



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Body Matters in Education

Cláudio Carvalhaes, *Union Theological Seminary, NY*

Blog Series: Stories from the Front

May 03, 2016

Tags: assessing students | power and privilege | student learning | embodied teaching

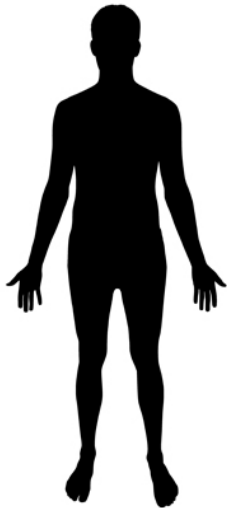
At the heart of education, the most important “instrument” of our lives, the house we inhabit, is the very core of our selves: our bodies. Fully! It is in and through our bodies that we learn and are able to unlearn. The immense diversity of our bodies, their shapes, formats, abilities and historical memories attests to the equally immense diversity of our learning processes, how we understand, how we grasp things, how we are able, or not, to relate, to commit, to engage and to learn.

Our bodies carry knowledge, not only information, that we know and we do not know. Let me tell you an example: growing up as a Protestant Christian, I learned that the African-Brazilian religions were filled with demons and were even believed to be the house of the devil. Later in my adult life and with my intellectual views completely changed from that racist, prejudiced education I received, I was supposed to go inside of one of the Candomblé places of worship. As I was moving to the worship space, my body literally froze and I could not move. It was as if my body was telling me: “I am not going to let us go to this place because we can die there. The devil lives there.” I had to “talk” to my body and tell myself we would be alright. Slowly, very slowly, my body started to move again and I was able to go. This fear is still present in my body and only through very conscious work can I get rid of this fear that inhabits my body and tends to limit my actions.

I have written elsewhere that we need to write our history from the perspective of our bodies, a “*bodyography*.”[1] Our bodies are a result of objective and subjective, formal and informal

education. In our bodies, are endless marks of something we went through, things we said or the words we silenced, the things we constructed, sustained, negated, denied or destroyed. Our bodies carry markers, memories, scars, violations, fears and hopes that tell our history. The body is fundamental to our very notion of who we are and what humanity is all about. Identities are bodily developments. So much so that the history of patriarchy, colonialism, racism, ableism, classism and sexism, were all created by constructing specific notions of bodies. One of the fundamental tools of these dominating histories is to delink the connections of the body, severing ancestral and present relations/memories and imprisoning bodies into specific systems of knowledge, ethical norms and structures of thought. The very sensuous and sexual dimensions of the body, its morals, codes and religious/secular precepts continue to direct the very senses of what civilization and savages are all about.

Thus any education that does not hold the body as a subject of a process of learning is destined to maintain intact these systems and structures of oppression and injustice.



In education we discover, remember and give meaning, shape, values and possibilities to the body. The education process helps reestablish severed connections, connecting people with people, people with times, people with the earth and universes, helping us to see much stronger threads of relationalities and connections. There is a whole sense of strength and wisdom that needs to be discovered through scholarship and community, needs to be unburied, unpacked, developed and fought for. For instance, with indigenous knowledge (often a knowledge made subaltern to the main and proper white knowledge denied, demonized and cast away), we gain different sources of strength, ways of thinking, seeing, sensing, and relating our bodies with the earth, the sky, the river, the soil, the stones, the animals, to other bodies, known and unknown, spiritual and/or not, forms of political theories, of modes of production, education, languages and life in common. By delinking our education from sources of domination and relinking our knowledges to other people's knowledges we can see the multiverse universes of possibilities for our own

people and humankind, expanding the breath of our common/different identities.

When we go to the classroom what do we think our body is made of? Earth, soil, water, sun, wind? Self, subjectivities, spirit, feelings, violence, sweat, blood, dreams, desires, fears, angers, histories, memories, contexts and so on configured and constructed in, through and from a complex chemistry of gazillion connections, synapses and spasms? The body is an individual, social, political, emotional, historical organ that networks, that creates and is created by histories, that fights, that constitutes forms of survival and is part of larger communities and universes, connected with the nonhuman and the inorganic matter. Life and death. Things that we educators must wonder and keep thinking about.

