

Performance Criticism as Critical Pedagogy

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Few themes have so dominated contemporary New Testament interpretation in recent years as the Roman imperial context of those writings. Whether interpreting the Gospels, Pauline letters, or Revelation, New Testament scholars have shown how the “empire of God” announced and embodied by Jesus and his followers offered an alternative to the Roman Empire. This paper asks not about the empire that ruled then, but about how power dynamics like those employed by Rome continue to rule today.

Let me pause for a moment of confession regarding this challenge. Sharing the abundance of anti-imperial interpretations opens my university students’ eyes to dynamics they had not seen in the texts. Yet, and here the confession, I often suspect that I am promoting anti-imperial ideas through an imperialistic mode of teaching. I struggle within the restraints and possibilities of the twenty-first century higher education classroom to nurture learning as a liberative process for my students. I don’t merely want to deliver ideas about transformation and reciprocity, I want us to experience these virtues in the classroom. I fear that the unintended irony a student offered me rings true. He wrote, “Your understanding of freedom captivates me.” This current struggle is an old friend; as a parish pastor I longed to help my congregation

members to interpret the Bible, yet often ended up teaching them my already defined interpretations.

Performance criticism of biblical texts

I have used biblical performance criticism in several ways in my undergraduate classrooms. I perform stories for my Introduction to Theology students; I have taught a unit on performance criticism in an interpretation course; I have worked with students on extended performances like the Gospel of Mark, Galatians, and the Jacob Esau cycle. I also have participated in congregational “scripture by heart” groups that prepare stories to tell in congregations. A few years back, students who had seen me perform biblical texts in the classroom asked me to teach them how to do it. We set up a one-credit course which involved meeting for one hour a week with a group of five students. We decided that we would all work for six weeks on a single pericope from the Gospel of Luke. I chose the story of the ten lepers (Luke 17:11–19) because it would come up in the lectionary in seven weeks and thus the students could go out and tell the prepared text in a congregation of their own choosing.

Every time we met we began with exercises that reminded us that we are

embodied people.¹ Then we read the text together, we performed the text, and discussed what we saw as a result. During the first session, I taught them the story using a method in which I would tell the text line by line in an embodied way and they would repeat back to me the words and motions I had offered them. This quickly led to an awareness that my way of embodying the text, while it looked natural when I did it, did not fit for all of them. So once the text was learned in this way, each had the freedom to reinterpret it. We discovered that there are many interpretations of the text that have integrity, but may not be transferable in uncomplicated ways to other interpreters. We also discovered that bodies make a difference. In fact, by the end of the six weeks we found it unbelievable that this text, which deals so much with the relationship between bodies, could be approached by any interpreter in an unembodied way and still be understood.

One exciting thing that took place in our repeated performances of this text was a growing awareness of the multiplicity of meanings possible within a relatively fixed text. Students are accustomed to thinking of texts as having one correct interpretation they must discover, forsaking all the others since those must be wrong. Many scholars and parishioners operate under the same assumption. The act of interpretation becomes profoundly more complex through this repetitive process. While we still know that the text refuses to play a number of ways—most shocking, of course, when we cannot get the text to do what we assumed it does—we discover the amazing diversity of ways that the text can be bodily interpreted with integrity. Some of these ways are mutually negating, but they stubbornly stand there and

confront us. Jason played Jesus as wanting distance between himself and the lepers. Taryn saw him drawn to them from the start. Rachel thought Jesus was angry at the ungrateful nine who did not return; I felt him longing for the even grander celebration all ten could have had. In one of the most interesting breakthroughs, David played the Lord squatting down and inviting the leper to stand up. As the leper stood, Jesus continued to crouch on the ground. This image of Jesus physically looking up at the leper standing over him provided an amazing moment of embodiment that surprised and changed us not only as interpreters but also as human beings. Throughout this process, we learned how power is configured in and between bodies—those of the characters in the text as well as our own, in aesthetic performance and in the performance we call life.

One main dynamic of this class continued to excite me. I was responsible for making sure that learning took place, but I was never under the illusion that I could control that process. I guided what one performance pedagogue described as “rigorous indeterminacy and openness.”² I brought certain skills to the meeting: storytelling experience, knowledge of Greek, knowledge of the ancient context, elements of research I have formulated over the years. While some of the students brought resources like these from their prior training or their weekly homework, I still had an advantage of knowledge in these specific areas.

However, these turned out to be only some of the tools that helped interpret the texts. They may not have even been the

1. We used exercises from Richard Swanson's *Provoking the Gospel* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004).

