



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Can White People Teach Latinx Studies?

Miguel A. De La Torre, *Illiff School of Theology*

Blog Series: Teaching, Religion, Politics

August 17, 2017

Tags: identity | diversity | teaching Latinx studies

Remember the composition of religion departments back during the 1960s? They predominately and unapologetically consisted of white males – especially the so-called Ivies. Now imagine if one of these schools, realizing the need for different perspectives, decided that they wanted to have a feminist viewpoint taught in their department. A search committee would be formed, advertisements placed, interviews conducted, and after an academic year of deliberation, the most qualified candidate would be hired – probably a white man whose Ph.D. dissertation somewhat dealt with a few aspects concerning women’s issues. Even though several women steeped in feminist thought applied for the position, it would not be too surprising if a man would have been hired. So, allow me to rephrase my question: Can a man teach Women’s Studies?

If identity does not matter as to who teaches racial/ethnic-based courses, then does gender matter? Maybe the question is not *can* but *should*. If we ask *can*, then the answer is obviously yes. Just like men can become proficient in feminist studies, so can whites become proficient in Latinx studies. And frankly, I cannot imagine any professor, regardless of ethnicity, race, or gender who can be considered scholastically rigorous if they fail to include these voices on a regular basis in every course they teach. For the record, in every one of my classes - except one (Formative White Male Ethicists) - I can and I do teach perspectives which focus on feminism, womanism, Black, Asian-American, Indigenous, and LGBTIQ religious

thought. So if the question is *can*, then the answer is not only yes – but failure to do so indicates a lowering of academic standards.

And yet, we face a situation where white people shamelessly apply to teach Latinx Studies simply because they can – or think they can. And like in the 60s, they are the ones who make ideal candidates in schools lacking the presence of Latinx. Latinx remains the largest ethnic/racial group in this country most underrepresented on Religion faculties. Ethnic discrimination against Latinxs is so prevalent that when a search is announced, the department hopes to find the brownest face with the whitest voice – or better yet, another white face who can appropriate our contributions to the discourse. While there are institutions who see the value of hiring a Latinx who will challenge their worldviews, and those of their predominately white students, to the core, most hope to find a Latinx who is not so damned angry. Of course, what they fail to realize is that if the teaching and views of Latinx scholars do not anger, do not challenge, do not disrupt, then they have indeed found the most assimilated brown face, which is of no use to *nuestra comunidad*. Such a hire is like pouring hot sauce onto a sloppy joe and calling it *chili con carne*.

Should whites teach Latinx studies? The *can* question is answered in the affirmative because all scholars are responsible to include marginalized voices in their courses. But the *should* question is quite different. While the *can* question is about inclusion, the *should* question is about exclusion – excluding Latinx voices *and bodies* from white classrooms and institutions. During the 1960s, male-only teaching faculty needed the voices of women (and still do); but just as importantly, they also needed their presence as professors. Such institutions were as academically deficient then as those today lacking professors who are Latinxs (and by Latinx I mean those teaching teaching and focusing their works on the scholars from *nuestra América* – not the assimilated ones who teach white theology with a “spicy pepper” thrown on top).

So, should whites teach Latinx Studies? No. Better yet – Hell no. There is a major difference between including the voices of Latinx scholars within everything you teach, and applying and being hired to teach exclusively *in their place* (regardless of whether you can or cannot). And shame on those institutions who continue to play games by making sure our radical and revolutionary voices do not, and potentially never will, sully their lily white halls by instead choosing whites, or Latinx in name only, to continue white theological hegemony in our classrooms.

<https://wabash.center/2017/08/can-white-people-teach-latinx-studies/>