

# WHAT WOULD WE BE DOING IF WE WEREN'T DOING THIS?:

A JOURNEY IN DEMOCRATIC DEPARTMENTAL PRACTICES

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## *Abstract*

A Religious Studies department at a small, liberal arts, women's college is using critical pedagogy not only in some classrooms but also in their departmental process. Critical pedagogies and popular education theories and movements offer insights into possible ways to challenge the systems of traditional, hierarchical models in higher education. This article examines this journey and the theoretical grounding of this work (Freire, Horton, Shor, Boal, and others), along with obstacles and future possibilities for a democratic departmental model.

*Keywords:* democracy, critical pedagogy, Paolo Freire, higher education

“There is no neutral education. Education is either for domestication or for freedom.”—Goan writer João da Veiga Coutinho

## INTRODUCTION: GULLIES

Kentucky writer, farmer, and activist Wendell Berry describes his lifework using the metaphor of an agricultural field. He talks about how even a few years of bad agribusiness practices have stripped the field of its topsoil and left it toxic and rutted. The gullies from rainstorms and snowmelt are deep. It will take about 150 years to return the field to its most sustainable state; Berry notes that in his lifetime he will only be able to start the process. He hopes he will be laying the groundwork for others to continue this work. His commitment to sustainable agriculture puts him in the muddy field with his horse and plow. This work leads him to involvement in alternative communities that stand against agribusiness and to engagement in social movements that work toward systemic change in farming practices.

I often think of my teaching in terms of Berry’s field metaphor; my classrooms and department and college are like small fields. I desire to do the work to heal each of these fields, but especially to build a democratic movement in my classrooms and in my department with my students. The years of higher educational practices that privilege corporate interests and stable hierarchies of knowledge and knowers have made the learning environment toxic. The rich topsoil needed to grow more radical democratic movements in academia has fast been washing out my classroom door. To stem the tide of such destruction I need heads with new ideas and concrete plans; I cannot do the work alone. As Berry reminds us, we have to go deep in the gullies to stop the loss of topsoil and to heal the wounds on the earth (Polsgrove & Sanders, 2007, pp. 31-32). There are gullies in his field but also in the cities; Berry explains that it takes people like Dorothy Day to show the way:

You can’t study these problems from the top, you’ve got to get down to where they are... It has to be done by somebody who’s both willing to get in the gully and somebody who is fascinated with the gully. (Polsgrove & Sanders, 2007, p. 32)

In over two decades of teaching religious studies, I realize that this utopian project is beyond what I will be able to do in my career, yet I can start the dream and share it with others who bring their dreams and join me in the project. It is all about coaxing others—and myself—into the gullies. And it is also about the work of deepening our commitments as citizens of the gullies. As Berry well knows, the real work of democracy and healing begins in and with the dirt.

I wanted to start with Berry in the fields, in the gullies, because it is in these ruts of the earth that the work of critical pedagogies occurs. Here you will find the Highlander Center, Citizenship Schools, the Instituto Paulo Freire, and other popular and grassroots training and movement building grounds. The elite liberal arts college where I work is generally not in these gullies, although we have gullies of our own—in the forms of institutionalized racism and classism, gender inequity (especially in terms of pay), heteronormativity, and the broader “neo-plantation mentality” of the New South, along with the internalized oppressions we bring to everyday life and to the struggles for justice. My college sits on a ridge (along the Subcontinental Divide, no less) on lawns maintained by chemicals and outsourced Latino immigrant workers. Our lawn water run-off goes either to the Atlantic Ocean or the Gulf of Mexico, carrying with it chemicals (that are all nonetheless EPA approved). More than this, our institutional commitment to sustainability does not include institutionalized respect, grassroots-empowered democracy, or just wages. The storms keep coming and the gullies grow deeper and more numerous, and at times the work is overwhelming, even from the safety of faculty privilege.

In this article I want to explore the power issues that create and sustain these institutional gullies and tell a story of one academic department (students and faculty) who have committed to working over “the long haul” (Miles Horton’s term) on creating not only democratic classrooms but also a democratic departmental structure (Horton, 2007). The departmental citizens are continually shifting; there are new students and graduations each year, along with new and adjunct faculty and a retirement every decade or so. The commitments of members of our community to the departmental process are also variable. And the naysayers in higher education far outnumber us. I

want to describe our utopian project and the theoretical framework and conversation partners that guide us through these changes and help us reimagine our community and place.

