



## *Intersectionality in Theological Education*

### *Spotlight on Theological Education*

Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner, Editor

*Spotlight on Theological Education* is a major initiative of the AAR Theological Education Steering Committee and is an important venue for exploring opportunities and challenges in theological education. Each issue focuses on a particular theme, setting, or concern to theological education. *Spotlight* appears as a special supplement to *Religious Studies News* in the spring of each year.

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Transforming the field of pastoral theology, she has edited or coedited four volumes involving fifty contributors over twenty-two years: *Women in Travail and Transition* (Fortress Press, 1991); *Through the Eyes of Women* (Fortress Press, 1996); *In Her Own Time* (Fortress Press, 2000); and *Women Out of Order* (Fortress, 2009). Additional publications include *The Spirit of Adoption* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), *A Primer in Pastoral Care* (Fortress Press, 2005), *A Prelude to Practical Theology* (Abingdon, 2008), and *Portable Roots: Transplanting the Bicultural Child* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014). She was honored with AAPC's Distinguished Achievement in Research and Writing Award.

**Emilie M. Townes** is the dean and Carpenter Professor of Womanist Ethics and Society at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, becoming the first African American to serve as dean of the Divinity School in 2013. She was the first African American woman to become president of the American Academy of Religion (2008). Editor of two collections of essays, *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (Orbis, 1993) and *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation, and Transformation* (Orbis, 1997), she has also authored *Womanist Ethics, Womanist Hope* (Scholars Press, 1993); *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness* (Abingdon Press, 1995); *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care* (Continuum, 1998); and *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). She is coeditor with Stephanie Y. Mitchem of *Faith, Health, and Healing in African American Life* (Praeger, 2008) and *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2011) done with Katie Geneva Cannon and Angela Sims.

**Kirk VanGilder** is the assistant professor of religion at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC. He is the author of *Making Sadza With Deaf Zimbabwean Women: A Missiological Reorientation of Practical Theological Method* published by Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht in 2012. He is also an ordained clergy person in the United Methodist Church and has previously worked as a campus minister and parish minister in Deaf congregations. His current scholarly interests include interfaith studies, missiology, practical theological methods, Deaf studies, and narrative theology.

**Traci C. West** is professor of ethics and African American studies at Drew University Theological School in Madison, NJ. Her research interests include Christian liberationist ethics and related issues of race, gender, and sexuality in church and society. She is currently working on a project that explores transnational African activist strategies to address gender violence against women and girls. She is the author of *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), *Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence, and Resistance Ethics* (New York University Press, 1999), and editor of *Our Family Values: Religion and Same-sex Marriage* (Praeger, 2006).

## Introduction

# Intersectionality in Theological Education: Engaging Complexity, Activism, and Multiple Consciousness

Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner, Perkins School of Theology

The earth will never again be seen as flat. In spite of sixteenth century intellectuals who argued that the earth was level, others like Copernicus and Ferdinand Magellan convinced us otherwise. The earth is anything but one dimensional.

With the lens of intersectionality, concepts of the human being and relationality have lost any residue of flatness or one dimensionality in their constructions. The contributing scholars for this *Spotlight on Theological Education* develop the interlacing realities and particularities that comprise the reality of human being as well as the notions of class, race, gender, linguistic identity, ableism, sexuality, and culture. The following essays offer a theological telescope by which to see not one world, but the constellation of worlds within human beings created by crisscrossing relationships.

The opening two essays by Emilie Townes and Nancy Ramsay locate the historical origin of the term intersectionality and develop the concept for educators and scholars. Emilie Townes pinpoints the original usage of intersectionality in the work of legal theorist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1989) who illustrated how race oppression and gender interact in Black women's lives. Expanding the theory of the dynamic identity and the "asymmetries of power weave themselves into individual and relational life," Nancy Ramsay brings the map of oppressive marginalization into bolder relief. There is no level earth or level playing field.

Robyn Henderson-Espinoza begins theologizing at the place of difference and multiplicity and moves into the ensuing instability to mobilize radical differences as the focal point of change and interconnectivity. Kirk VanGilder illustrates his use of intersectionality and self-disclosure as an academic strategy that counters the negative effects of identity splitting and pitting identity groups against each other; in his context at Gallaudet University, identity markers of Deaf and hard of hearing students become more or less prominent depending on the social contexts in which they find themselves. Maaraidzo Mutambara and Traci West cowrite an essay revealing the politics of intersectionality when taught in an intercultural exchange program involving Drew University Theological School and Africa University in Zimbabwe. Together they offer a candid assessment of contributions gained in engaging complexity, activism, and multiple consciousness and of challenges in trust, stereotypes, language, equal resources, and cultural barriers. Finally, using a case from her classroom, Heike Peckruhn calls attention

to the awareness that multiple identities appear through the body as performative; that is, they “are socially constituted, contextual, and only appear to be fixed or mapped onto the body.” The fluidity, multiplicity, and intersectionality of our identities make space for “misrecognition.”

## Making the Way Together

Emilie M. Townes, Vanderbilt University Divinity School

Among the many important things that feminist theologian Letty Russell taught me is the importance of seeing one's work in the academy as activism—or perhaps better put, that a key component of scholarly work should be done through the framework of activism. Indeed, Russell was one of three people I dedicated my 2008 AAR Presidential Address in memory of, honoring scholars whose work embodied scholarship and activism.<sup>1</sup> She taught me that it was important to be passionate about what I teach and also about *how* I teach it.

Russell employed a form of intersectionality (though she did not use the term) to help us understand that gender, racial, and class oppressions operate in society, the church, and in many of our classrooms. Her early works, *The Future of Partnership, Becoming Human, Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective—A Theology* (1974), and *Household of Freedom: Authority in Feminist Theology* (1987) gave me a place to find my voice as a divinity school student and later as a doctoral student coming of age in the 1980s. She also taught and wrote before the rise of womanist thought in the theological disciplines; her work helped me name what was missing in so much of what I was studying and hearing in classroom lectures: the fact that some of us, if not most of us, live in a richly complex world that cannot be fully captured by universals or heuristics grounded in flat absolutes. It was through Russell's work that I first encountered the notion that we are complex bodies who cannot be defined or confined to a single notion of class, gender, or race. As I look back over my career as a social ethicist, I see how her work laid the foundation for me to be able to embrace the interstructured/intersectional methodology of womanist thought.

### Objectivity

So what have I learned over the years as I continue to mature as a teacher and scholar from this strong foundation? When I paired Russell's work in theology with legal theorist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's introduction of the term *intersectionality* into academic discourse to explain how race oppression and gender oppression interact in Black women's lives (1989), the first thing it taught me was to question the notion of objectivity. In my presidential address I argued:

i don't believe that scholarship is or should be an objective enterprise

here, i am not equating objective with rigorous

they aren't the same thing at all

and i will always argue for deep-walking rigorous scholarship

what i am arguing against is the kind of disinterested research tact that doesn't figure in that our work is going to have a profound impact on someone's life in some way and some how

i worry when we think that we are *only* dealing with ideas and concepts as if they have no heart and soul behind them

if they matter to us, they will matter to others

and we should do our work with passion and precision and realize that we should not aspire to be the dip sticks for intellectual hubris

### **Deployment**

The second value that intersectionality taught me is that it is vital that scholars of religion deploy the knowledge we have amassed into public arenas. Too often, the public representation of religion and religiosity are simplistic caricatures that cordon off any possibility of understanding the heart and soul of various religions. This becomes even more problematic when we shape global and domestic policies around those caricatures rather than real flesh and blood.

