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Teaching Note

Toni Morrison, Vincent Harding, and Pedagogy by Bartleby

by Robin Hackett

INVITATION, 1963, ARTHUR THRALL. ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO OPEN ACCESS COLLECTION.

In the fall of 2024, I was a new chair of the department of Women and Gender Studies at the University of New Hampshire, where I have also been a professor in the English department for more than 20 years. The university is predominantly white and liberal with a small minority of conservative students, who have been increasingly activist since the 2016 presidential elections. As a new chair, and continuing until now, I have good rapport with the dean. Nevertheless, in the month after the 2024 presidential election, I was the recipient of three summonses to her office over complaints lodged against faculty by undergraduate students who felt persecuted for their political conservatism. One of the faculty whose course generated a complaint is a graduate teaching assistant, Abby, who announced on the morning after Trump's victory that her class was "cancelled on account of fascism." This bit of comedy mixed with despair was the last straw for the undergraduate who had been annoyed earlier in the semester when Abby used honesty about her own politics as a prompt to class discussion. The complaint led to a lot of emails and conversations, but ultimately it did not have a chilling effect on Abby or her cohort as such attacks often do. Instead, Abby was able to go forward with her class, including the complaining student, without abandoning her principles. At the same, Abby reduced her risk of being the target of further complaints. I was pleased with this outcome. Below, I discuss the materials I used in conversations with Abby to orient her to teaching in these times, and to bring about this rapprochement.

That Abby is an African Americanist writing a Toni Morrison dissertation shaped my choice of materials that would be productive for her. But Morrison's story "Recitatif" and Vincent Harding's essay "The Vocation of the Black Scholar and the Struggles of the Black Community" can speak to all of us working to develop a pedagogy for these troubled times. Harding wrote and circulated "The Vocation of the Black Scholar and the Struggles of the Black Community" in the 1970s as black studies was growing from the streets into the academy. In it, he develops an idea that has long been important to all the so-called "area studies"—the idea that scholarship of value is done in relation to the needs of a community. Since black people in the United States exist in an internal colony, Harding argues, the vocation of the black scholar must be framed against this condition. The practices and principles that follow are these:

1) Know our common ancestors and common contestations for justice without abdicating responsibility to outside "experts."
2) Speak the truth, including sympathetic and hard analyses of local and global affairs.
3) Identify the enemy. Colonized people cannot be understood except in relation to their colonizers—white America and its systems of domination (in education, law, economics, health care, military) that are interlocking regarding black people. The enemy includes white individuals who hold up those institutions as models for life, and black people whose moral failings harm us.
4) Be future orientated in our assessments. Speculate. Face possibilities.
5) Be truthful about black life even at the expense of respectability and universalism. Be "possessed" by pan African black experience to break away from the false boundaries of western colonialism, which also means to break away from academic disciplinary boundaries, and at the same time be personally disciplined to hard work *with* and *in relation to* black community.
6) Refuse despair. (Harding)

For Abby, grounded in African American literature, talking through Harding's ideas was affirming. It reinforced her commitment to social justice pedagogies. It suggested she is doing well in speaking explicitly about the political circumstances in which she and her students are studying. In being outspoken about her own politics, Abby breaks away from false claims to academic objectivity and universality. Notwithstanding her momentary despair (and acknowledging that canceling class probably wasn't her best idea), Abby does brave, honest, relational work in the classroom in Vincent Hardings's terms. Moreover, as a scholar, she generally follows my Harding-inspired advice to graduate students: 1) ask of texts "to whom is this work in relation?" and 2) be skeptical when the answer comes back "the discipline," or "the academy," or "the author's own career." This is the kind of work required of all of us in the context of current assaults on DEI and higher education generally.

However, three summonses to the dean's office in one month also suggest that in these times, as in others, more self-censorship than we like may be advisable. Having been targeted by Turning Point USA myself after the 2016 election, I am cautious in what I say to undergraduates, and I advise self-censorship to the graduate students with whom I work on queer and feminist research projects. I would be a callous mentor indeed if I did not warn these students that right-wing organizations are looking for opportunities to publish hit pieces on our field and individuals in it. Moreover, because my experiences make for an effective cautionary tale, I am often asked to lead workshops in my university about how to avoid getting into the crosshairs of the likes of TPUSA. I do this work with a lot of inner conflict. Self-censoring, avoiding controversial subjects, is neither my wont nor my training. It is not consistent with Harding's directive, also embraced by scholars in WGS and other area studies, that good scholarship is done in relation to community needs. Nor is it even a reliable strategy for staying out of trouble. Right wing attacks on educators have at least as much to do with who you are as they do with what you say. Current targets, as we know, are anyone perceived to be queer or trans, Muslim, Jewish, feminist, immigrant, or black or brown. Moreover, even if the university lawyers step in to defend us, as they did in my case, and as they may continue to do for now, their best advice is to remind us to "represent both sides of every question."

This admonition is distinctly unhelpful. There are not "two sides to every question" and especially not to questions

about anyone's full humanity. Classrooms are not courtrooms. Our job is to enable students to reveal and explore complexities, causes, implications, and multiple voices and standpoints. But university lawyers do not necessarily foreground this aspect of our work in doing theirs. Their jobs are to defend the university against existential threats. Assuming they want to help us, we have to help them do so by being explicit about the advocacy components of our disciplines, and of higher education writ large. And we have to teach them what this actually looks like in pedagogical terms.

