



# WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## Dear White People - “Woke” Requires Work

Nancy Lynne Westfield, Ph.D., *The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion*

Blog Series: Notes From The Field

June 19, 2018

Tags: anti-racism | critical thinking | white privilege

My course began with an iconic book by bell hooks and ended, after several other readings, with a beloved text by Parker Palmer. On the last day of class, a white woman student came up to me to tell me how much she enjoyed the course (she had earned an A in the course), and to give me feedback, saying, “Next time, start with the white guy and not bell hooks; it will be easier for us white people to stay in the conversation.”

So much teaching is complicit with dominant race ideologies and patriarchy, yet we yearn for different ways to teach. White normative approaches to disciplinary-subject matter, reading lists which strain to add even one non-white author, grading standards which insist upon majority culture assessment categories are only a few of the ways that the ideals which normalize whiteness permeate our daily living and teaching. Disrupting these patterns of evil and shifting these detrimental values takes mixing things up, muddling stuff, creating newness and difference. Increasing our knowledge of new resources and redefining our criteria of what might constitute acceptable academic resource for our classrooms, might be a way forward. Look for narratives which resist and repudiate the story of whiteness.

Stories that champion and reinforce whiteness and patriarchy, stories that allow for a token few minoritized people to triumph, but refuse to portray a change in the oppression for all or stories which never question the absence of powerless people in significant roles permeate our

airwaves and imaginations. We are persons immersed in the narrative which supports and promotes white supremacy, white nationalism, and patriarchy. We have to find ways to resist.

A critical challenge for all teachers who want to teach as a disruption to whiteness and patriarchy is that, regardless of personal social location, each of us must expand our knowledge of freedom narratives. We, all of us, given the ethos of the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, must with great intent, seek out and immerse ourselves in the counter-narratives to the lie of whiteness. We must internalize a narrative of freedom, love, creativity, and forgiveness. We must believe in the sacredness and worth of all human beings and teach this story in unflinching and believable ways.

As a spiritual discipline, take time to fill your consciousness and imagination with freedom narratives as a way to fortify yourself for teaching against the status quo. We must re-teach ourselves in order to teach toward freedom.

Read stories that depict and portray people of color as intelligent, generative, and caring human beings - as normal. This is why the movie *Black Panther* was so popular and so refreshing. It did not start and end with chattel slavery. It made use of fresh portrayals of people of the African diaspora which told a story of community, kinship and the complexity of freedom. Avoid the motifs of the individual superhero like the ways Martin Luther King's or Harriet Tubman's legacies have been distorted. Look past the stories of inferiority and degradation often told in the daily news cycle. Find stories where the women are not one-dimensional wooden beings and the people of color are not gratuitously violent, oversexualized, or stupid. Teach yourself to identify the narratives of freedom and bring them into your classroom.

In immersing yourself in freedom narratives, look for a multiplicity of mediums: film clips, music, screenplays, artwork, photography (all means of storytelling), and then consider making use of the best ones in your classes. Narratives that are sophisticated about race/gender politics are seeping into the U.S. culture. Look for new stories like "Dear White People" on Netflix.

Binge watching both seasons of "Dear White People" took focus and stamina. I managed to do it in 48 hours - taking occasional breaks to walk my dog, get a snack and sleep. The well-written Netflix series is based upon an acclaimed film of the same name. The plot is set in a 21<sup>st</sup>-century fictitious college called Winchester University. The story depicts the lives of African American college students at this Ivy League, predominantly white university. The Black students are bright, articulate, culturally and politically conscious, and conscientious. In other words, the black folks are woke. The title "Dear White People" is a clue that the white folks of the community are *not* woke.

The lead character and protagonist has a campus radio show. She often, to inform white peers, professors, and university administrators formats her radio soliloquies in the form of a letter which begins, "Dear White People." Then in great poetic rant, she informs and reprimands the

offending, or simply ignorant, white people about their white supremacy, privilege, and the ways their behaviors and the racist, sexist systems which privilege them, to which they seem to be oblivious, continually affect her and her friends. The poignant stories disclose and interrogate cultural bias, social injustice, misguided activism, and the zeal that comes with college-aged persons. The stories are also about the relationships of young people and the ways they struggle to negotiate their social, cultural, and intellectual growth. Creator and executive producer Justin Simien is a storyteller who understands the ever-present irony, bitter humor and too often anger for persons attempting to live life while being a target of white supremacy and patriarchy. "Dear White People" is an expanding of freedom narratives. This is the kind of material you want to explore for possible classroom use. Material which unapologetically tells the story from the perspective of the oppressed and the ways we navigate the dehumanizing terrain.

Consider radical ideas as you find new resources. What if you taught your introductory course with no white or male authors? Develop a course which is soundly disciplinary, but has no majority culture readings. This might mean using all articles and no textbooks, per se, but why not? Teaching to transform might not mean including a few voices of the marginalized --- it might mean excluding the voices of the oppressor so we can learn the perspectives, voices, and stories of the oppressed. And/or consider introducing each text to be read by providing, or having your students research, the social locations of each author. If an author is white and male, identify the person in this way. Resist only identifying the gender and race of authors who are female and people of color because it signals they are "exceptions" to the routinely read normal readings authored by white men.

Creating educational spaces for which the voices of the oppressed and marginalized is taken seriously, respected, even prioritized is a paradigm-shifting act - an act of freedom in which you can participate by the stories you bring into your classroom.

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2018/06/dear-white-people-woke-requires-work/>