



# WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## Meaning Matters? Distorted Words Confuse Public Discourse

Nancy Lynne Westfield, Ph.D., *The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion*

Blog Series: Teaching, Religion, Politics

December 15, 2016

Tags: racism | classism | sexism | heterosexism | classroom dialogue

*Have you noticed?*

The lexicon of the American mainstream media has shifted. Before the campaign season, the news only sparingly discussed notions of race. Any allusion to race was vague and superficial. Reporting of race was primarily reserved for assuring the public that criminals are either African American or Latino/a. Whiteness was rarely mentioned. White supremacy, which saturates US society, was mentioned even less. Any media analysis about the identity politics of race, class, gender, or religion was typically reserved for the interviewee to initiate or was the purview of “liberal” media. Occasionally, “the Black view” (as if there is the “normal viewpoint,” and the sole counterpoint is “the Black view”) would be brought into the conversation in the month of February or when discussing issues of “the inner city.” Overt acts of anti-Semitism or blindingly vivid acts of racial hatred had to be the headline story in order for a reporter to mumble an analysis which suggested hegemonic forces might be operative in US society. Most mainstream reporting treated each act of violence as if it were an isolated event. Hardly ever was there analysis and dialogue that suggested oppression is systemic, historic, and ongoing in our beloved democracy.

*Then it happened...*

The presidential campaign brought such bold, constant, and unrelenting hate-speech, outrageous acts of demeaning other-ed human beings, and outright, unfettered arrogance that the media was forced to change the run-of-the-mill lexicon by adding words usually heard in my graduate classroom setting. Reporting accurately so confounded the media that a different vocabulary had to be deployed. Words used sparingly, or if at all, are now common-speak in the public arenas: xenophobia, patriarchy, misogyny, bias, islamophobia, homophobia, prejudice, racism, sexism, classism and alt-right swirl through the everyday news reporting.

My ear is refreshed to hear my preferred analytical vocabulary finally in the public and being nationally engaged. My heart is sick knowing that if these words are so commonplace and routine in the democratic dialogue of a pluralistic society, then we are near a brink of unprecedented social upheaval.

I am, in an ironic way, appreciative that the national discourse was so overwhelmed with the need to describe the in-your-face hatred that it reached for important words. Pressing this new lexicon into extended service is paramount to our national dialogue on freedom and government. Until now, twenty-first century forms of racism, sexism, classism and heterosexism had morphed into expressions that were palatable to those whose highest values are niceness, pleasantry, and conformity. I am hoping this new lexicon is sparking a needed curiosity and that the new lexicon will assist persons to label their oppressive experiences for which they previously could not name but under which they suffer. Succinct naming of our fears and anxieties as well as interrogation of the structured hatred that perpetuates the "isms" is a powerful shift - we who teach, minister, and lead must sustain it.

*OMG! Then something else happened...*

Recently, the TV was on while I was busying doing something else other than watching it. My focus was jolted to the media broadcast when I heard a surrogate of the President Elect say to an interviewer, "The word *racist* no longer means anything. It simply means an angry, old [white] man." The new lexicon had been noticed. Those who use post-truth hegemonic strategies are making efforts to redefine, distort, and garble these terms. This deceptive definition of racist has extracted race, power, domination and victimhood. The new definition infers white women do not have the power to be racist (Ugh!). Racism is now, literally, being defined as toothless, impotent, and ignorable. We are living in tumultuous times when words of hatred, corruption, exploitation and dehumanization can be redefined by those who reap the benefits of white supremacy and patriarchy. We must recognize the power of words and keep these tools in our own quiver - in public ways.

The vocabulary that usually only inhabits my classroom spaces is now in the living rooms of average American citizens. We must not squander this moment. Those who are painfully acquainted with this vocabulary must take the time to assist those who are newly acquainted to these ideas and concepts. I suspect many people are hearing these words for the very first time. We must pause to discuss, define, and nurture this new public discourse clamoring to

make sense and make meaning of all that is happening in the identity politics of our democracy.

Listen for the new words in the media. Make a list, and then talk with your family, friends, teachers, students, parishioners, employees, etc. about their definitions and their importance as tools of liberation at this moment. Listen to the use of the words. Are they being sanitized? Are they being coopted to new meanings that give the impression that oppression is not vicious or evil?

We who feel the gravity of current national politics cannot squander these teachable moments.

Finally, to those of us who have the privilege and responsibility of regular interaction with students in classroom settings, let us integrate this lexicon into our classroom dialogues. Please do not hide behind the excuse that your academic discipline or course topic does not lend itself to a conversation which includes identity politics and injustice. Please do not rely upon the faculty of color to carry the burden of this conversation for the curriculum. Please do not depend upon the students of color to ask you a question after class. Being serious about this teachable moment will take your initiative, and perhaps, even a new approach to your own teaching and scholarship. In this moment of the new public lexicon, let our teaching struggle to stay abreast of the shifting political landscape and let us work-at a new sense of relevance and urgency for the formation of our students. Especially in our classrooms where our judgment is trusted, we must disentangle, expose, and de-fang the burgeoning pseudo-methodology which would intentionally distort and misrepresent the meanings of critical terms lest this dishonesty become preferable to our students.

Our freedom deserves these conversations.

<https://wabash.center/2016/12/meaning-matters-distorted-words-confuse-public-discourse/>