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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Disorientation

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Blog Series: Race Matters in the Classroom

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I admit that I was a bit flumoxed by how disoriented most of the students in my class were through much of the semester. My two very talented TAs were likewise lost for an answer. We realized late in the game that the reason for this seeming disorientation was there before us the entire time - we just resisted seeing it. Before continuing, it might be helpful if I shared a pedagogical decision I made about the teaching of the class.

As I shared with my TAs during the first of our weekly debriefing meetings I decided that I would use a Black aesthetic to frame our time together (by which I mean the music by which I open and close all of my classes) and I would use as the presumptive questions to which I attended ones raised by Black students in my classes throughout previous courses I had taught. Additionally, I would not count as naive readings of the biblical text common to the ecclesial locations from which most of our Black students came. In sum, I would pedagogically privilege a particular "ideal" student who in most spaces in our institution inhabited the margins. The results of this decision were surprising to say the least.

I fully expected that by decentering the normative experience and expectation of my white students the pedagogical shape of the class would cause some discomfort. What first surprised us was that the physical shape of the class changed. During the first two class sessions, the arrangement of students was the random sort you might expect with the knots of filial kinship

seminary students develop among themselves. The class was roughly 60% white, 35% Black, 3% Korean, and 2% Latino/a. Initially most of the first rows in the lecture hall seating were taken up by white students and a few students of color whom I had had in class before. The students of color largely clustered in the middle and to the rear of the classroom. By the third session of the class a migration began to take place such that by the fifth session Black students almost exclusively occupied the first two rows. Additionally, as the white students migrated further to the rear of the class, their participation declined as well. I should note here that we used the same texts I have used for this class in several other iterations so it wasn't the readings that occasioned these migrations.

We noticed, as well, that the students could not seem to understand what the assignments for the class were. I went over the syllabus, which was largely unchanged from recent iterations, several times but each class session there was at least one request to explain the papers again. When it came time to turn in the paper less than half the class was able to get it in on time and the quality of many submissions was disquieting. Given my belief as a teacher that if that many students are having a problem either the tool or its presentation is flawed, I spoke with several colleagues and went over the syllabus and assignment instructions in detail with a colleague. To all it seemed the syllabus and instructions were as clear as they could be. That was when it hit me; many of the students in the class, white and Black, had become so disoriented by the centering of Blackness in the class (aesthetics and pedagogical presumption) that their usual tools for learning and demonstration had broken down rendering them incapable of knowing what acceptable, forget exemplary, performance looked like. As my TAs and I puzzled over this for several weeks we could find no other explanation.

There was something else going on in the class which I still do not have a language to adequately describe, but it became clear in a dramatic way. We had a class session several days after the grand jury chose not to indict Darren Wilson for the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson and the subsequent unrest. Sensing that this was this generation's Rodney King moment I thought it would be irresponsible to proceed with the class as planned. So, we gathered as usual with song (this time one sang in unison) and prayer. I then spoke a bit about the moment, recalling what it had meant for me to be in seminary when a similar verdict was reached in the Rodney King case. I then broke them into small groups to ponder the following question: What does it look like to materialize goodness in this time? As the Spirit would have it, the students had randomly seated themselves much as they had at the beginning of the semester - the small groups were racially heterogeneous without any intervention on my part. When we came back several students reported that this was the first time in their lives that they had spoken with someone so different from themselves about the deep things of their faith and what it meant to live the Christian life. It was a moment of transformation.

While I am still processing what happened in this class there are two incidents which stand out for me. As just stated, something happened in the class that changed people. From the small group discussion emerged a plan to hold a protest the next Monday morning at a major intersection near the school during the height of rush hour. Their witness that day was one of only two organized responses to the events in Ferguson mustered by our institution in that

moment. Something had happened for and to the members of this class. The final incident was a note that I received from a student in the class thanking me for a transformative experience and for a gift I had given her. "Before this class, I did not know it was possible to be Black in seminary and feel normal."

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