2. Richard Schechner, “Forward” in *Teaching Performance Studies*, eds. Nathan Stucky and Cynthia Wimmer, (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), x.

most essential. Everyone came with a *body of knowledge* that mattered for interpretation. Some brought theatrical experience, others musical experience. Ritual elements of the text came out as students improvised with drums or piano in the background. A Spanish major stepped into the text speaking a language strange to the audience members, and they saw things anew. A slam poet slammed the text. Some used their sense of humor and timing. Others in stillness told the tale. Beyond these skills, we found that lived experience mattered. The illness that one suffered in his youth brought insight. Time spent as a foreigner in Central America or Africa shaped others. Harassment experienced by a lesbian shaped one interpretation. Rejection by one's own family turned out to be a hermeneutical resource. Recognition and confession of our own prejudices even contributed to engagement of the text. Male and female bodies as well as large and small bodies offered different impacts. Testimony to healing events in life changed the conversation. The embraces we had received throughout our lives came into play. Those who were emotionally in touch and articulate helped us delve into areas others of us would have missed.

In fact, for me, one of the most amazing things happened during a class session

in about the fourth week when I personally was shattered by my home congregation's violent conversations around sexuality. I found myself—I definitely did not feel in control here—being cared for and attended to by my students in a way that I would never allow in any other classroom, but which was clearly a gift for me. The community that had lived in Luke's healing story for weeks became a place for my own healing. At other moments, the same happened for others in the group when their needs became present. The community of healing performance shaped us in a way that was truly gracious. I cannot help but wonder how my home congregation's approach to the Bible and each other might have changed if we had engaged in this practice together. We might have noted the complex ways that God has entangled the divine story with our personal stories and thus understood each other better.

Performance criticism as critical pedagogy

About forty years ago, Paulo Freire found himself sitting among illiterate peasants in Brazilian villages trying to teach them to read. Dissatisfied with the teaching methods typically used in such contexts, he sought an alternative pedagogy. Freire articulated a way of learning that did not assume that he as the teacher held all knowledge or that he needed to transfer information from his head to his students' minds. Even though he knew how to read and they did not, he understood that education had to be co-intentional. True learning only takes place when the participants, Freire included, respected the concerns, intentions, and wisdom of all. Both he as facilitator and his students as participants read the world together as partners. He critiqued the educational patterns most of us know too well noting that they relied on a banking metaphor:

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the teacher deposits a wealth of knowledge into the students' heads. Freire states, "In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing."³ Students are to "patiently receive, memorize, and repeat."⁴ According to Freire, this system creates passive subjects as cogs in the economic machine. Freire deplors how educators with progressive ideas often fall into the same non-progressive pedagogy. He says, "At bottom, this is education reproducing the authoritarianism of the capitalist mode of production. It is deplorable how progressive educators, as they analyze and fight against the reproduction of the dominant ideology in the schools, actually reproduce the authoritarian ideology...."⁵

Let me extend the economic metaphor of capitalism. While many progressive educators do work to oppose the blatantly imperialistic modes of fundamentalism, we often do so with a pedagogy that more closely resembles "free trade" models. We desire to lift the poor out of their state of undeveloped resources and provide them with the tools they need to be truly modern. In free trade agreements, the United States often claims to seek a mutually beneficial model of economic exchange. Yet people outside of the centers of power point out that this mode, which appears kinder or gentler, in fact uses the rhetoric of mutuality to cloak the real domination that occurs. As a Christian friend put it

3. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* translated by Myra Ramos (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), 58.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Paulo Freire, "The Pedagogy of Asking Questions" in *The Paulo Freire Reader*, eds. Ana Maria Araújo Freire and Donald Macedo (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2000), 229.

about our liberal interventions in her country's economy, "It is good for the Chilean economy, but not for the people of Chile."

The lack of mutuality in the classroom replicates the values of the larger systems in which it is embedded. Freire believed that education as asking questions and seeking answers in community would create a different kind of world. He expected a world to arise out of dialog that would embody the virtues of 1) faith in our companions on the journey, 2) hope for the transformation of the world, 3) love actively serving the neighbor 4) humility, and finally 5) continued dialog in mutuality.⁶ While I may not list any of these as course objectives on my syllabi, the students I remember and cherish most are those with whom I have found myself humbly learning into practices of faith, hope, love, and mutuality. Among those beloved students are those with whom I studied the story of the ten lepers and many others who have struggled to perform biblical texts faithfully. If this can happen in an academic classroom, how much more might this process radically reshape congregational life into the image of God's empire?

Critical pedagogy and performance criticism

In a journal such as this, I could easily and, without much risk, point out how fundamentalism in its various forms, in both content and process, replicates imperialistic patterns. However, I return to my earlier point: I often find myself captivating my students with lectures on the transforming freedom that God's empire promises. I struggle to find strategies that move toward mutuality, but then often find myself relinquishing the real professorial

6. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 76f.

contributions I could make. In those cases, the students sit in small groups and share their ignorance or boredom or more likely what went on at last night's party. While this is not inevitable and skilled educators know how to avoid these traps, I continue to look for methods that respect what my students and I each bring to the classroom. Performance criticism as I described it above has been the best resource I have found to do this.