## **DREAMING AN ALTERNATE WORLD OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

If you could imagine your own utopian program (undergraduate or graduate) in your discipline, using critical pedagogy as a theoretical base, what would it look like? If you are the architect and could design that world, what would it take to make that dream world a reality? The center is feeling threatened by the margins, and the majority of undergraduate and graduate programs in religious studies look like they did decades ago, with only slight modifications and add-ons. The culture of religious studies is embedded in greater and lesser ways in the Enlightenment and the European university out of which historical criticism arose. Dreams of a utopia of radical democracy have slipped away; the investment in the patriarchal system is too great; there is too much at stake (a degree, tenure, etc.), and too little time to question it or allow those dreams, and dreamers, to organize. So when the choice is freedom or domestication, what do we choose? When I accepted the invitation to do graduate work in religious studies in the 1980s, I was, quite frankly, choosing domestication, even as I resisted it. When I took a tenure-track teaching position, again I chose domestication. I do not have to keep choosing the ordinary and traditional professoriate, and unless I find creative ways to resist with others, I will not be able to realize but only a part of my dream of democracy.

This idea of domestication and choice begs several questions: How do we work against domestication, and toward freedom, with our colleagues on the faculty and students and staff? How do we build a democratic context to do this work and what does “democracy” really mean? Who defines democracy? Is real democratic education possible outside the “gullies” in academia and beyond its gates? In what ways can pedagogies in the classroom reflect radical democracy and social justice and then ease these pedagogical commitments into structural spaces? How can we as faculty and students begin to build a social movement for radical democracy together—at the levels of the

classroom, the department, and our institutions? And finally, what can critical pedagogies and popular education tell us about domestication, but also democracy and emancipation, and finally, about utopia?

First, I want to talk about the pedagogical and theoretical bases for this work, pushing the boundaries of the classroom to include the structure of the academic department. I believe that classrooms that work toward the ideal of democracy need broader structural supports, and the departmental level is the first space for this liberatory work to occur. But to say this is to face an entrenched and deeply established structure in academe. Michel Foucault calls these configurations “regimes of truth” that cover real relations of power.<sup>1</sup> In working in both the classroom and departmental spaces, I am pushing the truth claims of traditional pedagogies and hierarchies in higher education. In doing so, I am learning from critical pedagogy (Paulo Freire) and theatre of the oppressed (Augusto Boal); these are theories and practices that have supported many grassroots, gully activists in their work for social transformation.

The gully is a damaged space. To enter the work of restoring a gully is to choose to be in the middle of its woundedness, right up against the toxicities and extant power frames that created the gully. Traditional models of classrooms and departments involve much work and knowledge of theory and have been tested for “best practices” in higher education. So why tamper with a workable, tried-and-true model? If exploration of these cracks in the dominant structure—these gullies—leads to questioning of the departmental structure status quo, then where will this work end? The traditional department operation allows for an ever-changing student membership and faculty shifts and additions. The framework is in place; it is a sturdy structure, on the outside. But critical pedagogical commitments in the classroom challenge these systemic relationships, and I believe, call on those of us who attempt to live out these commitments to extend our practices as far as possible. These practices involve mutual accountability and transparency as ideals. I want to argue that a democratic pedagogy should also step outside the classroom into the department, and beyond—beyond its own containment and that of students and faculty

## **DEFINING DEMOCRACY, OR DEMOCRACY AND BEYOND**

What is democratic education? Given our institutional structures, democracy is a difficult plan to realize. It is far easier to have a range of faux democratic spaces in the classroom, where students are valued and respected and diversity acknowledged and embraced, but where the professor wields the ultimate power of syllabus and order and grade and even determines the arrangement of the chairs. There are institutional rules and boundaries that cannot be easily changed; these rules support the divisions between students and faculty. Traditional models of higher education—or hierarchy and meritocracy—often masquerade as spaces of freedom and voice. Democracy seems to always stop short out of our fear of the possibilities of what lies beyond the traditional boundaries of power and authority in the classroom (or academic department). I ask each of us to ask ourselves: In what ways am I willing to risk? Or: How am I upholding the status quo? More importantly: What groups and/or conversational structures are in place to provide checks and balances on individual and institutional power? These are questions that involve our own pedagogical commitments both in the classroom and beyond.

