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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## **Fictionalized Bodies: Assigning Novels in Undergraduate Courses**

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Blog Series: Embodied Teaching

May 29, 2023

Tags: embodied teaching | Ngugi wa Thiong'o | Literature | Octavia Butler | Margret Atwood | Fictionalized Bodies

When utilizing embodied pedagogy, I am constantly aware that my own experience and positionality is limiting. I am a white woman from the southern part of the United States who is currently living in Denver. I have traveled some and have lived in several cities around the United States, but I have never lived abroad. I teach seminar-style classes where dialogue is prioritized and my students speak often. When creating my syllabi, I assign readings that represent a diversity of scholars, and which are mostly academic in focus. But even though I prioritize these things, it is impossible to represent all voices and perspectives in one course. I want to bring in stories and experiences of people from around the world, though, and I want these voices to enter the classroom, to be part of our dialogue.

One way that I attempt to do this is to assign novels. Through these readings, fictionalized bodies enter the space of the classroom and allow us to broaden our view of various topics. Last quarter, I taught an introductory level course called World Christianities. One of the course objectives was to outline how Christianity grew from a small group of Jesus followers in a specific region of the world into a global religion with devotees around the world. A second objective was to acknowledge how this transition happened through violence, missionary work, colonialization, enslavement, and various forms of manipulation. To cover a topic like this in a 10-week quarter felt overwhelming at first, and I began to think of authors that I could include who could speak to the distinctiveness of Christianity in a part of the world that is distinct from

my own teaching context.

The novel I chose was *A Grain of Wheat* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. The story is set in Kenya in the 1950s and 60s, during the Mau Mau rebellion and the fight for Kenya's independence from Britain. The main character, Mugo, spends time in a detention camp run by British colonizers, and he struggles inwardly with his interactions with colonizers, even though his village views him as a hero. Through this fictionalized story that is based on historical events, Ngũgĩ reveals the complexity of his own experiences living in a colonized place like Kenya. As Ngũgĩ discusses in this piece, choosing to write in English, the language of the colonizer, is itself a political decision. Ten years after writing *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngũgĩ decided to only write in Gikuyu, his mother tongue and the language of his community.

I encouraged students to read this novel throughout the course, and we discussed it together during two of the final classes. During one session, we focused solely on the experiences of the characters in this novel. We used the narrative to imagine their experiences and also the ways that Christianity impacted their lives. On the one hand, many characters in *A Grain of Wheat* were impacted negatively by the impact of Christianity, especially as it was entangled with colonialization. On the other hand, some characters embraced aspects of Christianity and were empowered by certain biblical stories. For example, Kihika (who becomes a martyr after his death) carried a Bible with him and underlined passages of importance to him. After his death, the Bible is passed along to his family and friends who reread the passages he underlined. The text becomes a source of hope to the community.

I assign novels in other classes as well. In a course I teach called Women, Gender, and the Bible, I give a list of possible novels that the students can choose from in order to follow their interests. For this class, I include novels such as *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Parable of the Sower*, and *The Color Purple*. When we discuss the novels, I put the students into discussion groups according to which novel they chose. I then dedicate a class session for the groups to introduce their novel to the rest of the class. The goal of their presentation is to "convince" the other students to read this novel. At the end of the class we have a vote as to which presentation was the most convincing. Similarly, when I taught a course on *Jesus in Text and Traditions*, I assigned *The Book of Longings* to provide an imaginative view of the ways in which women could have been involved in Jesus's life and ministry.

Assignments like these have been beneficial additions to my syllabi, and they illustrate my pedagogical goal of creating classroom spaces that include a variety of perspectives as a way of encouraging dialogue. Fictional characters are embodied characters. The experiences they bring into the classroom enhance the content of the class in a number of ways. Returning to the example of *Grain of Wheat*, the students in World Christianities brought this novel up in their final presentations/projects and also in the course evaluations. They appreciated the inclusion of a story from another part of the world. This one novel provided them with multiple viewpoints of how Christianity impacts a community. In the space of the classroom, these fictionalized bodies came to life and spoke to us about their experiences. In a way, characters like Mugo and the novelist Ngũgĩ joined our classroom and dialogued with us, sharing their

experiences and listening to ours.

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