Toni Morrison's story "Recitatif" provides a useful model here; it suggests a way to manage all these priorities, including leaning into Harding's time-tested advice that good scholarship is done in relation to community needs. Morison's story illustrates that to refrain from politically committed speech is not a cop out, or a concession to fear in the face of Harding's call for honesty and bravery, but rather, can be effective pedagogy. Moreover, as a bonus, following Morrison's tutelage may also have a slight protective effect for faculty who would prefer to avoid having to work with university lawyers in the first place.

As you may know, "Recitatif" is set in an orphanage. Two pre-teen girls, Roberta and Twyla, arrive in the care home at the same time, share a dorm room, and have in common flawed mothers rather than beautiful dead parents in the sky. The two are also involved, from the beginning, in explicitly racialized conflict. We learn that one of the girls is white, and that one of them is black: "we look like salt and pepper," Twyla the narrator comments (Morrison 423). Also in the story's first paragraphs, Twyla reports that the minute she and Roberta were introduced "I got sick to my stomach. It was one thing to be taken out of your own bed early in the morning--it was something else to be stuck in a strange place with a girl from a whole other race" (422). Twyla agrees with her mother that "they smelled funny" (422). More conflicts written in terms of racial hostility proceed from this beginning.

Morrison, however, does not divulge which character is white, and which black. The process of reading the story for many people with whom I have discussed it is something like this: from page one, readers encounter suggestive but inconclusive cues based on stereotypes about the racial identities of both central characters. Twyla might be a more black name than Roberta. On the other hand, Twyla's comments about "their" hair might mean she is white. Later, Roberta's mother's refusal to shake hands with Twyla's mother seems to mean Roberta and her mother are white. Conversely, Roberta's mother's religiosity may hint that she and Roberta are black. Still later, when the two protagonists meet as adults in a Howard Johnsons, Roberta, on her way to "the coast" for an appointment with Jimi Hendrix, snubs Twyla for not knowing who he is. Is this a hint that Roberta is black? Perhaps. But given Hendrix's largely white fan base, maybe it's a hint that she is white. Readers tend to focus first on sorting through this inconclusive data to discover racial assignments as a mechanism for understanding – understanding the character's views, understanding the meaning of the story. In classes assigned "Recitatif," discussion often begins with one student giving evidence that Twyla is black, and another that Roberta is. At some point, after the failure of multiple cues to determine racial identification, readers and classes full of readers give up trying to pin down the question of racial identity, and read instead to make sense of the story in other terms -- in terms of the painful mothering over which the girls bond; in terms of their common fears; in terms of their shared cruelty toward Maggie, a mute, bowlegged kitchen helper universally bullied by residents of the orphanage.

Thus does Morrison teach her readers to mistrust racial identification -- historically over-used, including with devastating consequences--as a route to understanding, and instead to read openly not only for evidence and data but also for terms of analysis that are not racial identification.

It would be a grave and perverse misunderstanding of Morrison to suggest that because her story turns on not revealing racial identification, and Harding's essay advocates direct honest speech in terms of racial identification, that the two works reflect opposing visions about the vocation of the black scholar. Morrison's story is an exquisite affirmation of Harding's principles. It is honest, and it is brave in identifying racial conflict as the subject of American life. Morrison works in relation to the needs of black community. It's not a stretch to imagine that Morrison learned from Harding directly.

Morrison's pedagogy, however, is strikingly divergent from Harding's insistence on honest direct speech. The pedagogy of Morrison's story reinforces what we likely already believe about teaching and learning: when teachers supply answers, student exploration is limited. To translate the lesson of the story to Abby's work as a teacher of composition is to see that announcing one's views -- her support for Harris over Trump in this case -- might be brave speech. It follows longstanding and time-tested principles about rejecting false notions of academic objectivity in favor of transparency and positionality. But it also tempts students to deliver answers they think you are looking for based on what you divulge about your politics. Under Morrison's tutelage, what might be understood as brave speech in telling students that you supported Harris over Trump looks like a way to encourage not critical thinking but rather a short cut to that right answer highly sought after by good students everywhere, and, as well, as a short cut to that wrong answer handy for use as a weapon by those students with an ax to grind. Most importantly, it denies students the prompt of mystery to turn to data, to attend to evidence, to explore even the terms of analysis.

Moreover, as a bonus, Morrison's pedagogy seems to follow the advice that lawyers and administrators are offering to faculty in these times of trouble: refrain from exposing your politics. Morrison's story speaks and does a great deal, of course. It is brave and honest. It exposes the technology and effects of racial identification in the USA. But its pedagogy is a refusal to divulge. Morrison refuses to divulge racial identity, and in doing so illuminates how commonly and devastatingly readers mistakenly understand racial identity as a route to knowing. Morrison's work is not animated by caution or concession to fear. Nor should ours be. But when we can describe our pedagogy as refraining, as a refusal to divulge, in the name of turning students back

to evidence and independent analysis in the search for deepened understanding, we can keep the lawyers and administrators working with us in defense against the assaults that come our way when we are invited to the dean's office or find ourselves featured in *Breitbart News.*

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