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Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins

, and

Santeria: The Beliefs and Rituals of a Growing Religion in America

Conservatives question my salvation, while liberals question my intelligence. This is what it means for a scholar of color to be the Other at an academic, religious-based institution. Five years of teaching at one of the most religiously conservative colleges in the nation, and two years of teaching at one of the most liberal seminaries in the country, has led me to the conclusion that most scholars of color, unless they assimilate to the dominant academic paradigms (and even then), will always be viewed with suspicion regardless of how many books and peer review articles they publish. Unfortunately, to be the racial or ethnic Other in an academic institution can prove costly, if not professionally deadly for the professor of color who insists on doing his or her scholarship from the marginalized perspective arising from their communities of color.

Unapologetically, I am a liberationist ethicist who fails to fit into the neat Euro-American labels of “conservative” or “liberal.” Not surprisingly, I was dismissed as a “flaming liberal” at my previous conservative institution due to my emphasis on radical social justice. Then I was branded “conservative” at my present liberal institution because I take my faith seriously. Many religious-based institutions are baffled by those of us who do liberationist-based work. Their failure to understand academic Otherness increases frustrations for colleges and seminaries desiring, yet failing, in the process of recruiting and retaining faculty of color. Which scholar of

color hasn't heard these complaints: "There's just not many of them," "We must maintain our academic excellence when hiring," or "They leave because they found a better job elsewhere."

During my tenure at a religiously conservative college I constantly struggled with students, administrators, and faculty who questioned my religious commitment. Students would gather at my office door and lay hands on it, praying for my salvation. I'm sure my door appreciated the prayers! "Do I know Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior?" was a common question I would hear. Ironically, I am an ordained Southern Baptist minister. Such a question concerning my salvation, while normally insulting to most who are of other faith traditions, was especially an affront to me. What it told me is that if I read the biblical text through the eyes of marginalized communities, a reading that leads to ethical conclusions that challenge Eurocentric power and privilege, in their minds, I cannot be a Christian.

During my tenure at this college I also wrote bimonthly editorial columns for the local newspaper on current issues from Christian liberationist perspectives. As anyone familiar with liberationist ethics knows, the raising of consciousness within the community at large is integral to being an activist-scholar. I specifically wrote on national and local current issues concentrating on their racist, sexist, classist, and heterosexist underpinnings. Not surprisingly, "hundreds" of letters were mailed to the editor questioning my faith as a Christian. Such letters proclaimed that I had lost my faith, I was a wolf in sheep's clothing, or I was simply the left hand of Satan. Such rhetoric seldom bothers me; however, it did take a toll on my family, particularly my preteen children whose school friends repeated their parents' taunting that I was no "believer."

This situation worsened when the school chaplain and the college president asked me why I was so angry. Others were paternalistic, saying that my anger stemmed from hating white people. Yes, I, too, can allow Jesus to heal me from my anger and the pain I harbored due to the ethnic discrimination I have faced in my early life (their words, not mine). In the minds of those who hold power in the academy, as long as I can be constructed as "just another angry Latino," my views — and the views of any scholar of color who challenges the dominant paradigm — can easily be dismissed as lacking objectivity. To be Other in the academy means that one's scholarship is reduced to an interesting perspective while ironically, the dominant Eurocentric culture's subjectivity is unquestionably objective.

To do ethical analysis as a liberationist means, by definition, the creation of an uncomfortable space where complicity to oppressive structures that are normalized can be explored and challenged. Creating such an environment assures such a scholar that they will never be a "popular" teacher. Quite the contrary. Because no student (or faculty or administrator for that matter) cherishes the prospect of unmasking how the present status quo is designed to privilege

them, the scholar of color who relentlessly pushes such issues can expect push-back, at times manifested in dismissive, if not hostile ways. This is true at both conservative and liberal academic institutions.

Naively I first thought that liberal institutions would be better, but the liberal version of Othering the scholar of color admittedly caught me by surprise, even though I was warned by other scholars of color teaching at similar institutions. In fact, I have found that many liberals would be incredulous when their own complicity in racist structures is questioned. After all, “they” marched with Martin Luther King, which in their minds gave them nonracist credentials for life. As long as I riled against the Religious Right, everyone was happy. But when I began to explore how liberal religious and academic thought is as damaging to scholars of color as it was when done by conservatives, then I discovered that my scholarship became suspect.

I have had students in class voice their concern, to my presence, that a person with my views should not be working at such a liberal institution. I had one student who, after taking a class on liberationist thought with me, claimed in class that my work lacked a cutting edge. Another questioned my pedagogy when I quoted an inflammatory statement made by Fanon, expecting the class to go to the library and find out what he was talking about. I even had a student walk out of class, claiming she’d had enough, during a difficult discussion on how white-skin privilege creates an inactive false hope.

The issue, as I see it, is not whether I know my material, or am cutting edge, or am effective in my classroom pedagogy, or lack the skill to effectively discuss white privilege. The issue is something else. You just know that if I were a Euro-American professor, none of these students, even if they were upset, would have offered such a public and direct rebuke. They were able to voice such a challenge because in their eyes, I am perceived as powerless to negatively affect their graduate (specifically doctoral) work. Consequently, it is safe for them to exercise their white power and privilege when a man of color questions their constructed reality, which, like their more conservative classmates at other institutions, is still based on white supremacy and privilege.

My intelligence is also challenged by students (as well as by some faculty and administrators) when I allow the spirituality of marginalized communities to inform and impact my scholarship. I am a man of faith whose first act when coming to the office is to light a candle to my Virgencita del Cobre, who enjoys visiting Pentecostal storefront Latino/a churches where I can “dance” in the Spirit and maybe — if truth be told — even speak in tongues. It is crucial for my scholarship to be rooted in the experience of my people so that I can effectively function as an organic intellectual. Only then do I find the work I do as an ethicist relevant. My Euro-American

colleagues who rely more on the so-called European Enlightenment Project usually view the spirituality of scholars of color as proof that they lack academic rigor. The quest for “academic excellence” becomes code-language for fluency in Eurocentric meta-narratives.

Perspectives arising from marginalized communities might be interesting, but they always fall short of “academic excellence.” Books and papers written from these perspectives are usually seen as lacking depth, or too “churchy” for academia. Failure to operate from the Eurocentric canon, or the insistence of participating in the spiritual practices of one’s community of color, is viewed with suspicion by many liberals. Yet, for many communities of color, the spiritual is as crucial as the intellectual, and for those scholars of color grounded in these communities, the false dichotomy created between the academic and the spiritual prevents us from fully exploring all the dimensions of our community. And if truth be told, it erodes the academic excellence that is trying to be maintained.

To be Other within the academy means that the scholar of color must publish three times as much as a white colleague just to receive half the recognition, struggling to prove they are worthy of being in their particular institution. This is not because students, colleagues, or administrators are necessarily racists (although some obviously are). It is because the power structures within the academy are racist for them. While no graduate student of color who lacks proficiency in Eurocentric thought can ever obtain a doctorate, let alone employment, Euro-American graduate students can obtain a PhD and never have to read or know the literature developing within marginalized scholarly communities. Or as one recent candidate for a Bible opening responded to a question I asked, “No books written by blacks or Hispanics about the Bible exist to the best of my knowledge.”

As long as our scholarship remains on the margins, as long as our scholarship continues to be seen as irrelevant, lacking in academic excellence, or merely the “forced” diversity quota tacked onto the cannon, as long as we are easily dismissed as angry or simply hating white people, we will continue to be the Other.