It is crucial as scholars that we assume the responsibilities of being public educators because we live in an increasingly polarized world in which religion matters as beliefs and practices.

### **Interdisciplinarity**

Through the lens of intersectionality, I have also learned that genuine intellectual engagement means engaging a wide variety of sources—it is more than repeating and reoutfitting our scholarship in exactly the same ideas and concepts that we learned in graduate school. I believe that the best teaching comes out of a spiral of inquiry where we move from *concepts* to *tools* that help us and our students craft scholarship that will contribute to the academy *and* to the lives beyond the halls of academy—to our societies. In other words, we must think in more expansive ways than our disciplines have taught us. Yes, it is important to master our respective disciplines, but there is more for us to know and engage. We are so much better at what we do when we step outside the boundaries of our training and begin to talk to colleagues in other disciplines rather than take comfort in the boundaries of our training.

Intersectionality—for me, exploring how class, gender, race, sex and sexuality play an unseen heavy hand in everyday experience—encourages us to grow our scholarship large and expand our pedagogical tool kits. So in many ways, I think that by embracing the interstructured emphasis of womanist methodology, I am continuing to grow the foundational ideals that Russell and Crenshaw helped forge. It is not surprising that it was in the work of Alice Walker, a writer who is not an academic, that things began to break open for me as I (and others) looked at her four-part definition of “womanist” in her 1984 collection of essays *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*.<sup>2</sup>

### **Particularity**

Russell, Crenshaw, Walker! What a triumvirate! What they produce for me is the somewhat ironic realization that a key piece of what gives intersectionality its pedagogical spark and fire is its focus on particularity. In my own work, I often focus on Black societies in the United States and begin by talking about the various shapes and textures of womanhood in them. I want to be very particular *about* the particular as I explore the vastness of it and as I try to understand the various assortments of Black lives—sociocultural and religious. If I do well, then I open the door to conversations with others who are not Black folks or even the Black folks I’m talking about and with. This is the crucial move in intersectionality: to concentrate on particularities rather than universals. If I am exploring the deep nuances of Black lives, then I am taking seriously my particularity—not as a form of essentialism



(and *that* would be a long conversation in itself), but more as epistemology where my scholarship and teaching can meet and greet others in our intricately and intimately interwoven postmodern culture.

### Curriculum

With particularity firing the furnace of intersectionality, we are opened to a more expansive awareness and vision for our research, writing, and teaching. It also helps us think through our curricula. Far too many of us are holding on to curriculum models that are dangerously close to being on ontological suicide watch. We're gearing up for a curriculum revision at Vanderbilt Divinity School, and I am beginning to wonder if it might help my colleagues and I to think of what we are attempting to undertake is actually a *curriculum transformation*. I don't fully know all that I mean by this, and it may only lead down a rabbit hole, but I do know that the questions that students are asking me in my classes today are not the same ones they asked in 1989 when I began teaching full time.

I am not suggesting that we mindlessly rush to "change," but I also do not want to be a part of a faculty that is the last bastion of irrelevancy. I also don't want to be a part of a faculty that practices a kind of fifty-two-card pickup style of curriculum that is more touchy-feely than rigorous and analytical. I want a balance that helps educate our students for the worlds they are already in and the worlds they will help shape and create. I must admit it is hard for me to see what the rigorous new curriculum might look like, but I know in my bones we have to look for it—together as a faculty dedicated to teaching, learning, scholarship, and doing so with eyes pointed to creating a more just world.

Leaning into intersectionality may well help us get there, but I suspect that it will not be without quite a few disciplinary tantrums and fending off urges to hoard our turf. We will have to give up the urge to see our curriculum as a possession and think of it more as gift and challenge to live into our commitments. If I learned anything from Letty Russell, it is that we make the way together.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>In addition to Russell, the lecture was also given in memory of Catherine Bell and Rosemary Skinner Keller. See Townes, Emilie M. 2009. "Walking on the Rim Bones of Nothingness: Scholarship and Activism." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77(1): 1–15.

<sup>2</sup>Walker's four-part definition of womanist (1983):

1. From *womanish*. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "you acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.

2. *Also*: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally a universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige and black?" Ans. "Well, you know the colored

race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me."  
Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."

3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves the Spirit*. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves the Folk*. Loves herself. *Regardless*.

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.

## Resources

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## Intersectionality and Theological Education

Nancy Ramsay, Brite Divinity School

As a theologian with particular interest in the public dimensions of pastoral theology, much of my scholarship, writing, and teaching focuses on ways to discern, analyze, and resist forms of difference treated oppressively in church and culture such as race, gender, sexuality, and class. My participation in programs sponsored by the Wabash Center provided me with opportunities to collaborate with colleagues in theological education to identify and develop pedagogical resources that enhance the effectiveness of our teaching. These pedagogies help faculty and students to recognize, resist, and transform interlocking systems of advantage that give rise to marginalizing practices. However, until recently, the theoretical grounding for those resources was shaped by modernist understandings of social identities as additive rather than simultaneous. This additive approach limited any analysis of the constructivist and intersecting nature of identity shaped by asymmetries of power. While we could name these interlocking inequities, identifying how they arise and are reproduced was more elusive. The consequences have limited the depth of analysis and possibilities for effective change.

In the last several years, I have embraced intersectionality as a theory that helps students and faculty better understand and engage with the complex, constructed, and intersecting simultaneity of identity and its entanglement with asymmetries of power. The theory helps us out of the quagmire of identity politics that was built on modernist approaches to social identity as additive, essential, and inevitably vulnerable to debates about hierarchical arrangements of oppression. It refuses such divisive hierarchies even as it insists on the analysis of the simultaneity of oppressive forces of intersecting asymmetries of power.

Intersectionality provides a far more adequate frame than earlier modernist models for equipping students for effective practice and richer analysis. I am convinced that it can also foster constructive theological engagement in areas such as theological anthropology and ethics. For example, my students and I find it opens up new possibilities for considering concepts such as embodiment, the tragic, sin, agency, and the *imago dei*.

It is important briefly to locate this theory historically, for although today it has wide use, it originated in the protest of African American women who insisted on the integrity of their social identities. Intersectional theory emerged in the post-Civil Rights era when Black feminists insisted that their social identities were neither divisible nor hierarchical, but co-constructed. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), a legal scholar, was the first to use the term to point out the legal consequences of simultaneous identities for Black women who were otherwise invisible in policies that addressed protections for men of color and women. Womanist scholars, international feminists, queer theorists, scholars of social work, social psychologists, gender and women's studies experts, and others have refined this insight and applied this analysis to other fields (Weber 2010, Collins 2000, Holvino 2010, Crenshaw 1989). Theologians benefit from the intersectional commitments of womanist theologians whose work points the way toward the value of this theoretical approach for ministry and religious scholarship (see, for example, Copeland

2010 and Townes 2006). True to its origins, this dynamic theory continues to be shaped by the voices of those whose social identities are marginalized by dominant cultures in the United States and Northern Europe.

