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Embodying the Brown Puerto Rican Experience in the Classroom of an Evangelical Seminary

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Blog Series: Race Matters in the Classroom

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For the last two years, I have taught a required class on evangelism for ordination at the United Methodist Church at Asbury Theological Seminary on the Orlando Campus during the summer and January terms. The course is structured as an intensive class delivered over five days. Over these two years, I have never had an African American student in class. For example, in the J-Term of 2015, there were 11 white students: 9 males and 2 females. In the summer of 2015, there were 22 students: 12 males (2 Kenyans) and 10 females. In the J-term of 2016, there were 23 students: 19 males (2 Filipinos) and 4 females (1 Chinese). In the summer of 2016, there were 26 students: 12 males and 14 females (1 Chinese-American female). Given this, I have been surprised by the fact that the student demographics at the Orlando Campus is 24% Latino/a and 28% African American. Maybe it is due to the southern UMC as it is known for its lack of pastoral diversity.

The last module of the class is devoted to racial reconciliation and mission. Students read “Evangelization and Politics: A Black Perspective” by James Cone. As you could expect, this is the module when silence becomes unbearable as students wrestle with evangelicalism and white privilege. It is also the moment when all the students have “a black friend” or when “my

roommate in college was black.” The superficiality of our conversations has been frustrating and such frustration grew to the point that I considered changing the last module to something else. It was at this point that I sought the help of a respected colleague. His suggestion was for me to change gears and examine my own experience of discrimination and history as a brown Puerto Rican in the context of North American imperialism and colonization.

Using the new approach, I replaced Cone’s article with primary sources of Protestant missionaries to Puerto Rico in the early 1900s, a sociological article on “the Puerto Rican Problem,” and excerpts from Gloria Anzaldua’s *La Frontera*. By contextualizing the history of race relations between white North Americans, Puerto Ricans, and other Latinas, I was able to deconstruct the disregarding ethos of racism that is embedded in a systemic structure of oppression in the United States. In light of evangelicalism’s insistence of individual responsibility, confronting racism as a systemic issue brought its own complexities to our conversations.

Students were more engaged in discussing issues of race and oppression in the historical context of mission and colonialism. However, the closer we got to contemporary issues, especially immigration, the tone of the conversation changed and the discomfort around ethnocentrism and negative views on immigration was palpable. A good example was when a white male student in the summer of 2016 recited the talking points of the Republican Party to the class. He referred to the negative impact on immigration on crime, employment, and US culture in general based on language and customs. To everyone’s surprise, because she never spoke before in class, only the female Chinese-American student confronted the speaker by telling her family’s story of immigration. Her mother came to the US with a temporary work permit, but after it expired she stayed. As years passed, she married an American man and became a citizen more than a decade after her visa expired. She confronted the white male student and the whole class with her story and showed the ethnocentrism and stereotypes embedded in US society against immigrants.

I learned that even though I am in complete solidarity with African Americans in their quest for justice and respect, students saw me as a Puerto Rican who does not embody the African American experience. On the other hand, when I embody my experience and the history of racism against Latino/a people in the US, the perception and reaction in the classroom change. At the end, we are contextual beings and sometimes the best way to teach others about race is not through theories, but through our own experience with racism.

What triggers public opposition to immigration? Is immigration a racial issue? What triggers racial resentment against undocumented immigrants? What is the value of the implementation of autobiography in the classroom? How should professors move from autobiographical data to theoretical articulations in the classroom? How can professors help students take responsibility for their assumptions of the other in a safe manner? Is this desirable, or it would a shock approach to student assumptions be better?

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