The work of Freire has been built on and expanded by bell hooks. She writes passionately about the need for new educational models that move in Freire's trajectory. I will connect the dynamics she

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speaks of within classrooms to imperialist or anti-imperialist options outside of the classrooms. I will ask how the values in class are replications of the larger systems in which they participate or, alternatively, are visions of the hopes for different systems in the future.

Traditional classrooms, hooks notes, are organized hierarchially. Professors are those who come with knowledge; students

at best are those without knowledge resources, or at worst are perceived as those who only have prejudicial and misguided resources that must be wiped away before real intellectual construction can begin. In theology courses, professors may look at students and see biblical illiterates or, worse, Sunday school-educated people with misguided ideas that must first be cleared away before the real learning takes place. In this model, the professor has the resources and the students bring only deficits. Of her own experience, hooks writes, "In the institutions where I have taught, the prevailing pedagogical model is authoritarian, hierarchical in a coercive and often dominating way, and certainly one where the voice of the professors is the 'privileged' transmitter of knowledge."⁷ Similar dynamics are not alien to many pastor/laity relationships. These dynamics also reflect international relationships where the centers of power come filled with economic wisdom to bring along those who are bogged down in what are perceived to be backward ways. Once the situation is structured in this way, the one with positive resources will need to control the conversation and practices to produce the desired outcomes. These outcomes are, of course, desired by the center, not the margins.

The multiple resources that facilitate interpretation via performance criticism destabilize the power relationships. If knowledge is based strictly on disciplinary research, the teacher or pastor has a major edge. However, if we recognize the multiple resources that provide insight into performance critical interpretation, then we move toward mutuality because all parties bring resources that will affect the conversation. This does not mean that

7. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 85.

I am no longer responsible for the integrity of the learning process, but that I guide it seeking reciprocity that moves us in the direction of mutuality. Even the sharing of my own expertise becomes a way of better equipping the others for their own interpretive work.

This all happens within the honest recognition that complete mutuality will not be possible since in the end I assign the grade. The cloaking of my real authority does not serve the process well since that same authority tends to assert itself under the table when I do not place it clearly on the table. One of the major issues in the free trade agreements our government makes is that they are publicly presented as an accord made between equal partners at the table. Yet under the table or behind the scenes, the center imposes regulations and restrictions that limit the real options available to their so-called partners. Within our classroom, we mitigated the imbalance of power by having the course be pass/fail, thus allowing the public performance to be the primary motivator of student effort. Fellow classmates and eventual audience provided feedback on the quality of the work. Both content and form came together nicely as we critiqued power relationships between characters within the text while trying to create alternative power relationships within a non-hierarchical classroom.

One of the lovely results of this educational process is that the students all share and see the intellectual work of their peers. In my other courses, most of the assignments involve writing papers or exams that only I ever read. Through performance criticism their personal reflections go public. The students have exerted local control of the product they produced that both serves the world and serves as an opportunity for the enrichment of their own lives.

Performance criticism makes its most impressive contribution to liberative education by acknowledging the role of our bodies in the process of learning. As hooks notes, "Liberative pedagogy really demands that one work in the classroom, and that one work with the limits of the body, work both with and through and against those limits..."⁸ While those traditionally granted educational authority can have "the privilege of denying their body,"⁹ this is not a luxury offered her as a black woman. The focus on academics as "mind" activity at the expense of body leads to an illusion of neutrality that is a luxury not universally extended. She states,

The erasure of the body encourages us to think that we are listening to neutral, objective facts, facts that are not particular to who is sharing the information. . . . We must return ourselves to a state of embodiment in order to deconstruct the way power has been traditionally orchestrated in the classroom, denying subjectivity to some groups and according it to others. By recognizing subjectivity and the limits of identity, we disrupt that objectification that is so necessary in a culture of domination.¹⁰

What is more, the "luxury" of disembodiment is unhealthy for both the privileged and those denied privilege. We all suffer this separation of mind from body as brokenness and fragmentation. Through the possibilities of performance criticism we can begin to "re-member what has been dismembered."¹¹ When everyone "struggle[s]

8. Ibid., 138.

9. Ibid., 137.

10. Ibid., 139.

11. Mark Kline Taylor uses this imagery in *Remembering Esperanza: A Cultural-Political Theology for North American Praxis* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), 22.

bodily with course content”¹² we come to know things about ourselves, our world, and the texts in a more profound way. We create a literal *body* of knowledge.