Although there is considerable variation in intersectional theory, some key elements characterize most proposals. Briefly, I want to explore the way these assertions cohere to give the theory its intellectual and strategic force and how these descriptions form a “fit” with contemporary theological education.

Constructivist: Intersectional theorists maintain that each aspect of social identity (sexuality, race, class, gender, age, and so forth) is constructed by dynamic negotiation between individual agents and their social contexts. Identities are neither universally nor ahistorically defined.

Co-constructed: Not only are such aspects of identity constructed; they co-construct each other so that, for example, as one claims a gendered identity, that choice implies the gendered identity of others.

Intersecting or simultaneous rather than additive and hierarchical: These co-constructed features of identity are inseparable and interdependent. It is impossible to calculate the influence of one of them in the dynamism of identity. The performance of identity reveals the fluid simultaneity of social identity and the complexity involved in discerning which features are more salient in particular moments. It is not possible to arrange these simultaneous dimensions hierarchically. It is also important to note that in any given moment, one or more features of identity will be more prominent and likely shape strategic responses.

Geographically and historically variable: As a co-constructed reality, our social identities are invariably and deeply influenced by geographical and historical contexts. For example, this is demonstrated by the dynamic character of gender rules and roles for women across time and region in the United States. Even in the same historical period, normative expectations in regions of a single cultural context vary—as women and African Americans will attest.

Insinuated by interlocking domains of power: Because interlocking systems of advantage function best when obscured from view, an especially valuable aspect of intersectional theory is the importance it gives to naming power. It analyzes three interdependent power domains that shape identity: ideological, political, and economic. These domains create and extend rationales and practices that normalize treating forms of difference oppressively or as advantage. The *ideological* domain relies on the rhetoric of sources such as religion, media, and education. The *political* domain operates at a less visible level through the regimes of public policy established by local, state, and national legislatures. Deeply held ideologies that enact and reproduce systemic advantage and oppression easily become embedded in the outcomes of legislation regardless of its explicit language as famously [demonstrated by the GI Bill following World War II](#). The *economic* domain designates how power insinuates itself in local, regional, and international economic practices such as those played out in mortgage rates, health care premiums, “fair trade,” and international monetary policies.

Animated by social justice as *telos*: Though the theory is not shaped by any religious claims, intersectional theorists posit social justice as its primary goal. In other words, intersectionality is intentionally transformative in its vision and practice.

Theories of change: Some theorists describe dual strategies of individual and group conscientization of agency in a politicized context to leverage influence and disrupt the balances of power.

In my experience, intersectionality is a constructively, pedagogically, and strategically rich resource for

theological education for both masters and doctoral students. Students find it accessible and engage it productively. In a doctoral seminar that focuses on issues of sexuality, gender, race, and class, this theory has deepened students' abilities to recognize the complexity of social identities deeply insinuated by asymmetries of power. I often begin with the students themselves. Intersectional analysis reveals the balances of advantage and oppression in their own social identities. They begin to recognize the complexity of enacting such identities simultaneously in different contexts where the salience of differences shifts. The theory helps students appreciate the accrued effect of domains of power either as advantage or oppressive marginalization. Intersectionality helps students lift the veil of obliviousness to the systemic advantages and patterns of oppression created and sustained by the domains of power. In my experience, this allows the theory to deconstruct the resistance of students who embrace the myth of meritocracy and support students who know the accrued force of oppressive marginalization from experience. Finally, it helps students think strategically about transformative change. In a master's level course, we were readily able to use the theory to inform the complex situations they encounter in ministry and particularly to shape responses to these challenges. Because intersectionality provides depth for understanding the complexity of human being and the pervasive ways asymmetries of power weave themselves into individual and relational life, I am introducing it as a resource in courses as diverse as Introduction to Pastoral Care; Responses to Experiences of Aging, Grief, and Loss; and Postcolonial Themes in Pastoral Care.

In a recent doctoral seminar on theological anthropology, students and I were intrigued by the ways intersectionality opened up constructive possibilities for deepening current scholarship around aspects of human being such as freedom and agency, *imago dei*, sin, the tragic, love, and justice. For example, we found the theory helped us imagine the complexity of identity and appreciate the challenge of exercising agency. We came to appreciate the difficulty of resisting the influence of domains of power and recognized in them ways sin amplifies brokenness at individual, relational, and structural levels. The tragic dimensions of accrued oppression were in sharper relief.

Given my enthusiasm, a word of caution is in order. While the intellectual power of this theory is compelling pragmatically, teaching it is not simple. For example, while simultaneity is readily apparent, trying to weigh the salience of various aspects of identity in a particular context quickly demonstrates that there are no shortcuts to doing one's homework. Effective practice presumes competence in scaffolding the particular narratives of harm that marginalize various forms of difference treated oppressively. It means recognizing the markers of privilege and tracing these advantages across centuries through domains of power. Students and I found literature and film were particularly useful media for practicing intersectional analysis. Case studies also helped students recognize the multiple evidences of differences constructed as advantage or oppression and their asymmetrical interactions.

While the theory clearly provides important advances for theological education, it is important to remember Gregory Bateson's caution that theories are only maps and not the territory. This theory remains dynamic; its construction is ongoing and revision is lively. There are at least two ways in which theological educators can contribute to the theory's development. It is widely critiqued for devoting limited attention to enacting the theory. Social ethicists and pastoral and practical theologians are accustomed to generating theory in the mix of lived experience, and our contributions in this area can be significant. Further, it is clear that religious identity is not benign. It shapes social identity as marginalization and privilege. The theological academy can make an important and timely contribution to discerning and responding to this aspect of identity and social justice.

I look forward to the ways this theory will enrich our theological imaginations and provide strategic resources for engaging the complexity of difference. It can help us explore the mystery and wonder of

identity as the salience of features such as sexuality, race, gender, and class dynamically shift within asymmetries of advantage and marginalization. Because intersectionality foregrounds domains of power for closer analysis, hopefully it will promote more informed resistance.

## Resources

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## **Thinking at the Intersections of Theology and the Matrix of Differences: From Intersectionality to Interconnectivity**

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Historically, systematic theology has been an institutional bloc within the field of theology that has in many ways ignored the matrix of difference while upholding orthodoxy. Nevertheless it has been forced to contend with the critical questions of race, class, gender, and sexuality because those intersections figure prominently in the work of contemporary, constructive, and queer theologies. Many of these theologies use feminist and queer theories to address systems of difference and oppressions, but their roots in traditional identity politics result in representational theologies. Such reliance undermines the relational aspects of interconnection and interrelatedness that can emerge by moving beyond traditional theories of representationalism that is found in theories of intersectionality. The classroom is one such place where we have upheld representationalism, requiring the teacher to represent to their students barriers to difference and the intersections of different standpoints. What results is a crossroads of identities that is passively introduced to students. This crossroads or intersection does not fulsomely illustrate interconnectivity and the matrix of differences.