Democracy is a problematic term. John Dewey advocates that “democracy has to be born anew in each generation, and education is its midwife” (as cited in hooks, 2010, p. 14). Amy Gutmann (1987) issues a warning “that we must not look upon education as a realm ideally to be separated from the tumult of democratic politics” (p. 291). Paulo Freire takes these ideas further:

No one constructs a serious democracy, which implies radically changing the societal structures, reorienting the politics of production and development, reinventing power, doing justice to everyone, and abolishing the unjust and immoral gains of the all-powerful, without previously and simultaneously working for these democratic preferences and these ethical demands. (Freire & Faundez, 1992, p. 67)

And Henry Giroux (2011) expands on this definition: “One of the central tasks of any viable critical pedagogy would be to make visible

alternative models of radical democratic relations in a wide variety of sites” (p. 72). For Giroux (2011) (following Zygmunt Bauman and Cornelius Castoriadis), education must be linked “to the project of an unrealized democracy” (p. 145). The role of students is central: “As a performative practice, pedagogy takes as one of its goals the opportunity for students to be able to reflectively frame their own relationship to the ongoing project of an unfinished democracy” (Giroux, 2011, p. 157). The idea that has evolved from Dewey through Freire and beyond is that democracy, if it is to be real, involves multiple practices and spaces of social justice and transformation and is always unfinished and “yet” but “not yet.” In the making of the “not yet,” the *demos*, or people, must be central.

Critical pedagogical theory, especially in the form of popular education models, reminds us that everyone in a classroom brings knowledges and experiences and that everyone is a student and teacher alike. This model is the basis of transformative education—that there is the possibility of transformation—of teachers and well as students. Critical pedagogy critiques and moves beyond the traditional “I’m the teacher; you’re the student” hierarchy to open up spaces of possibility.<sup>2</sup> Freire (1997) asks a key question in this process: “What is a teacher to do in order to open himself or herself up toward the reconstruction of the world in a democratic sense?” (p. 321). The answer is to first draw an “ideological map of the institution” (p. 322) and from there build allies and build a change movement.

Ideological mapping is a central part of critical pedagogies. Henry Giroux (1997) offers this explanation of critical pedagogy:

the major thrust of a critical pedagogy should center around generating knowledge that presents concrete possibilities for empowering people...a critical pedagogy needs a language of possibility, one that provides the pedagogical basis for teaching democracy while simultaneously making schooling more democratic. (p. 108)

For teachers to live out emancipatory authority, Giroux (2011) argues that they have to move beyond their own classrooms and working situations: “They will have to open up every aspect of

formal education to active, popular contestation and to other front line-groups and constituencies. This includes community members, parents, support staff, youth-advocacy groups, and others with vital interests in the schools” (p. 111). Giroux (2011) is talking mainly about K-12 education here, but the same applies to higher education. Teachers must be involved in movement building for social change, both inside and outside their classrooms, to build a truly emancipatory classroom space. And the movement includes not only the dyad of faculty and students, but concentric circles of knowers, both inside and outside the institution.

Giroux also speaks of how radical teachers do radical education that:

speaks to a wider sphere of intervention in which the same concern with authority, knowledge, power, and democracy redefines and broadens the political nature of their pedagogical task, which is to teach, learn, listen, and mobilize in the interest of a more just and equitable social order. (p. 112)

These relationships connect the classroom—and department—with the multiple worlds around it.

bell hooks (2010) shares a similar sentiment: “Democratic education is based on the assumption that democracy works, that it is the foundation of all genuine teaching and learning” (p. 18). Most importantly, “At the core of these ideals was a profound, ongoing commitment to social justice” (hooks, 2010, p. 14). hooks (2010) talks about how (potentially) radical departments such as Women and Gender Studies have been “deradicalized” and or “ghettorized” since the 1990s (pp. 15-16). She defines democracy in terms of equality and diversity, and education as and for “the practice of freedom” (hooks, 2010, p. 16), while acknowledging “that democratic education is being undermined as the interests of big business and corporate capitalism encourage students to see education solely as a means to achieve material success” (p. 16). hooks (2010) warns us of this danger but does not offer any radical ways of movement building for social change.