What Latin American Biblicist Nancy Cardoso Pereira says about the relationship between the body and the Bible can be understood as well in relation to education and the body. She says: "The body cannot be considered as a mere side-issue in any reading of the Bible which asks questions about gender relations. Life and death manifest themselves through the body. Restoring the physical body to its rightful place is a fundamental part of our affirmation of a real and sensual life." [2]

The body must be seen as an instrument of power dynamics, construction and the demise of empires and a thousand forms of domination. The material history of recent forms of capitalistic use of the body shows how libidinal movements of the body are turned into commodities, when bodies are detached from their own autonomous forms of being and are turned into objects of desire, profit and control. As a commodity, bodies are disassociated from their own bodily marks and aggregated as value to the material economic exchange of value. As Marx says, the "social relation between commodity and commodity," is one in which "all its sensuous characteristics are extinguished." This appropriation of the body into the economic system can explain the ways in which our education is trapped into not thinking about the body as a subject of our craft but rather as an object whose presence brings profit to the institution. Bodies equal revenue and symbolize prestige to the school. If a body cannot pay or aggregate economic value to the system it is discarded.

Educational institutions are a result of the ways in which we value the bodies, the formations and the possibilities of the bodies in relationship to hierarchical systems, historical formation, bodily/identity composition, asymmetric/systems power relations, pedagogical commitments and the very theory/praxis of what education is all about, or the why, how, what and for whom we do it. Fundamentally, the body is at the center of it all. The body is never a side-issue in education.

Bodies carry theories and praxis. It is in this fundamental crux of body and education that we can understand bell hooks' claim that her body was in need of theory: "I came to theory because I was hurting - the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend - to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing...Theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills this function

only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing towards this end.”[3]

Emancipatory education can only make sense when bodies are at the center of this common endeavor, and where we are free to move to places we wouldn't normally go. As Paulo Freire says: “We cannot enter the struggle as objects in order later to become subjects.” We enter the education process with our bodies as subjects, and they/we are a fundamental part of our learning. The body is not only the carrier of our heads, as if it is only an organ that supports the mind to think properly. Our classrooms cannot think theory only for the mind since ideas shape bodies and their conditions to live. Our bodies think, feel, move... Our bodies are subjects of our own learning, of engaging in life, deeply.

We can see how we are shackled in forms of education that only privilege the mind. How poorly we conceive education when, for instance, the only form of evaluation is written papers. I have nothing against this form of evaluation, but I do have a problem when this is the only possibility that we offer to our students, mostly because teachers were trained only in this form of analysis and evaluation. Unfortunately, successful education becomes this: students must prove to the teachers that they can do exactly what teachers can (only) do.

We must be able to expand that! Multiple pedagogical forms of teaching and learning that engage multiple intelligences must be used in the classroom. Later on we will talk about this. But for now, the challenge here is for us to think of the body in an expansive way and as subjects of our leaning process, central to our teaching. Borrowing from the preaching in some Black churches, through education we go from being no-body, to become some-body. Only bodies that are emancipated can continue the disrupting, dismantling and decolonizing of our present (racist, European, heterosexual, culturally oriented) educational body systems!

[1] Cláudio Carvalhaes, “Thinking Spiritually: Where Is the Spirit When We Think?” In *Thinking Theologically*. Ed. Eric Barreto (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

[2] Nancy Cardoso Pereira, *The body as hermeneutical category: guidelines for a feminist hermeneutics of liberation*, In *The Ecumenical Review*, July, 2002. PLACE??

[3] Hooks, Bell (2014-03-18). *Teaching To Transgress* (p. 61). Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition.”

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2016/05/body-matters-in-education/>