The matrix of differences represented by each of these “intersections” mentioned above impact theological reflection in very particular ways: Latina feminist theologies address the gender disparity and patriarchy in Eurocentric and other White theologies; queer theologies address the overwhelming heteronormativity and heterosexism in “traditional” systematic theology and conceptions of sex, bodies, and sexuality; and theologies of color address the existing gap in white dominated theologies that do not privilege voices from the margins. What is important about thinking at the intersection of theology and the matrix of difference is that there is no illusion that this is a difficult or challenging exercise. In fact, the challenge of thinking at this particular boundary of theology and intersectionality demands attention to the ways in which relationality and intersubjectivity impacts this ‘intersection.’ I contend that we cannot do theology in any sort of substantive way without recognizing the co-constitutive ways that our multiple unstable identities connect with and also disrupt our material production of theologizing for radical social change. I propose a relational constructive theology that is rooted in difference-becoming-interconnection and opposed to totality (orthodoxy) and exclusion (heterodoxy, heresy, alterity, etc.). In this short essay, I will explain the concept of interconnection as a way to rethink theology and what is often understood as intersectionality by moving beyond the representationalism of intersectionality. Where intersectionality focused on the identities of black women in particular, interconnection as a theological frame utilizes differences to make connections and develop new contours of relationality. This is accomplished by privileging postrepresentational thought. This, then, mobilizes our radical interrelatedness and incites the material turn in theology. An example of this is the work of AnaLouise Keating’s postoppositional theories that utilizes interconnection as the primary frame in producing affinities with differences, rather than creating modes of sameness (2013). The classroom, whether brick and mortar or virtual, is a great place to cultivate moments of interconnection by moving

beyond what is traditionally represented in theories of intersectionality.

As a theory, intersectionality gained traction after Kimberlé Crenshaw first used the term in the context of Black women's lives in her 1989 article, "Demarginalizing the Intersections of Race and Sex." Later, Patricia Hill Collins, in her oft-cited *Black Feminist Thought* (1999), theorized Crenshaw's intersectionality further, utilizing the term matrix to describe the connected social categories that inform particular dimensions of oppression. As an analytic rubric, intersectionality frames the matrix of oppression by not only exposing the ways in which Black women are systematically oppressed by institutions and social relations, but also has created a language for (especially) women of color to access in explaining their own positions relative to the ways they have been and continue to be oppressed. Together, the concepts of intersectionality and addressing the matrices of oppression were a necessary intervention by Black women to critical race theories and the broader feminist analytic method, the latter of which largely addressed white-only subjects. Today, it is likely the foremost method in feminist analysis. But there are pitfalls to this method because traditional frameworks of intersectionality rely on representational identities. This reliance "locks in" the very identities it attempts to destabilize.<sup>1</sup> As such, contextual theologies continue to use identity categories to merely flag difference rather than to relationally connect differences.

I wish to be more unencumbered in my work and therefore look to the postrepresentational identities posited in the relational theories of Jasbir Puar and Gloria Anzaldúa. Anzaldúa and Puar think differently about intersections—they talk about connections, relations, and power forces, thus bringing about a more robust version of intersectionality. I argue this theoretical and pragmatic move shores up new contours for theology to embrace. I try to use Anzaldúa's concepts of the borderlands as a way to talk about intersectionality, because borderlands require relations and power. In AnaLouise Keating's *Transformation Now!: Toward a Post-Operational Politics of Change* (2013), which draws on Anzaldúa's epistemology and ontology along with women of color theorizing and is not bound to the intersectionality that is traditionally foregrounded in women of color theorizing, Keating discusses the syntax of relationality relative to intersectionality which emerges in the term: interconnectivity.<sup>2</sup>

With interconnectivity, no longer is theology fenced-in by the boundaries of stabilized identity politics. While womanist, Latina, feminist, and queer theologies—all representational in character—have attempted to embrace relationality, they have not succeeded in destabilizing identities through the processes of relationality and intersubjectivity. A theology of interconnectivity allows relational discourse to form between self and community, seeking radical liberation of both. In this sense, then, theology becomes the discourse of the politics of change, destabilizing traditional representational identities, unmasking them as stabilized identitarian politics, and pointing toward a horizon where theologies do not merely represent identities but also help mobilize the instability of such identities into difference becoming relational; this is the moment of interconnection and is especially apparent when this happens in the classroom. When theology leans into its future as a post-representational politics of change, it can become a theory of radical interconnectivity that transforms both self and community. In order for this to materialize, theology must be given the fluidity to become a discourse of connectivity, over against the solidity that seeks to contain it in a systematized discourse. When the fluidity of relationality disrupts the traditional solid discourse of theology, theology then emerges having the potential to create moments of radical interconnectivity.

An example of this type of theology can be seen in queer of color theologies and post-representational theology. Both of these types of nascent theology establish a new contour in constructive theologies that take intersectionality to task. In rethinking structures of family and queer desire, the matrices of difference emerge quite naturally as moments of interconnectedness that mobilize the multiplicity and



fullness of identity into a relational connection. This approach has the capacity to reframe our efforts of faith seeking understanding and the ethical practices emerging from this frame. Remapping representational theologies as theologies of interconnection lends them to new moments of difference rather than immutable constraints.

It is not enough to simply unmask the intersections of race, class, sexuality, gender, and other differences, or to build theologies from these stable points of departure. A more generative way to highlight the contours of interconnection and trace interrelatedness is to show the contours of connection within these differences. Puar does this in her analysis of assemblages (which can be traced back to Deleuze and Guattari and refers to the interlocking connection of thought, things, and beings), and Anzaldúa does this by speaking about a planetary connection with all things and beings. What Keating offers us is the potential to put interconnection into action for a tangible politics of change. We are all assemblages, faced with multiple systems of power and oppression that affect us all, most especially in the classroom. When we understand that the teacher is also an assemblage that is connected with their students, new contours of interrelatedness can emerge.

Establishing theologies of interconnection demands attention to multiple differences. A more relational theologizing helps bring about contours of connectivity and interrelatedness through which intersections can flow, creating new paradigms for thought and action. Allowing co-constitutive identity markers to become assemblages that are affected by relations and power resituates theology as an art that not only participates in the flow of these markers, but also helps mobilize theological discourse. It is *relationality seeking action* rather than *faith seeking understanding*: Where the latter creates insiders and outsider, a relational approach in intersubjectivity operates by collapsing those boundaries and creating new pathways for interconnection. Doing this radically reframes our theological task of systematizing difference into unitary moments of experience and instead allows for the disruptive moments of theology and pressing social concerns to guide us in our intersubjective relationality—an interconnection that is rooted in a difference that can be mobilized for radical social change, a new participatory flow of differences becoming connection. This mobilization of difference as an assemblage of theological thinking remaps the tradition of theology into productive moments of a materialist theology whose frame is the radical interrelatedness of multiple identities becoming different.

As a theological frame, interconnection redistributes identitarian politics and the co-constitutive identity categories and connects differences within the existing matrices. Doing theology as interconnection and advocating for the radical interrelatedness of all things, especially of multiple differences, reframes both theology and intersections of difference by shifting to radical differences as the focal point of change. Difference becomes the locus of reflection for theology in this sense. This change, then, helps interconnection to irrupt the stable representational points of identity that in turn disrupt traditional ways of representing intersections and this, in turn, establishes a new shape of theology in the form of interconnection. In many ways, it is the materialist turn in theology that circumvents the largely linguistic turn in traditional intersectionality discourse.

The impact of this on education is great. New contours of relationality emerge, new methods of teaching can take root, and difference no longer becomes something to overcome but rather embraced as part of the radical interconnections that are being developed. If these material realities can have a place in the teaching of theology, our theologies can then really become the spirited-material theologies (or pneumatological) that have the capacity to produce radical social change, transformative realities that our institutions desperately need.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, AnaLouise Keating's *Transformation Now!: Toward a Post-oppositional Politics of Change* (2013).

