

“The Power of Words, The Power of the Classroom”
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A few weeks ago I stared at a sleepy class full of undergrads failing to engage in a discussion on the function on gender, power, and race in God language and imagery. Frustrated, I proclaimed loudly, “If God is male, where is God’s penis?” This provoked a series of nervous giggles, shocked faces, and finally a provocative discussion. Later that day, I ran into another student who was not in my class but nonetheless inquired, “Did you ask your class about God’s penis today?” Surprised I answered yes and asked her how she knew. A friend of hers was in the class, and had posted my question on her Facebook page. At that moment I felt a mixture of pride that my lecture merited a Facebook status, fear that I had gone too far in class, and betrayal that the privacy and the sanctity of the classroom had been violated. At that moment, identity, power, and technology came together.

I am a scholar of religion that spends much of her teaching and research looking at the intersection of identity and religion. Whether it is race, class, culture, or gender, the manner in which religion shapes and contests identity construction has challenged my intellectual imagination since I was an undergraduate much like the very students I try to inspire and engage in the classroom. And it is because I teach undergraduates the question of what this generation thinks about these issues has been on my mind quite a bit lately. It is quite clear from my classroom experiences that these issues are important to them. While they are not always the most attentive in class, identity and religion are subjects that fascinate them. However, often when I bring the function of power into the discussion the conversation deteriorates.

I struggle to teach students about racism when many of them do not know anyone who is explicitly racist. What do I mean by that? I grew up in a world, sadly, where my parents made racist slurs and my friends' naively proclaimed racist stereotypes were part of my everyday life. I remember my parents pulling me out of the sun constantly as a child (no easy task growing up in Miami) for fear that I would get "too dark" and be mistaken as biracial. When I speak to my students about how they understand racism shaping their everyday lives, many, even my students of color, stare at me blankly. They equate racism with racial slurs, with denied opportunities. As students at a prestigious university, they do not see roadblocks. As young adults with a black president, they do not see the world as one in which skin color negatively impacts their lives.

Sexism does not always fare much better in the classroom. Female students, an overwhelming presence in university classrooms, seem to have no self-awareness that they are recent arrivals to the academic scene. They take for granted the struggles of their foremothers, and on bad days they appear to me to be quite ungrateful. They do not see their biological sex as an impediment to their future. While many women and men in the classroom will begrudgingly admit to gender stereotypes they overwhelmingly speak of them with a reluctant acceptance that this is "the way things are."

These comments are anecdotal, and in many ways are products of the particular setting in which I teach and live. Miami is an extremely diverse city and the University of Miami is a very diverse school. This is a city where Latinos/as have strong political and economic power. And yet this microcosm of the diversity that will eventually consume the United States as a whole often masks the subtle ways in which racism and sexism saturate

our lives. Students find it hard to identify the subtlety of oppression in their midst, which I argue, makes its presence all the more sinister.

Over the years I have tried to develop strategies in the classroom to make students more aware and dare I hope contest the subtlety of racism, ethnic prejudice, and sexism in their midst. I would like to focus on the classroom, because I find little merit bringing this discussion to the academic world of my colleagues. My research, while extremely important to me, is written for a very small community of scholars who often self-select given their own theoretical and political commitments. These books do not have a strong public intellectual voice. I suspect that most academics who read my books tend to agree with me on broader, more substantial issues. Even when I present in public academic settings such as the American Academy of Religion, individuals in the audience have chosen my session, my paper in the midst of a sea of other options. I do not have to spend too much time convincing them. The realm that I do see as the extension of the classroom is when I am given the opportunity to speak in public settings, both academic and ecclesial. Whether it is talks at churches or speaking engagements at universities, these public presentations, while based on my research, feel more like an extension of my time in the classroom.

It is my vocation to teach. There are very few things I can say with 100% certainty, yet this is one of them. I understand my teaching as a mission and a service. And fortunately, I love it. My role as an academic, researching and writing, and attending academic conferences is inextricably linked to my teaching and my relationships with my students. They force me to be clear and concise, not allowing me to hide behind words like “hermeneutic” and “epistemology,” and they push me to confront the relevance of academic

discourse in people's concrete everyday lives. This understanding of teaching as vocation is also connected to my concern for social justice.