In the biblical studies field Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's definition of democracy is still too tied to the neoliberal construction of higher education. She makes attempts to move beyond this when she defines her pedagogical action as a move from emancipatory interpretation of the bible to "emancipatory educational space." For Schüssler Fiorenza (2009) the bible has "democratizing potentials" (p. 1). She clarifies further, "Rather, I envision a profoundly egalitarian space where citizen interpreters of the Bible are accountable to a global citizenry" (Schüssler Fiorenza, 2009, p. 7). I have to say, that after having studied for a year between seminary and doctoral work in Germany at the University of Göttingen, where lectures in large halls were the model, Schüssler Fiorenza is really breaking in many ways with the tradition of her heritage. Nevertheless she stays bound to neoliberal agendas by her limitations on the democratic, utopian vision of education. My point with this example is that Schüssler Fiorenza (2009) does not extend her critique of the mainstream neoliberal globalization of education to her own context of Harvard Divinity School or offer any "rules for radicals" (Alinsky, 1969) for religious studies scholars who are working toward emancipatory educational spaces.

This neoliberalism upholds the enlightenment ideals of reason and justice embedded in a corporate capitalist system. University ethics centers, while supporting the importance of ethics in the curriculum and community partnerships, continue to have the residue (or more) of corporate interests. The ethics center at Harvard is an example. Like most university ethics centers, Harvard's invites top scholars to discuss a range of issues from genocide to bioethics and economics, but they avoid justice movements, such as a living wage campaign, at their own institution.<sup>3</sup>

Using another example, the Emory Ethics Center has dealt with some of the harder campus issues, such as living wage. But even the most open programs get snagged by the corporate interests. A few years ago, my Religion and Globalization class attended a talk by the Indian ecofeminist activist and physicist Vandana Shiva sponsored by the Emory Ethics Center. The very personable Shiva approached the lectern, held up the Dasani bottled water that was left for her there, and

said calmly, “The blood of my people.” Of course, the ethics center staff was horrified, for they knew, as my students and I did, the writing Shiva had done about Coke and Pepsi and theft of water rights and pollution in India and around the globe. The Emory events office had simply done the usual room preparation. It is at such intersections that I think the term “democracy” and terms like “democratic education” open themselves to corporate and institutional cooptation. Coke money funds many institutions of higher education in the Atlanta area. None of us can claim any purity in these matters. Or as Jacqui Alexander (2006) relates, “What is democracy to mean when its association with the perils of empire has rendered it so thoroughly corrupt that it seems disingenuous and perilous even to deploy the term?” (p. 17).

What limits are being placed on “democracy” in religious studies classrooms? What hierarchies do we maintain as teachers? How do we continue, in overt and covert ways, to uphold the status quo in higher education? In what ways do we allow or disallow dissent in our classrooms?

## **FREEDOM IS JUST ANOTHER WORD**

We preach freedom, but we don’t really practice it. The need I sense now is to work on changing not so much the practice but the preaching. (Elbow, 1986, p. 98)

In what ways does pedagogy reflect democracy? Grassroots educational movements do pedagogy in and from the gullies. They use popular education as education for critical consciousness (Freire, 1974). Another common definition is: “Popular education is the education in popular movements, i.e., democratic social movements against oppression and violence, and for sustainability, human rights, justice and peace” (The Popular Education News; n.p.). With Freire and others, the discussion of democracy and freedom is influenced by Marxist theory and liberatory practices. Perhaps a Marxist call to a socialist classroom is another way to explore democratic possibilities.

Freire acknowledges this connection to socialism. He states, “When we hear the word ‘democracy,’ many of us think of conservatism, bourgeois exploitation or social democracy: I, however, think of socialism. And why not? Why should deep, radical social

change be incompatible with freedom?" (Freire & Faundez, 1992, p. 63). Perhaps instead of democracy, biblical/religious studies should strive to be socialist, in the way that democratic socialists define it to include economic and political reordering of society. The organization Democratic Socialists of America offers this definition of the political philosophy that provides the underpinning of their work for economic, social and political equality and human rights:

At the root of our socialism is a profound commitment to democracy, as means and end. We are activists committed not only to extending political democracy but to demanding democratic empowerment in the economy, in gender relations, and in culture. Democracy is not simply one of our political values but our means of restructuring society. Our vision is of a society in which people have a real voice in the choices and relationships that affect the entirety of our lives. **We call this vision democratic socialism — a vision of a more free, democratic and humane society.**

We are socialists because we reject an international economic order sustained by private profit, alienated labor, race and gender discrimination, environmental destruction, and brutality and violence in defense of the status quo.