<sup>2</sup> While I focus primarily on AnaLouise Keating's work, it is important to note that she is heavily influenced by Gloria Anzaldúa. I find resonances with Keating's work and Puar's, though due to the length of this essay, I am unable to fully articulate the connections between these three theorists.

## Resources

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum*: 139–67.

Collins, Patricia Hill. 1999. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge.

Keating, AnaLouise. 2013. *Transformation Now!: Toward a Post-Oppositional Politics of Change*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.

## Intersectionality and Disclosure as Pedagogical Tools

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Although I am trained as a practical theologian and much of my scholarly research and interest therefore tends to express itself as theological construction and imagination, I am currently teaching in a religious studies setting at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC. While all campuses are sites of diversity and intersectionality in identity markers, Gallaudet University presents teachers with a unique layer of identity formation. We are the only free-standing four-year liberal arts university in the world specifically designed for Deaf and hard of hearing students. Therefore our [mission statement](#) expresses our desire to be a bilingual institution committed to providing the best educational opportunities possible in both American Sign Language (ASL) and written English.

As Deaf (sometimes indicated with a capital D) people mark ourselves as a cultural and linguistic minority group within American society, many of us do not identify as people with disabilities in relation to our audiological status. This self-understanding contrasts with the view of many, if not most, hearing people who regard deafness as a medical condition in need of correction. This means that the formation and expression of Deaf identities is often a counternarrative to a larger hegemony that attempts to overwrite our own understanding of ourselves. Historically, Gallaudet was the only choice for Deaf people who use ASL when considering higher education. Secondary schools for the Deaf fed our university with a core of students who had already formed their identities as members of a cultural and linguistic group. However, with the passage of accessibility laws, Deaf students now have more options than ever. At the same time, the high number of students who were mainstreamed into hearing schools with hearing aids or cochlear implants and found those experiences unsatisfying now use Gallaudet as their entry point into Deaf culture and ASL.

Add to this the usual diversity of racial, gender, ethnic, linguistic, economic, generational, international, and LGBTQ identities found on any college campus—all within a student body of roughly 1,000 undergraduates and 500 graduate students. This is my classroom every day. Every individual embodies multiple identity markers and is negotiating a complex and potentially politically charged landscape. This makes intersectionality a vital and necessary part of my pedagogy when teaching religious studies courses. Religious and secular identity markers are not formed separately from other aspects of one's identity. Therefore, a classroom conversation about personal experiences with one's religious or secular identity will often interweave with how students experience their cultural identity, linguistic identity, racial identity, gender identity, and so forth.

How one responds to a religious community and identifies as a member (or not) is often wrapped up with how that religious community responds to other aspects of one's identity. Deaf people who were taken to religious settings, told that they were in need of healing to become more like hearing people, and sometimes forcibly prayed (or preyed?) upon, may have very reasonable impulses to reject religious identities. In contrast, as an example, Deaf people who experience marginalization in a mainstreamed work environment where they are the only Deaf person may find Sundays at a Deaf church to be a holy

and sacred time where their identity, language, and being is understood, affirmed, and celebrated. In either situation, neither a person's construction of their Deaf identity nor their religious identity is formed in isolation from one another. They form a powerful intersection. Similarly, the layers of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, disability, and other aspects of identity create a myriad of intersections that create each and every person.

Teachers must be aware of the contentious questions, assumptions, and inequalities that emerge from intersections of identity, and they must become adept at teaching students the practice of self-awareness so they can come to understand how privilege and power shape perspectives. In my classroom, these opportunities occur every day. One example: Black Deaf students frequently (although less now than in previous years) find themselves being asked some variant of the question, "Which comes first for you, being Black or being Deaf?" Most Black Deaf students find the question impossible to answer because their identity as a Black person and their identity as a Deaf person were formed simultaneously. If pushed to answer, many often end up saying something like, "When I'm at Gallaudet, it's my Blackness that makes me different, so I tend to put that forward more. But when I'm at home with my hearing family, it's my Deafness that makes me different so that comes forward." This negotiation of intersectionality reflects what Richard Eckert, a Deaf American Indian sociologist, refers to in describing complex Deaf identities as a portfolio where one can shuffle various identity markers to the forefront in response to the social context (2010, 323). When discussing this example of intersectionality in a class, I once had a student respond, "That's absurd! It's like asking which comes first for me, being white or a woman. I can't answer that." I was able to counter, "Yes, but has anyone ever actually asked you that question?" Her response, "No," allowed us to explore how racial privilege impacts the kind of questions white people often feel justified asking people of color.

Intersectionality can also be an academic strategy that allows us to counter the negative effects of identity splitting that generally pits various identity groups against one another in social settings. A second example from Gallaudet's community: In 2012, our chief diversity officer at the time signed a petition while attending her church that would put to popular vote Maryland's recently passed legislation establishing marriage equality for same-sex. The petition was in the public record, and a lesbian faculty member discovered the chief diversity officer's signature while examining the list of signers online. The faculty member filed a formal grievance based on the chief diversity officer's job description, which included regard for LGBT people on campus.

As this dispute eventually became known on campus, tensions rose very quickly. LGBT people felt betrayed and unsure about their place in the community. Our chief diversity officer was placed on paid administrative leave immediately. That alarmed evangelical Christians on campus who were now unsure if they could express their beliefs without fear of punishment. Additionally, this action was taken against the only African American woman in our administration, and as a result, people of color questioned whether an immediate administrative leave would have taken place if this had happened with a white administrator.

Outside political groups, eager to score points in an election year, used the media to weigh in on our campus situation with little or no understanding of the complexity of identity on our campus. Within our community, students were torn by the tendency of the media to portray the matter as Christians v. Gays v. African Americans. This was unfair and bewildering to our students in general, but particularly for our students who embodied all three of these identity markers. Their portfolio of identities were suddenly reshuffled for them and thrust into a very public arena as contentious and controversial. People felt justified asking questions that seemed to ask them to prioritize their loyalties to various parts of their personal identities at the expense of others. To their credit, it's my opinion that students did a much

better job addressing this crisis than the faculty or administration. It was through student-led workshops and discussion groups on intersectional identities and safe spaces that campus tensions were addressed and redirected into opportunities to learn and reconnect with one another.

### **Modeling Practice in the Classroom**

Learning to negotiate these intersections of identity requires both an understanding of one's identity and the practice of disclosure. My pedagogical approach to teaching intersectionality includes modeling disclosure, thus allowing for the assumptions of identity markers to be challenged and creating a safer place to explore and discuss identity. In my second semester of teaching, I cotaught a course on postcolonial Deaf identities as a part of our general studies requirements curriculum. My coteacher was someone who was well known in the Deaf community and clearly grew up within Deaf culture. I, however, was much harder to read and place within the spectrum of identities between Deaf and hearing. As someone who was born hard of hearing, was mainstreamed into hearing schools, and did not come to a sense of Deaf cultural identity or ASL fluency until my late twenties after losing more hearing, students continually have a hard time figuring out my identity labels. The inevitable question among the students eventually surfaced, "Are you Deaf or hard of hearing?"—meaning did I identify more closely with Deaf culture or hearing culture?