Passion is the most essential component in my pedagogy. I am passionate about my students, the readings we discuss together, and the study of religion. The minute I stop feeling passion for teaching is the moment I will no longer be a good teacher. I know that my passion is what most effectively reaches my students and makes their encounter with religion a transformative event. As bell hooks notes, "Given that critical pedagogy seeks to transform consciousness, to provide students with ways of knowing that enable them to know themselves better and live in the world more fully, to some extent it must rely on the presence of the erotic in the classroom to aid the learning process" ("Eros, Eroticism, and the Pedagogical Process"). I honestly believe that students will not learn anything (and here I mean learn and not memorize) unless they care about the material and I show them that I care about it as well. Passion not only engages students at the level that African-American public intellectual Michael Eric Dyson describes as, "the erotics of epistemology"; it also refutes the notion that the intellect and emotion or the mind and the body are not somehow organically united. So I constantly encourage emotion in my classrooms, and I show emotion in them.

One of my favorite quotes by Adrienne Rich is found in a 1984 essay entitled "Invisibility in Academe," where she writes, "When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you, whether you are dark-skinned, old, disabled, female, or speak with a different accent or dialect than theirs, when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw

nothing.” This quote haunts me, for it sums up in many ways my undergraduate education. It also reminds me of the power I hold as a professor based simply on the readings I select for a course or the discussions that occur in my classroom.

Another word that is fundamental to my pedagogy is humility. The spirit of this humility is best summed up by an excerpt from a poem entitled, “A Call to Certain Academics,” by José María Arguedas. Arguedas is a Peruvian poet who as some of you may know deeply influenced the theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez. Much like the Adrienne Rich quote, this poem haunts me, especially when I teach about the poor and marginalized, reminding me to make them the subjects of theology and not its objects.

They say that we do not know anything
 That we are backwardness
 That our heads need changing for a better one.
 They say that some learned men are saying this about us
 These academics who reproduce themselves
 In our own lives
 What is there on the banks of the rivers, Doctor?
 Take out your binoculars
 And your spectacles
 Look if you can.
 Five hundred flowers
 From five hundred different types of potato
 Grow on the terraces
 Above abysses
 That your eyes don't reach
 Those five hundred flowers
 Are my brain
 My flesh.

Teaching is a humbling profession. For me, the worst and yet most empowering moments in the classroom have been when a student asks a question and I have to look at a room full of undergrads, many of whom are a bit wary of a self-proclaimed feminist teaching them and say “I don't know.” It is truly a liberating event to admit you don't know everything. I believe our demeanor in the classroom is just as instructive as the readings

and lectures. As the great Cuban leader and thinker José Martí once wrote, “to think is to serve.” For me, the service that is my teaching is at the heart of my vocation.

Connected to humility is privilege. I often teach courses that focus on the teachings of Latin American liberation theology. I am always surprised at the manner in which my students respond to these teachings. Many Christian students are surprised and pleased at the presence of such a strong call to action and appeal to solidarity with the poor within their religious tradition. They resonate strongly with the biblical teachings highlighted by Latin American liberation theology. They usually interpret it as the way Christianity should be, nodding eagerly at the preferential option for the poor and condemnation of the rich in these texts. When we read the Exodus story, the quintessential story of God’s solidarity with the oppressed within liberation theologies, the class practically cheers for the Hebrew slaves. And yet they do not realize that they are the Egyptians in the story. Students want a religion that cares for the poor, but they do not live their lives in that manner. They do not want to recognize that they are the rich.

Why are they the rich? They are the rich because they sit in air-conditioned classrooms and complain about having to read and study so much. They do not understand their education as a privilege and a gift. In many of their worlds, a university education is an expectation that they sometimes engage reluctantly. It is not surprising to me that my poorer and working-class students often take their education more seriously. With wisdom well beyond her years, a young woman I taught who worked from midnight to eight in the morning would go home to shower and show up at my nine-am class. This student, who had candidly shared with her classmates her financial struggles one day, shocked us all later in the semester when she wisely claimed, after losing her job, “I am broke but I am not

poor, because I am here.” It was a jolt to the middle-class students who constantly complained about being “poor.”