*We are socialists because we share a vision of a humane international social order based both on democratic planning and market mechanisms to achieve equitable distribution of resources, meaningful work, a healthy environment, sustainable growth, gender and racial equality, and non-oppressive relationships.* [emphasis in the original] (<http://www.dsusa.org/about/index.html>)

In their background paper on social and economic rights, the group Democratic Socialists of America outlines the following rights: to a living wage job; to a sufficient amount of nutritious and safe food; to affordable and safe housing; to preventative, acute and long term health care; to free, high quality public education; to give and receive care; to income security throughout their life; to leisure time; to a healthy environment; and to associate in whatever organizational

form they choose. These rights follow those of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and other documents and privilege the poor and oppressed. But how can religious studies, both in classroom and department, be truly democratized in such a human rights framework?

Without such a commitment to economic, social, and cultural rights, a democratic classroom space is in danger of maintaining the mainstream, capitalist status quo. So how do faculty and students reach beyond the classroom for justice issues? Here are some beginning questions: Who cleans these classrooms and do they earn a livable wage? How can the classroom be a source/force of change for the university—and beyond? In what ways do the papers in the book and on the website model radical democracy? Is there any politics-connectedness-justice in them? How is any project grassroots when it remains elitist and privileged? What exactly is being realized here? Many of us struggle with the voices from grassroots activists. Schüssler-Fiorenza (2009) is helpful in defining the struggle:

I do not propose an emphasis on theorizing and vision above social action. Rather than continuing to question the 'role' of intellectuals in social movements, I propose refocusing our attention on what these movements themselves contribute theoretically to the articulation of what is considered knowledge. Such a shift underscores the significance, creativity, and initiative of grassroots movements for articulating emancipatory knowledges and wisdom over and above that of the talented intellectual and privileged advocate. Instead of seeking to empower and enable people at the grassroots level, public intellectuals must first *learn from* the politics and values of grassroots movements for justice and well-being. (p. 10)

But how do you learn from if you are not learning with? This brings me to my broader point: how can those of us who claim to work toward democratic classrooms be creating truly emancipatory spaces with our students when these classrooms are spaces embedded in webs of economic (and usually racial and gendered) oppression and injustice?

The majority of religious studies classrooms are not about oppression—at least not primarily. But they are not about liberation either, except in a paternal/maternalistic way—of teacher knowledge passed on to supposedly unenlightened students. What makes a classroom radical? The answer about power in my classrooms is always “not very radical.” I too often allow the work—of syllabi and conferring information and grading—to consume me. In our department of Religious Studies we have continued to work on our more systemic “ground rules” or “class agreements,” taking a classroom practice to the next structural level (see Appendix 1). This process is ongoing, and also under revision and reimagining.

Freire’s latter work is instructive here. According to his wife Nita, when he was on staff at the Municipal Bureau of Education in São Paulo, he helped to build a democratic school system in which all constituencies had decision-making power, the main point of which was to “Change the face of the [K-12] school.” Nita Freire defines this process:

This means: to make it really popular because it would be happy, pretty, efficient, agreeable. To this end, he would be counting upon the participation of the educational agents (teachers, students, directors, supervisors, people in charge of pedagogic orientation, guards, people in charge of the meals, cleaners, janitors, mothers and fathers of students, etc.). (Borg & Mayo, 2011, p. 115)

Paulo Freire imagined a people’s movement in the Brazilian schools, one that involved and linked the communities’ knowledges. But he extended the community to be more inclusive, so that families and all staff at the schools were welcome in the process of creating a just environment. Here he is drawing not only from Marx but from Gramsci, who included a critique alongside practical political action for social justice. In a similar way, Miles Horton (2003) relates that the Highlander Folk School realized early on that capitalist industry in southern Appalachia was keeping people poor: “I knew from the beginning economic democracy had to go hand in hand with political democracy, so I was keyed into that” (p. 129).