As this class was aimed at building student skills in understanding culture and identity theory, I immediately used this as a teaching moment. I asked them to classify me and gave them full permission to ask questions and speculate where I fit without fear of offending me. They remained timid, but after a few bold students asked questions, the entire class got into it. Could I voice clearly? Yes. Could I hear enough to use a telephone? No. Did I prefer ASL or spoken English? I use ASL most of the time, but spoken English with my family and close hearing friends. They found me unclassifiable. This was where I could explain that identity is not something that can be determined by essentialist checklists, but that it often remains fluid or situational. So they finally asked me, "What do you call yourself, Deaf or hard of hearing?" I still refused to categorize myself.

"I'm guess I'm some sort of deaf, but I know I didn't grow up in the Deaf world and ASL is not my first language." They weren't entirely satisfied with that answer, but they accepted it. Class eventually dismissed and my coteacher expressed his amazement at how my openness to being questioned on my personal identity had led to such an effective understanding of identity theory.

Then two students standing outside the door came back in to ask, "So tell us, are you Deaf or hard of hearing?"

A second example of modeling disclosure as a pedagogical tool: I teach all our religion courses at Gallaudet. As I openly affirm the value of a wide variety of religious and secular traditions, students often have a hard time classifying me religiously. In my second year of teaching, an African American Jewish student asked me after class, "Do you mind if I asked what your religion is?"

"Sure no problem," I replied, "I'm a Christian." His jaw hit the ground.

"Really? You're so open and accepting, I figured you were some kind of Buddhist."

Since then, I've sought to disclose my identity as a liberal-minded Christian, while also affirming that Christianity is a diverse tradition. This goes a long way in challenging preconceived singular notions of what "Christian" means for many students. It also assists in modeling successful and nonconfrontational disclosure of religious identity in relation to aspects of identity that make me more liberal

minded. Gallaudet often has a heavy silence around discussing religious identity on campus as people fear causing division, offense, or misunderstanding. My self-disclosure helps students learn how to disclose and discuss religious and secular identity in a pluralistic campus climate. I've found the disclosure and open examination of my own intersectionality to be a powerful tool in teaching both the practice and theory of identity markers to students in ways that improve our campus climate.

### Resources

Eckert, R. C. 2010. "Toward a Theory of Deaf Ethnos: Deafnicity  $\approx$  D/deaf (Hómaemon • Homóglosson • Homóthreskon)." *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* 15 (4): 317–333.

## **Intersections: A Zimbabwe-US Class**

Maaraidzo E. Mutambara, Africa University

Traci C. West, Drew University Theological School

In this essay we each reflect on our cotaught course, Christian Ethics and Global Issues. We comment on some of the pedagogical challenges and opportunities that arose as we navigated the intersecting cultural dynamics that teaching this class involved.

### **Part I: “Intersectionality in Theological Education: Engaging Complexity, Activism And Multiple Consciousness” by Maaraidzo E. Mutambara**

In January 2014, I participated in an intercultural exchange program between Drew University Theological School and Africa University faculty that took place at Africa University (AU) in Mutare, Zimbabwe. This was the first of its kind at the university, an arrangement made through connections established by the dean of the faculty of theology at AU, Dr. Beauty Maenzanise. The contents of the course were decided upon by Professor Traci West and myself based on what we considered to be the germane and pressing ethical issues for the students in their respective contexts. We met two months before the beginning of the class to discuss the themes, topics, and logistics.

The class was comprised of students from very diverse cultural backgrounds. AU students came from at least six African countries. There were five master of arts students (two women and three men) and ten bachelor of divinity students (five women and five men), all participating in theological education. The majority of the students were members of the United Methodist Church, except for two students, one Baptist and one Presbyterian. The US students came mostly from the eastern part of the country. Their group also included international students who were from South Korea. Selected readings for the class came from African, US, and South Korean scholars. Themes covered included environmental justice, HIV, AIDS, and marriage/gender violence (heterosexual and homosexual). Gender was the crosscutting issue in these areas.

### **Pedagogical Issues: Challenges and Opportunities**

The exciting program involved teaching ethics across denominational, national, racial, gender, age, and cultural differences, and it presented some challenges and opportunities that required creativity on the part of Professor West and me. Below, I share some of the lessons and encounters that we had in our intercultural exchange.

Videos/DVDs can be an effective medium for intercultural communication. Discussing contentious issues in an intercultural setting can be provocative, and I learned that a good film can be an effective pedagogical device. The videos used in class not only captured the cultural, religious, social, and gender dimensions of the issues at hand, they also allowed disadvantaged members of the societies in question to speak for themselves. The documentaries confirmed for students that the ethical issues discussed in

class were indeed real. This was very important in my African milieu where gender inequality issues, especially as they relate to women, are attributed to western influence and associated with the elite. I noticed that some of the male students from AU watched in disbelief as some African female participants in the videos challenged patriarchal authority in their contexts. Good examples of this are included in the films *Taking Root: The Vision of Wangari Maathai* and *Positive in Church: Church Leadership Dealing with HIV and AIDS*.<sup>1</sup> The videos exposed oppressive gender norms, especially as they relate to women in some African cultures, and, at the same time, debunked the stereotype that women are generally timid. Similarly, the video on the environmental problems in the United States called into question the stereotype held by some AU students that only rich people live in the United States. The videos were useful teaching tools in the sense that they provided an entry point for some very fruitful discussion later on about gender inequalities and environmental justice, and they offered greater objectivity in analyzing the issues.

Class presentations were a means to promote interaction in an intercultural setting. One of the purposes of organizing the intercultural exchange was to facilitate the exchange of cultures and ideas among the participants. It is regrettable that the limited time we had for the program did not permit much physical interaction among the students, especially during class times. The seating arrangement in class did not help as students sat according to some small clusters (probably interest groups) that remained intact throughout the course of the program. In order to facilitate students' familiarization with the topical issues in a context other than their own, we devised an assignment whereby a student was expected to respond in writing and orally to an article that came from an unfamiliar context. Students were asked to share the new ideas that they learned from the readings and what they disagreed with in the readings. The exercise was helpful because it opened students to looking at an issue from a different perspective. It also provoked some responses from others.

Clarification of cultural presuppositions became critical for intercultural discussion/debates. The theological and ethical questions students had on the selected topical issues reflected the social, political, and cultural concerns of their contexts. This came out clearly in the discussion on gender and family. Homosexuality and same-sex marriage dominated the discussion and were the site of the most intense debate. The topic generated a great deal of interest for the US students who candidly expressed their views. Some African students, however, were reluctant to share their thoughts on this matter, and when they did, it was to express their negative attitude towards the issues, citing culture as the reason. The presuppositions that shape views about family and marriage in the US and African contexts were not clearly defined, and cultural assumptions about marriage and family were taken for granted by both the US and African students. The result was that it was difficult to understand what each side was saying about the matters in question. In addition, the discussion also showed that the location of the intercultural exchange can influence the nature of the exchange. It is possible that the African students' negative attitudes toward homosexuality and same-sex marriage were influenced by the course's location in Zimbabwe. There was suspicion on the part of some Africa University students that the issues were part of a hidden agenda. On the other hand, some of the students expressed later that open discussion of such sexual issues was not acceptable in their culture(s). Others asked why other forms of marriage that generated ethical issues for the church today (e.g., polygamous relationships) were not given the same attention. The influence of culture on moral decision making was very clear. From this experience I learned that it is critical that participants engaging in intercultural exchange clarify their cultural and moral presumptions.