This is not the only reason I classify them as rich. They are rich because they are unaware of how the lives they lead and the lives many of them will lead are interconnected with global poverty. Those who become aware often do not think that this complicity applies to them. In many ways they remind me of Lazarus and the rich man. The rich man’s sin was his blindness to poverty. He walked by Lazarus everyday but never truly saw him. The poor were nonexistent to him. And this is what amazes me with many of my students (and frankly most educated liberals I know). They can somehow claim solidarity with the poor and even celebrate it, but they do not in any way shape their everyday practices to reflect that solidarity. They do not see themselves as in any way complicit within the web of global poverty. And yet we all contribute to the global consumerist culture that is built on the broken backs of the poor whether we chose to acknowledge that or not.

I teach a service-learning travel seminar at my university that spends spring break in San Lucas Tolimán, Guatemala. I lived in this predominantly Mayan community for two years, which is my husband’s hometown. Prior to the trip students learn about Guatemala’s politics, culture, and religion, with a particular emphasis on the complexity of race and identity in this setting. We then travel to Guatemala and students spend a week doing service work through the Roman Catholic Church’s social justice outreach programs in this impoverished community. Students often think that the service is what will transform them and, egotistically they think, the community. They are wrong.

As part of their course time in Guatemala students receive lectures in the evening from community leaders that work with the various projects. The individuals who give

these talks are poor, illiterate, and have little or no education. Yet these individuals lead the projects that are slowly but steadily improving the quality of life in the community. And for the hour or two that they spend with my class, they teach students about poverty, solidarity, and oppression in a manner that my books, the books of my colleagues, and my lectures will never come close to communicating. They have a critical hermeneutic about the world around them which life, not a textbook, has taught them. And perhaps more importantly, they put a human face to abstract words such as racism, classism, and sexism.

In inviting these guest speakers I attempt to subvert the very academy that has given me the authority to speak and write. For those of us concerned with issues of global injustice we exist in a conundrum. We want to give voice to those without voice, yet in the process we become the narrative authors of their voices. Our power and prestige as academics eclipse their voices. We have to be very careful and accountable to those communities we claim to represent.

You may ask about my other students, the ones who do not travel to Guatemala but instead spend their time with me in air-conditioned classrooms in Miami. I attempt to challenge these students in other ways. I ask them to think about the books that are assigned in their classes: who is writing the books they are required to read? Are they men? Women? Brown, black, and/or white? I also challenge them to question the very university education they are receiving and the manner in which it teaches a very limited understanding of knowledge. In their world, sources of knowledge are only those who have the ability to write and to further narrow the field—those who are published. While in no way an anti-intellectual, I do think that emphasizing that knowledge exclusively comes

from books, a message we give in the university setting, ultimately leads to the assumption that individuals that do not write books or cannot read are not sources of knowledge.

Last night I gathered with a group of students to discuss the power of language and the manner in which we use offensive terms in our everyday speech. We spoke of race, sexual identity, gender, and disability. A young Haitian student raised the question of the power of words that we often don't think of as hurtful, indicating that speech does not have to be intentionally offensive to hurt. She then shared that a fellow student had told her that she was an affirmative action admittance to UM, questioning her intelligence based on her race. So I suppose that racism isn't always masked in subtle ways, and that for some students, racism is something they continue to encounter in very direct and explicit ways.

My entry point into these conversations is always religion. The study of religion, in my eyes, offers us an invaluable doorway into discussions of identity and power. I am always struck by the manner in which religious claims continue to have such a great influence on my students, even those who do not claim to be religious. They accept them uncritically, not recognizing that Tradition is a process, a verb, not an object that is handed to them. It is through making them aware of identity-making processes and the function of power within them that I attempt to undermine the manner in which oppression operates not only in their daily lives, but also in the broader society.