But as I have indicted others, I have to indict myself. One of our department's community partners is the Open Door Community, a Protestant Catholic Worker house in Atlanta that works in solidarity with the homeless. The organization calls for a reevaluation of the roles of teachers in democracy and justice movements. Rev. Eduard Loring (2010), a co-founder of the Open Door proposes:

We must choose our teachers, lovers, preachers, friends, rabbis, poets, imams, novelists, musicians, and filmmakers carefully. If those from whom we are learning have not been to jail in solidarity with the disinherited, BEWARE. They may well be nice people and their products may have impressive footnotes in very small print, but if they have not been to jail in solidarity with the poor, or suffered some other form of costly social retribution for reducing the distance, they will betray us unknowingly, for they do not know the truth that will set us free. It is precisely these good and well-intentioned folk who have traded love in action for respectability and comfort, unaware of what they are doing. (p. 87)

Loring reminds us that the real work of justice is done side-by-side with the disinherited—in the gullies. But above ground, profits trump prophets, and the walk toward democracy gets sidetracked. When we look to the prophets, Dorothy Day, M.L. King, Jr., Della Spurley (custodian for over forty-five years and facilities union co-founder at Agnes Scott College), then we can begin to dream the dream and do the work the dream demands.

I have returned again to the topic of utopia—the perfectly healed and rich field made whole again—and to human rights as a framework for democracy and freedom and utopian dreams. According to Annette Kolodny (1998), who offers an administrator's perspective on these issues,

The twenty-first century will also find us asking how colleges and universities can better educate citizens to protect a democracy with a strong Bill of Rights, a tradition of civil liberties, and a relatively recent commitment to women's equality and to civil rights for all—a democracy, however, that must survive in a

global economy where such values are not universally shared. And in lieu of sustaining higher education as essentially a tool for ‘complementing democracy,’ the urgency in the year 2000 will be to determine how higher education can help to eliminate the increasingly destructive extremes of wealth and poverty that threaten democracy at its very core. (p. 255)

The focal points of democracy continue to be the underpinnings of class, the gullies between the 99% and the 1%.

Critical pedagogues such as Ira Shor (1996) offer a more local perspective: “Nevertheless, when people are not consulted about policy and process in their experience, they are denied citizen status as members of a democracy, as Dewey warned many decades ago” (p. 31). He continues, “Without formal participation in decision-making, students develop as authority-dependent subordinates, not as independent citizens” (Shor, 1996, p. 31). Another term for these practices is “critical emancipation,” which Kincheloe (2008) describes as one of the foundations of critical pedagogy: “Those who seek emancipation attempt to gain the power to control their own lives in solidarity with a justice-oriented community” (p. 51). In this regard, Freire (1997) urges teachers and students to “develop the capacity for rupture, that is, for reinvention” (p. 325).

In his critique of democracy and education, Michael Apple (1995) shifts the focus from solely the political to “the contradictions within and among the economic, political, and cultural spheres” (p. 154). Democracy, like the recent “sustainability” movement at universities, shares three components: equity, economics, and environment. This trio mirrors human rights concerns for civic/political, and also social, cultural, and economic rights. Apple is convinced that a democracy that does not arise from and fully include the working class and poor is not full democracy, since it is tethered to capitalist, patriarchal rule. Apple, along with Freire and other critical pedagogues, draws from Marx, Gramsci, and other socialist critiques and ideals. What is at stake is changing structures and organizations based on a capitalist system. For example, Schüssler Fiorenza argues for organizational change in graduate programs in biblical studies; this is a high, utopian vision. But even in her individual classroom on *Democratizing/*

Emancipatory Biblical Studies the traditional hierarchy seems firmly in place. Shor (1980) says that the classroom is a place where democracy demands the teacher share power with students: “Teacher-direction must be democratically co-constructed *with* students, not *for* students, so that they codetermine the study” (p. xii, emphasis in original). He and Freire both warn that the classroom is never a community of equals, for the institutional hierarchy and power issues are too embedded. In Shor’s ideal liberatory and democratic classroom, students co-create ground rules (class agreements) and syllabus and grading contracts and assignments with the teacher. Shor would tell Schüssler Fiorenza that in order to change traditional biblical studies graduate education, her own classroom needs more radical pedagogical practices. She uses an “equal-participant” model (2009, pp. 172ff), but she sets the agenda for the class.