Different institutional calendars and requirements created quandaries. These were not factored into the planning process of the intercultural exchange program. In our case, the meeting time for the planned course fell short of the thirty-six hours that were required for AU students. The result was that AU



students continued to meet after the class had formally ended. The extra meetings encroached into the first two weeks of the following semester and required adjusting the semester time table in order to accommodate this unforeseen hurdle. Despite the challenges that came with this, it turned out that the extra time was really needed. Some undergraduate students, especially those from Francophone and Portuguese-speaking countries who had just one year of intensive English classes, confessed that they struggled to keep up with the required reading for the course and to understand the accent of their colleagues. Some of them expressed that they felt inadequate in the presence of the Drew Theological School students because they did not have confidence in their English language skills. The situation, I observed, also negatively affected their participation in group discussions.

Imbalances in access to resources are a dilemma for partners in intercultural exchange. The different economic situation that we operated in affected the way we planned and prepared for the class. Accessing relevant and up-to-date literature is one of the obstacles I always face when putting together literature for a culturally diverse group of students. This intercultural exchange was not an exception. I was very glad and relieved when, after a couple of consultations, my colleague Professor West came up with a packet of readings for the class. In addition to the resources in the packet of readings, I invited colleagues with particular expertise in relevant areas, such as HIV and AIDS, to contribute as guest speakers.

## **Part II: “Lessons from Our Zimbabwe-US Teaching Partnership” by Traci C. West**

For me, the class was a first-time experiment in intercultural, transnational learning and team teaching at an African university. It was an intensive class that met daily over a period of a few weeks. Some of the most difficult moments inside the classroom emerged when the topic of heterosexual marital rape in the context of heterosexual transmission of HIV and AIDS came up. There were equally intense exchanges when we discussed same gender marriages of life-long Christians as part of our focus on contemporary views of gender and family in church and society.

Fertile ground for transformational learning resided precisely in the fact that the nationalities, racial and ethnic backgrounds, age range, sexual orientations, politics, and theologies of the students represented such a broad spectrum. I should note that unlike their theological views or national backgrounds, we did not include open discussion of the sexual orientation of students in part because of the potential risks for gay and bisexual students in Zimbabwe where homosexuality is outlawed. I struggled with the challenge of encouraging honest and respectful discussions of church debates on sexual orientation without placing these students at risk.

It was difficult to gauge the range in the economic backgrounds of the students. I am not sure how similar or different the resources of their families were, nor how to make accurate transnational comparisons of the wealth or poverty of their varying local contexts. I found it to be exciting but also a new challenge for me to teach AU students from Zimbabwe, Kenya, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Angola. They had very specific cultural backgrounds that were not only unfamiliar to me, but also represented only a portion of the populations in those nation-states. The cultural makeup of the students who came with me to Zimbabwe was more representative of the classroom in which I routinely teach: African American and white US citizens as well as international students from South Korea. As a symbolic acknowledgement of the cultural diversity represented in the room, either Professor Mutambara or I began class each day with a simple “good morning” greeting in Swahili, French, Shona, Korean, and English.

The major goal that I found so compelling when I first envisioned this undertaking turned out to be a

monumental challenge that provoked both a few painfully disheartening moments as well as some delightful breakthroughs. I had hoped to boldly dismantle stereotypes, particularly some of the stereotypes of Africans that non-African Christians tend to hold. In my setting, some seminary students (US and international) who enter with a strong church background may associate Africa exclusively with their church mission projects. When starting to plan the exchange, I knew that I did not want to organize what would be seen as a more typical cross-cultural trip for students from US schools to the global South, comprised of tours of cultural sites and visits to organizations that introduce the mission needs of and projects for black Africans.

I had an alternative vision for this trip. I wanted to nurture an understanding of Africa as a site of advanced knowledge. This focus needed to be rooted in intercultural exchange, not an exercise in intellectually consuming “the other.” Professor Mutambara and I experimented with several classroom methods for embodying this kind of intercultural exchange. Unsurprisingly, I discovered that more time than we actually had for the class was needed. It would take much more time to effectively introduce students from my American university to the ideas of African scholars and African academic culture in a manner that inculcated a deep association between Africa and the specifics of religious thought generated by scholars from across that continent.

For meaningful shared learning and honest classroom interactions, the students needed the space to discover how to interpersonally relate to one another across multiple cultural barriers. In several cases, age groupings and degrees of maturity proved to be much more salient for creating divisions and bridges among students than predictable barriers of three differing continental sociopolitical locations (Africa, Asia, and America). The powerful influence of the western consumption values that we brought also proved to be revealing. Some (not all) of the US students expressed a need for more time out from the tight schedule of classes and homework in order to go shopping. As the students and I struggled over these requests, I may have clung too rigidly to my disdain for tourism and shopping that would supplant joint studying of the course material. I did not anticipate the relationship building that occurred among the students as they worked out private payment arrangements (I learned about after the trip) with local Zimbabwe students with cars. Together they went to town to buy snacks and food familiar to the US students not offered in the dining hall. A few of the US students also bought handmade, tailored clothing goods from local entrepreneurs identified by local students. As I reflect on it now, I must consider that this kind of relationship building may have enabled the survival of some of the tense moments in the classroom. For some of the US students, might the comfortable familiarity of economic overconsumption have lowered anxiety about the unfamiliar setting and allowed more absorption and engagement of ideas by African scholars? Perhaps.

Another unexpected lesson concerned the exercise of my professorial authority. I found that, in general, my (host university) students—those who came from African nations—held a more formal understanding of professorial authority and gave me more deference than I had been accustomed to receiving. This sort of formality seemed to be a dominant part of the overall academic culture there and therefore difficult for me to reject in favor of the informality I prefer. But, simultaneously, for some of those students in the class, there were certain assertions they would make about what was an authentically African understanding of morality that stood out as an exception to this deference. They did not seem to grant me professorial authority to instruct them to question or critically examine such assertions in part because I was a cultural outsider, a non-African. The space and place of the university setting seemed to help to authenticate my *outsiderness*. My blackness and female gender identity no doubt also played a role in this issue of authority, in combination with the intensifying dynamics of the setting. I felt like I only began the process of reaping the stimulating possibilities for learning from the complex configuration of intersections that comprise the issues to which transnational, intercultural

teaching must attend.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Taking Root* is a documentary narrative about Wangari Maathai, an activist from Kenya who was the first environmentalist and first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004. In 1977, Maathai encouraged rural women in her country to plant trees to address problems stemming from a degraded environment. This initiative gave birth to the Green Belt movement, a nationwide movement aimed to safeguard the environment, defend human rights, and promote democracy. In the documentary, environmental degradation is not just a technical problem; it is a result of the intersection of economic, gender, social, and political injustices. *Positive in Church: Church Leadership Dealing with HIV* shows how African church leaders are dealing with HIV in some churches in southern African countries. The issues of stigma and discrimination of people with HIV is discussed together with ways of overcoming such in the church. The DVD has a user guide that can be used for discussion.

