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Pedagogies of Affection: Designing Experiences of Presence and Regard

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One of the reckonings I have had to make five months into a global pandemic is that the grounds upon which our classrooms stand continue to feel unstable, confusing, and ever shifting. Educators across the country are once again welcoming into learning spaces amalgamations of stories, experiences, memories—and trauma. Teachers and learners are resuming virtual classes with bodies that have experienced too much, too fast, and are likely to be overwhelmed even before the beginning of a new academic year. So how might the design of our classes and pedagogies grapple with and take into account the profound and collective shifts, disempowerment, and emotional and physical challenges that COVID-19 has imposed on us? How might we design experiences of presence and regard using a practice I call “a pedagogy of affection”?

In an effort to answer these questions, I have been taking a closer look at classroom interactions between March and May of 2020. Looking back at my notes, I notice an important pattern: a more open naming of how our heightened instability aroused feelings of helplessness, anxiety, worry, withdrawal, grief, preoccupation. Students also asked for (and were granted) extensions on assignments, opportunities to process their response to the pandemic via check-ins, campus ministry, zoom happy hours, chapel services, and so on. Our

conversations expanded beyond so-called disciplinary boundaries to include questions like “How is your breathing today?” and “What kind of insecurity are you dealing with in this moment? Did you have enough to eat? Did you have a restful sleep?” and even “How is your undivided unit of *bodyspiritplacetime*?” as Patrisia Gonzalez put it.

Some of us may have asked our students how their bodies were metabolizing fear and anxiety, housing and food insecurities, whether they had a computer to work from, a stable enough shelter. We may have encouraged them to occupy institutional spaces to speak and write about how they were envisioning us showing up for them in the most meaningful and regard-filled ways. One of my student-teachers, Jacob Perez, asked in one of our institutional meetings whether we would be willing to stretch our “understanding of pedagogy beyond what happens when a zoom link goes live.” Having co-created together a special reading course on “Queering and Decolonizing Pedagogies,” Perez invited reflection on the power of implicit pedagogies, affirming that they “occur in the contexts and contours of how we come to the classroom.”[ii]

In finding ways to navigate the spring of 2020, we began to ask how we could hold space for breath and feeling and truth telling; how we could mutually co-create spaces of presence, regard, and care, responding to the many urgencies named above. Some of us began to write love-lectures, began starting classes with breathing and stretching exercises or a more robust check-in where we could talk about anger, vulnerabilities, dissociations, isolation, the ongoing inability to concentrate, police brutality, anti-Blackness, grief. Some of us reconsidered deadlines, exams, grades. Zebulon Hurst, for example, poeticized his longings through a publication co-authored with Perez, as well as this poetic piece, even before the uprisings began: “i wonder when my Black life will matter beyond a sign in the window/ i wonder when i will go home / i wonder where is home / i wonder if my aunties are safe i mean / i know they aren’t but / i wonder if anyone beyond the bonds of my genetic material cares about that. / i wonder if you love me the way you say you do.”

This pandemic, the ensuing uprisings, the incapacity of governments to decently respond to the population’s most pressing needs interrupted our lives in unimaginable ways. We haven’t really recovered or adequately processed much of what happened in the first semester of 2020. And with that, a question haunts me: How are we to begin a new academic year integrating the overlay of stories and traumas that circulate in our bodies, histories, and memories? How are we to think about pedagogies of affection and presence with integrity instead of reinforcing pedagogies of cruelty and trauma response in minoritized students in higher education?

A set of pedagogical choices that are trauma-informed may prove helpful in designing our fall courses as the global pandemic has barely subsided, our communities continue to be in danger, and as we brace ourselves for this year’s election cycle. A trauma-informed approach would not only affirm that suffering, pain, and distress is present among us but would also seek to actively mitigate or foresee potential challenges.

In *Pedagogy of the Heart*, Paulo Freire reflected on his experience of trauma: a forced exile after the violent Brazilian coup d’état, which took place in 1964. His warning that trauma is

not simply something to be lived through—but rather, is something to be felt, to be acknowledged, and to be suffered—is fundamental for our times.[iv] He also warned about the dangers of creating disjointed communities during times of crises where members interact with one another through a “functional” system and a set of transactional interactions. For Freire, the only way forward is one that implicates us in each other’s well-being, with presence, integrity, solidarity, emotional roots, and communion. In order to develop such bonds of affection, presence, and regard, we would have to apprehend the “tragedy of ruptures” while acknowledging our collective crises, all while maintaining a lively political-pedagogical response-ability and epistemological curiosity.

With Freire’s pedagogical charge in mind, a fellow co-conspirator and faculty colleague at the Pacific School of Religion—Dr. Aizaiah Yong—and I designed a course on spiritual formation that is mindful of such pedagogies of the heart via embodied, spiritual, and artistic practices. One goal of the course is to co-construct with students a “covenant of presence and regard” through synchronous and asynchronous exercises such as contemplative practices, writing prompts, artmaking, and a “Spiritual Care Package.” The required “readings,” aside from a curated multivocal range of scholars, are experimental and will include poetry, podcasts, documentaries, and the visual arts, delineating an anatomy of learning that leans more into instability and unlearning than inflexibility and certitude, as Clelia Rodríguez puts it.[v] Our hope is that these pedagogical choices will continue to affirm an educational journey that not only resists “the worst muck of racialized, ableist heterocapital” settler-colonialism, as Alexis Pauline Gumbs names it, but that is aware of our heartaches, our indignation, our agonies, and our political rage, with all our capacity to be at once “problematic and prophetic.”[vi] As the academic year of 2020-21 draws near, I hope we can continue to commit to pedagogies of affection, presence, and regard that gather the dismembered pieces of our bodies, stories, cultures, and existences so we can continue to imagine and create with a tremendous capacity to intimate this world differently.

Notes

[i] Patrisia Gonzales, *Red Medicine: Traditional Indigenous Rites of Birthing and Healing* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2012), xix

[ii] Jacob Perez (he/his) is a Master of Theological Studies student at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley and a Co-Chair of the Latinx Religions and Spiritualities Unit for the American Academy of Religion Western Region. Jacob also serves on the Board of Directors for the AARWR as the Student Representative of Northern California. He can be reached at jperez@ses.psr.edu.

[iii] Zebulon B. Hurst (he/them) is a Master of Divinity student at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California. His work weaves together queer intimacies, pleasurepain, somatics, and poetics. Their continued research explores manifestations of fissure, domination, and self-sublimation. Hurst authored a chapter in the 2017 volume edited by Anthony J. Nocella, II, and Erik Jeurgensmeyer, *Fighting Academic Repression and Neoliberal Education: Resistance*,

Reclaiming, Organizing, and Black Lives Matter in Education (New York: Peter Lang). He can be reached at zhurst@ses.psr.edu.

[iv] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Heart* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 67.

[v] Clelia Rodríguez, *Decolonizing Academia: Poverty, Oppression, and Pain* (Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2018), 1-2.

[vi] Alexis Pauline Gumbs in *Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2020), 2.

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