Freire and other critical pedagogues emphasize the connection between real democracy and social justice. The apparatus (Foucault’s term) of democracy has to also model democracy; that is, the structures that govern syllabus, assignments, and then on to curriculum have to be infected by a participatory system in which students and faculty share power. This work is difficult since the profession, colleagues, the institution, the very nature of higher education works in opposition to freedom and democracy with the placement of strict boundaries and containment policies (e.g. students “practice democracy” in student government and social or departmental clubs); classroom and department governance is solely the domain of faculty. Parker Palmer (2011) talks about “creative tension-holding” in the “tragic gap,” that is, “the gap that will forever separate what *is* from what *could* and *should* be” which he believes we should inhabit “with energy, commitment, vision, and hope [emphasis in the original]” (p. 26). As we “inhabit” our department we are called to pay attention to our commitments and challenges as we journey toward the possible. But the day-to-day journey involves power relations, and the sirens of the traditional structures seduce by offering safety and rewards. Individual advancement trumps the collective in the meritocracy.

On the other side, Freire offers a different understanding and an amulet against these sirens. He outlines the power issues involved in



creating democracy and stresses that in order to change society there has to be

a gaining of power which is prolonged creatively in a rediscovery of power; creating a new power which does not fear to be called in question and does not become rigid for the sake of defending the freedom already achieved which, basically, should be a freedom constantly being achieved. (Freire & Faundez, 1992, pp. 62-63).

And Freire pushes further: “In fact, rediscovering power presupposes rediscovering the struggle” (Freire & Faundez, 1992, p. 63). And rediscovering the struggle takes building a people’s movement, one in which there are spaces for risk and deep listening and critique and compassion and imagination and idealism. To start this journey means that one will never see the end of it, for it is an evolutionary process, constantly formed by the members who walk along the way and engage in the difficult work of sustaining the dream for the long haul.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Foucault states, “‘Truth’ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extends it. A ‘régime’ of truth” (1980, p. 133).

<sup>2</sup> On this hierarchy, see P. Allitt (2004).

<sup>3</sup> See the report: “Ethics at Harvard: 1987-2007”: <http://ethics.harvard.edu/files/center-for-ethics/files/20threport.pdf?m=1393878813>.

The lectures and publications of this ethics center are excellent. But imbedded centers do not lead grassroots movements for institutional change.

## **APPENDIX 1**

### **VISION STATEMENT**

#### **DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES, AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE**

We, the community of religious studies scholars, believe that the study of religion opens the door to greater acceptance and understanding of individual and cultural beliefs. This greater understanding provides one of the necessary frameworks on which a peaceful and just global community is built.

- As a community of scholars, we seek to be nurturing, mutually inclusive, and responsive by:
- Building an inclusive atmosphere on issues of race, class, ethnicity, nationality, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, age, ability, and gender.
- Supporting a variety of teaching methods, learning styles, and abilities. We seek to share knowledge in the classroom to supplement academic dialogue, realizing that we are all learners.
- Challenging ourselves and each other to critically engage academic theories of religion with global and social perspectives.
- As a community, we affirm academic freedom and seek to support an inclusive and interdisciplinary curriculum that reinforces mutual empowerment across boundaries of difference.
- As a community, we seek to nurture through the whole journey of the religious studies major or minor: job/career options, (wo) mentoring for graduate school, and being a support network after graduation from Agnes Scott. The religious studies and religion and social justice majors are preparation for the process of learning and living.

- As a department, we seek to build a coalition with other departments and programs, at Agnes Scott and in the wider community.
- As a department, we oppose any and all forms of sexual harassment and recognize the subtle power dynamics in a learning environment.
- We will aspire to an ongoing process of education about power, attitudes, awareness, and support through peer educators, Safe Agnes Scott Students (SASS), and other departmental peer support groups.
- By actively listening to and supporting one another, we seek to offer a stable, nurturing place from which to challenge and question ourselves and others. We will seek to use these conversations and this writing as a way to articulate our needs, differences, and hopes about our journeys toward democratic education with students (majors, minors, friends) and faculty.
- As a community, we seek to live intentionally as mutually accountable to one another. We affirm and seek to embody the goals of Agnes Scott College as articulated in its mission and values statements. This accountability agreement binds us to mutual respect and accessibility that is continually evolving.

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