## Resources

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## Performing Bodies in the Classroom: Multiple Identities and (Mis)Recognition

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We are bodies, and we engage with the world as such. In the classroom, to bodily engage with our peers, instructors, and the course content is neither simply a possibility nor an interesting method. We are bodies learning. And the crucial question presented to me then is how to consider bodies in our classroom space as the essential element of our pedagogical practice and teaching of critical analysis. Resources on practices for critical, social justice-orientated pedagogies take embodied diversity in the classroom seriously, though it seems to me that there is an underlying assumption that embodied identity markers—my race, my gender, my abilities, for example—will always be perceived in the same, or at least similar and somewhat predictable, ways. The pedagogical literature addressing diversities in the classroom often offers teaching strategies that presume a static connection between certain identity markers, especially those associated with marginalization, and the perception of and reaction to those marginalized identities.

*In a course I am coteaching with a male colleague, the class has an intense discussion that leads to a back and forth between me and a student, “John.” John cuts me off and redirects the conversation to give the floor to another student. And I am thinking, “I just got shushed! By a white male nonetheless!” In the moment, the “obvious” read I have on the situation is this: white male John undermines me, brown female queer teacher—something that he “of course” would never do to my senior straight male coteacher.*

I tend to think of myself as embodying multiple intersecting identities—brown, foreigner, queer, female. But what if my self-perception, my go-to sense of self that is made up of many intersecting markers, is not how I am always or most often perceived and responded to by my students? In literature and faculty lounges, pedagogical counsel for non-hetero-male-white-normative teachers assumes that students’ resistant behaviors are at least in part traceable to their instructors’ embodiment of minority identity boxes (i.e., teaching while brown, Black, female, genderqueer, etc.).<sup>1</sup> In other words, a brown teacher is always experienced as brown and “means something” as a brown teacher, a female teacher as female, a queer teacher as queer. And as these various identities intersect in ourselves when we experience challenges posed to us by students, we tend to explain those challenges by tracing them to our identity markers that tend to be marginalized. So of course a situation emerged because I am female, brown, and queer.

Ironically, this assumption is complicated by scholarly works regarding intersectionality, multiplicity, and fluid relational becoming—the very kind of works that challenge rigid perceptions of identity and their meaning in the first place. Relating to each other in the classroom is not simply a process of corresponding (self) perceptions and interpretations of our bodily presence and performance. If identities appear through the body, it is because they are performative: they are socially constituted,

contextual, and only appear to be fixed or mapped onto the body. To expect then that my self-perception always corresponds to how I am actually perceived and treated would be to fall back on a fixed and stable conception of identity. Further, it might also reveal a firm attachment to my favorite marginalized identity category. It certainly is necessary, in theory and practice, to know how my identity is constructed and how I come to “mean something” in daily interactions. Subtle microaggressions as well as blatant violations of bodily integrity and agency are often directed at me and others because of the ways we embody that which is consistently marginalized socially.

*Same class, different moment. We discuss the structural violence of Christian supremacy, and in my perception, the discussion is hijacked by John and suddenly we find ourselves off topic. Female classmates begin a sexism 1-1 moment with him, at which point I interrupt to take back the floor. I sketch out the interrelation of oppressions and connect gender oppression to other systemic oppressions, and move back into the theme for the class. John looks at me, listens, and is noticeably silent for the rest of the class. I think, “I guess he just doesn’t like being schooled by a woman.” Or did he? Something was a bit off in how I expected him to react: I expected him to be resistant in certain ways, but he wasn’t. He was still attentive, though differently engaged. What had just happened?*

Because identities are performative and available—more or less—to different kinds of bodies, I can enact and be perceived in multiple and shifting ways. In other words, just because I am a female brown body does not mean I cannot be socialized into, be positioned in ways, and be perceived as aligned with whiteness. Just because I am emotionally attached to my self-identification as queer does not prevent me from being perceived in line with heteronormativity. Intersectionality complicates my *being identities*. Since identities depend on their performativity, and identities are multiple and intersectional, I never just move from embodying one discursive script to another, nor are my performances always distinct movements and therefore perceived uniformly. Differently put, I don’t just add my queer moves to my brown look, or shift from performing woman to embodying foreign accent speech. In the classroom (as in other real life situations), our bodies and their meanings emerge in multiple and fluid ways, contingent on context. And in the classroom, “teacher” is also an identity that we perform in certain ways, depending on our educational training, philosophy, and institutional context.

To add more complexity—or shall I say to introduce chaos?—the classroom is always fundamentally open to contingency: our conceiving of each other as bodies in the classroom are fluid and multiple perceptual interactions. In any given moment I may emerge for my students and be sensed by them aligned with various meanings, depending on who sees me, how they might see themselves, and how they experience meanings of/in our shared space. Perceptions then are not either/or, but make classroom performances as fluid as they are contingent. So it may be that in classroom interactions, students respond to our socializations into and performances of scripts that are “whiteness” or “masculinity.” Or it may be that a heretofore seemingly unmarked/unremarkable embodiment (also the mark of a majority identity script) emerges and is perceived in ways that is usually aligned with non-normative identities.

*I offer John a meeting to talk about what happened in class, and am determined NOT to defend my teaching tactics and to find my inner compassion and openness. John and I have a genuine and constructive conversation, and I am genuinely sensing that my authority in the classroom is not challenged, quite the opposite actually. Now I am left wondering how my performance as teacher might actually at times be perceived as more authoritative, top-down, shall I say in ways typically aligned as “white” and “masculine,” than I tend to think of myself? Did I mention that my straight, male, senior coteacher is Native American and most often leads roundtable*

*discussions seated in a circle, whereas I am Christian identified in a Christian theological school, and regularly start this Christian history course with a short lecture and tend to teach while standing?*

My point in recounting my interactions with “John” (and depending on who is reading this, it probably already meant something to you when I presented my student in a certain Anglo-white imagery by calling him “John”) is that fluidity and multiplicity necessarily make space for “mis-recognition,” spaces in which I may be perceived in ways that differ from the identities I am either attached to or with which I am most used to being associated. In this case, at times I was performing capital-T Teacher, more than brown queer female.

Other times in the classroom, I felt like being “caught teaching while female and brown”; other times I sensed that I was responded to in ways that seemed like I was perceived as aligned with white masculinity. I was fought with when seemingly associated with heteronormativity, and was “here and queer,” all in the same course with the same student group, but contingent on the ways in which I was perceived to embody the recognizable identity scripts during specific moments.

Identities are doings that emerge as beings. As teachers, we may find ourselves in performances of identities we don’t necessarily claim, but identities which we become in the perception of the beholder, at least for a moment. As teacher who feels various and conflicting identities intersect in my body, I am urged not only to understand the individual dynamics of oppression and the nature of student resistance. I also feel the need to remain humble and open enough to take the chance on being less attached to my own minority identity boxes, and recognize that perception of me is not necessarily coherent with my own self-identification. Rather I may have emerged out of another box depending on classroom dynamics and perceptual alignments and orientations of the student/moment. In the end, we are bodies learning. As a teacher, I am charged to contribute to learning in which we bodily engage each other and the world towards more just relationships.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It is also striking that disabilities as a “concern” in the classroom is often addressed in terms of “dealing with” students with disabilities. This seems to reflect a remaining stigma surrounding visible and invisible disabilities for those in teaching professions, and it seems to reinforce a certain ableist perception of proper teacher bodies.

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