WABASH CENTER
For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion

The Impossible Possibility of Conversations about Race in the Classroom

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Twenty-five springs ago I sat in a class on African American literature. On a small, rural midwestern campus, this course was taught by a white professor. Two of the seven Black students on campus at that time were in the class, the remaining twenty-five or so students reflected the demographics of our predominantly white institution. One Monday we filed into class and learned that a fight had taken place over the weekend. The details were still emerging, but one of the seats in our classroom was empty. The one detail that had been confirmed: racist slurs were a precipitating factor for the physical violence.

In this moment, the professor faced a choice: to continue apace with our scheduled reading of *Beloved*, *A Gathering of Old Men*, and other, now canonical works, hewing close to the text; or, to break the fourth wall and talk about what happened, call us to the uncomfortable acknowledgment that we could not confine our discussions of race to the characters in books that could be sold back to the bookstore when the course ended.

Like most students, I suspect, I was largely unaware of all that went into that deceptively simple choice. This past week, as I prepared for a class discussion on Ibram X. Kendi's *How to Be an Anti-Racist* and Fania Davis's synthesis of racial justice and restorative justice, my class

and all other classes were canceled by our administrators in a show of support for a student organized walk-out. The walk-out was a response to a blatant act of racist hate speech that targeted one student. Hundreds gathered on our main courtyard to listen to their peers speak their truths about being a person of color on our campus. For many students at our predominantly white institution this was, as they later acknowledged in class, the first time they had heard unfiltered, unmediated stories about the lived experience of blackness from people they actually knew (or thought they knew?).

The night before the walk-out, I thought about my own professor's choice twenty-five years ago. I had no doubt we would center the incident and the campus response in the coming weeks in our class discussions. And I have no doubt that my immediate clarity on this choice owes a debt to the professor who chose discomfort over distance, modeling the way in which good teaching demands recognition of the explicit and implicit ways the world consistently breaks into our classrooms.

With so much political hand-wringing about conflating activism and academics and looking over the shoulder as some iterations of "cancel culture" paralyze our classroom discussions, tempting us towards pedagogical paths of least resistance and convenient half-truths, I am left to wonder if our classrooms can still serve as activating spaces, as spaces where the world doesn't just break in, but where we prepare students to break out into the world.

I want to believe that this is possible, realizable, and not just part of the trite, pedagogically elusive language of university mission statements and branding slogans. But I confess that one-on-one conversations with students after class this week—in a course intentionally focused on racial equity—have tempered my optimism about the classroom as an activating space. Or, perhaps it has once again reminded me of the perennial, now hyper-polarized and politicized, challenge of teaching: what activates one student often deactivates another. With its now ubiquitous undercurrent of subtweets and their offline consequences, is the classroom the right place for these conversations?

For the moment—no, for the movement—my answer has to be yes. The impossible possibility of conversations about race in the classroom remains for me a pedagogical, even if paradoxical, imperative. Like Reinhold Niebuhr's impossible possibility of the love ideal, conversations about race in the classroom confront us with what we know to be true and right in our assertions of basic human dignity, even as these conversations remind us of how often we fail to fully actualize the ideal by which we are guided. In recognition of that gap and our moral obligations as teachers to stand in it, I share, with no small amount of trepidation, the email I sent to my class the night before the walk-out, my own attempt at reclaiming the classroom as an activating space not in spite of, but in the midst of its impossibility.

Message to Living in a Diverse World Class, March 2021

Hello Students,

I had planned to address the hate incidents in our class discussion tomorrow. The tragic irony

is not lost on me that our focus in this week's reading is the intersection of racial justice and restorative justice as outlined in the chapter by Fania Davis.

In the days and weeks ahead, I ask that you consider what is your role to play in supporting students directly and indirectly impacted by this incident as well as in addressing the elements of our campus culture that give rise to these types of incidents. The framework of restorative justice centers the needs of the victims even as it makes clear that harms caused by acts of hate and violence extend out into the community and, therefore, require both individual and community responses.

We are all trying to sort out how it is that we have come to this moment in history when hate speech is too often conflated with freedom of expression. And, tragically, we are bearing witness on our campus and in our wider culture to the normalization of violence this conflation inevitably leads to.

In this moment, I want to challenge us to move back into the uncomfortable space of talking directly about racism and anti-racism as they manifest offline in our very midst; it is, for me, one necessary way we must hold ourselves accountable. This is not about reducing these incidents to a "teachable moment." This is about the distance we too often try to maintain between the classroom and the world. And how these incidents reveal this distance for the illusion that it is.

The "world" breaks into our classroom, regularly. Our denial of this fact is, itself, a form of white, heteronormative privilege. In these moments, I think it is also imperative that we ask: can the classroom also break into the world? Can what we do together in class the remainder of this semester be responsive to, and a form of taking responsibility for, the injustices that shape individual students' lives on our campus in radically disparate ways? At a minimum, I think we owe this to one another in our class, but more importantly, we owe this to those targeted by the hate and violence.

In closing, I offer I drafted in response to national racial and religious hate incidents over the past couple of years, words I had hoped (perhaps naively) would never be needed as a response to incidents on our campus:

> Let us stand together committed to forming our lives in this community, daily, through practices of hospitality and not hate, in acts of compassion and not callousness, and as witnesses to the promise of peace and not the pathology of violence.

While our various religious and spiritual traditions call us to imagine a world when this daily work is no longer necessary, they are not naïve to the world as it is. As wisdom from the Jewish tradition reminds us: *"It is not your responsibility to finish the work, but neither are you free to refrain from it."*

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