This holistic experience of education in the interpretation of biblical texts also allows us to explore emotional dimensions of texts. These were stories that were told with passion. To know them only as words on a page is fundamentally to be ignorant of the way that they were first sent into the world. Knowing through feigned objectivity facilitates ignorance of ourselves as human beings. While Western epistemology has been highly attentive to the way emotional passion can imprison rationality, our learners are aware of how rationality stripped of passion imprisons one in dullness and banality. Embodied interpretation demands the exploration of our own passionate impulses as well as those of the original authors. This too has a transformative effect as we deal with pain in our own lives, pain that is often ignored, above all in the classroom. Having become aware of our own experiences of brokenness, we are broken open to engage compassionately others who suffer. Yet the whole range of human emotions comes into play through performance criticism. The joy and laughter that inevitably pours out of these sessions makes them delightful places to occupy.

Space will not allow me to go into all of the other ways that performance criticism helps us become whole, but I would like to at least suggest some of the borders within and outside of ourselves that performance criticism causes us to cross. As Bible stories

intersect with our own lives, we see the religious facet of life reconnected to other aspects of life. We see sacred dimensions as well as those that call for lament in all of life. As a result, classroom life becomes filled with the rest of life and our lives become more reflective of what was learned in the classroom. Study and praxis come together as do work and pleasure. Our explorations in the particular discipline of biblical studies also lead to self-knowledge and awareness of the world. The disciplinary lines that run like scars through our institutions begin to fade as aesthetics, politics, literature, and dramatic media find common ground in performance. In congregations, the theological positions that separate one from another also begin to shift. The divisions of our world break down as we try on, hear, and engage in multiple interpretations bodily. We learn new ways to interact with each other since “performance enables an imaginative leap into other kinds of bodies, other ways of being in the world, and in so doing, it opens up concrete and embodied possibilities for resistance, reform, and renewal.”¹³

This holistic practice moves us to know beyond what we have known and to do this bodily. I have tried to follow a pedagogy that hooks maps out in the hope that it will yield something new. She writes of her hope:

Urging all of us to open our minds and hearts so that we can know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions, I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education a practice of freedom.¹⁴

12. Elyse Lamm Pineau, “Critical Performance Pedagogy: Fleshing Out the Politics of Liberatory Education,” in *Teaching Performance Studies*, Nathan Stucky and Cynthia Wimmer, eds. (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 50.

13. *Ibid.*, 51.

14. hooks, 12.

Final confession

I began with a confession and I conclude with another. I am aware that these little gatherings of learning communities will not bring multinational hierarchies to their knees. Global imperialism did not crumble as a handful of us gathered in a classroom in Seguin, Texas, and embodied God's word, any more than Rome rolled over and died in the presence of Jesus and the divine empire that he announced. I am aware that I may be guilty here of what McLaren and Farahmandpur call "airbrushed insurgency"¹⁵ and "Jacuzzi socialism."¹⁶ Yet there are ways that I have sought to move the analysis of these texts beyond resistance to classroom imperialism and out into the world for transformation.

First of all, we linked power challenges within the texts to power relationships in our context. Where it was not possible to make this apparent in performance, we at least discussed it in our conversations. What are the mechanisms of exclusion and domination in our own world that mirror the dynamics reported in the text? In a later course, the key to attending to these dynamics has been immersion experiences in marginalized communities. A trip to the U.S.-Mexican border opens our eyes to see global dynamics that are hidden from us on campus. Several of our participants lived for a full semester in Africa, Spain, or other global contexts. They came with lived experiences and tools for political, economic interpretation. We welcomed the perspectives that their travel offered on the biblical texts.

Ideally, the participants in my courses are as diverse as the university campus itself, with members of different classes, ethnicities, genders, nationalities, sexual orientations, and religious identifications. Beyond this, we must struggle to make our universities and congregations places that more accurately represent these same kinds of diversity present in our surrounding communities. In a world where even hints of mutuality are all too rare, perhaps a concrete taste of partnership in a learning community or congregational Bible study will create a longing that inspires us to ask: What would the world be like if this kind of reciprocity were to spring up in the cracks of globalization? Might it look like the mustard weed infestation—decentralized, multi-formed, out of control, but alive—description in Jesus' parable (Mark 4:30–32)? Thus the community of storytellers, while not bringing in the fullness of God's empire, could experience "a staging ground for self and social renewal" by requiring students and teachers [or pastors and laity] to rehearse more equitable and impassioned ways of being and behaving.¹⁷ To participate in and contribute to such a vision is a gift and challenge that not only has renewed my pedagogy, but disclosed and nurtured the power of Christian hope in my life.

15. Peter McLaren and Ramin Farahmandpur, *Teaching Against Global Capitalism and the New Imperialism: A Critical Pedagogy* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), 18.

16. *Ibid.*, 21.

17. Pineau, 53. restating and expanding a quotation from a Western States Communication Conference Keynote address by Earnest Boyer in 1994.