer pedagogy offers us tactics for countering institutional strategies imbued with neoliberalism, such as discourses that position students as consumers, reframe higher education as job training, and promote civility and accountability in ways that inhibit the academic freedom of cultural Others. (p. 959)

Critical pedagogy aims to foster a connection between the teacher and the student through communication regarding “activist-oriented pedagogy, social justice-oriented curriculum, and close mentoring relationships” (Freire 1970/2003; Jones & Calafell, 2012, p. 971). Critical pedagogy claims that teaching is not separate from issues of social justice, democracy, and the emancipation from oppression and that students’ education should be fostered and nourished following these guidelines (Giroux, 2007). As critical pedagogy grew, it incorporated other

leftist fields to include queer theory, postmodernism, anti-racism, and feminism to critique other social issues. Because Jones and Calafell (2012) are two queer critical scholars, it is imperative for them to combat neoliberalism, its “quest for profit [and] the move toward privatization” within the academy, and the fulfillment of diversity initiatives that tend toward corporate multiculturalism (p. 964). The intersection of Jones’ and Calafell’s identities, both marginalized and privileged, uniquely positions them to distinguish, critique, and educate their students about the pitfalls and dangers that lurk within higher education.

In addition to critical pedagogy, Jones and Calafell (2012) use aspects of queer theory to contest neoliberalism. Jones and Calafell’s (2012) definition of queer challenges essentialism, single identity politics, and the box of sexual orientation, expanding queer to include other aspects of identity which may affect how one engages in politics, ideology, and other experiences. For instance, queerness can be used as a link with other marginalized populations to aid in the examination of intersectional identities, beyond sexual orientation, and create alliances within society, and more specifically for the purpose of this article, academia (Jones & Calafell, 2012). The authors use queer theory to shed light on their Othering experiences, self-imposed and otherwise. These experiences range from performing a more accepted aspect of one’s identity to rise within the ranks or being publicly called out for one’s ethnicity (Jones & Calafell, 2012).

As a response to their narratives of Othering, Jones and Calafell (2012) advocate for the formation of alliances and promoting coalitional activism within the academy to keep these types of experiences to a minimum. Coalitional activism requires participants to acknowledge all of their identities, whether they are praised or condemned in society, be self-reflexive about the impact of these identities on others, and be willing to “face the daily epistemic and physical

violence that threatens marginalized groups” (Jones & Calafell, 2012, p. 975). For the average person with privilege, such as Whiteness or maleness, this requires a critical look at these socially privileged identities and an acknowledgement of the unearned benefits that come with these identities. From there, the person with privileges must be dedicated to using these privileges to bolster and protect the voices of the marginalized because a white male would not face the same consequences as a woman of color for challenging someone in public. The privileged person must be willing to face the same risks as their marginalized counterparts. Coalitions and alliances between the oppressed and privileged are a crucial start to raising up the voices and experiences of the marginalized and leveling the playing field within society.

Jones and Calafell (2012) use personal narratives to reflect on experiences with themselves and students to understand the implications of neoliberalism in higher education. Looking at these experiences through the lens of critical/queer pedagogy starts to provide a framework to support marginalized students, reduce Othering, and call out harmful hegemonic tendencies. Calafell chronicles an experience with a white woman, Jenny, who hijacked a conversation about Arab feminists with a Moroccan woman. Jenny recentered the conversation around whiteness, much to the alarm and chagrin of the rest of the class and Calafell. When Calafell made a comment about the recentering of whiteness, Jenny was indignant, refused to take responsibility or even acknowledge her actions, and began to cry. Jones and Calafell (2012) unpack this incident:

This strategy is often used by White women in the classroom and in other professional settings against antiracist of color, as it deflects blame and guilt, instead ‘victimizing’ the White woman while centering Whiteness and reaffirming the savage Otherness of women of color. (p. 968).

Here, Calafell did her job as a critical scholar and this experience also serves as a reminder that it is not the responsibility of the marginalized to comfort the oppressor. Though this white woman was in Calafell's class on feminists of color, it is clear that Jenny was not an ally or interested in coalitional activism. In a situation like this, using Jones and Calafell's (2012) model, a person interested in being an ally would have taken a minute to reflect on their actions and acknowledged their harm and perpetuation of the dangerous standard that white opinions are more important and should be privileged over those from people of color. In regard to the other students in the room, while this incident occurred, an ally would have mentioned the detriment of recentering whiteness to Jenny and endured the reaction that Calafell, a woman of color, was forced to stomach.

This article is important to read and reflect upon because it is a potent reminder for the importance of reflexivity about one's identities, how they are supported or oppressed by neoliberalism, and how that affects others. Even though higher education is thought to be a place that rises above hegemonic structures, it is not immune and as scholars, it is on us to make these imperfections visible and critique them vociferously. Jones and Calafell (2012) remind us that the onslaught of neoliberalism is not purely economic and contained within the policy realm. Neoliberalism pervades all aspects of society because it actively attacks the most vulnerable members of society. This article should encourage critical scholars, in particular, to support and be a coalitional activist and to be willing to put themselves at the same risk marginalized scholars face.

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