ENGLISH

Pathos and the Moral Imagination in ENGL 205: "Passing and Performing Identity"

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The summer before beginning the Ignatian Mentoring Program, I faced a challenge: delivering my ENGL 205: Literature and the Moral Imagination course online. I had already successfully taught this course with the theme of "Passing and Performing Identity," having students read texts that explore the phenomenon of racial passing in the United States, whereby "black" persons light-skinned enough to appear "white" cross the color line to live as white people. But I was concerned about adapting this complex theme for the online environment while still retaining the flavor of a Xavier signature course (part of the Ethics and Religion in Society triad) *and* the student learning goals for the Diversity Flag and the Gender and Diversity Studies designation. The course is designed to integrate approaches and artifacts from multiple disciplines to enhance our reading of literature as we ask big questions: How could someone be "born into" one race and then live life as another race? Is racial identity fixed or fluid? Natural or cultural? And why do Americans conceive of race according to a black/white binary?

For previous iterations of my ENGL 205, I had developed assignments that ask students to investigate their own backgrounds, experiences, and values (e.g., a personal essay where students describe a time when they successfully "passed"—intentionally or unintentionally—for something different than what they "are," whether in terms of racial/ethnic identity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, ability/disability, or some other social identity or group status), as well as essay assignments requiring students to contend with the past (using a primary historical document to explain a central theme in William Wells Brown's 1853 antislavery novel *Clotel*) and with characters having diverse racial experiences (comparing/contrasting two characters from the Harlem Renaissance novels *Passing* and *Plum Bun*). I had also used contemporary narratives of passing, including film and comics, as well as a smattering of cultural theory on the social construction of race and what it means to "perform" identity (personally, institutionally, culturally). Given these already-established assignments, I couldn't quite put my finger on what I thought the online version of the course would be missing.

As I was scripting my two-minute "welcome" video for the Canvas home page, I suddenly realized what the online course would lack: me. That is, I knew I would be interacting with students on a daily basis via intensive written feedback to their comments and questions posted via the learning management system. But I hadn't fully considered how much I rely on my face—my own phenotype, my racial ambiguity in person and in the flesh—to subtly do the work of explaining the nature of racial passing. I am a half-Jamaican (black) + half-Swiss-German (white) American who appears white to

most white people, and ethnically something-other-than-white to many people of color. In a traditional brick-and-mortar classroom, I usually discuss my heritage with students at some point within the first week of class—if not the very first class period—and it tends to come up naturally based on assigned readings that explain how race is socially constructed rather than biological (hence, a white-appearing person can be deemed "black" via hypodescent, the history of the one-drop rule, etc.). But in an online version of the course, I would have to be more deliberate in sharing anecdotes about myself and about how this particular course came to be.

I used to hesitate or be overly scripted when teaching texts about racial passing because they seemed too close to my own identity and experience. Although I have never tried to escape slavery by pretending to be the slaveowner of a darker-skinned family member, never hid my background while dating a racist rich white man during the Jazz Age, never been encouraged by friends to "marry up" by finding a lighter-skinned (or white) partner—all experiences of the characters we read in my ENGL 205—I can testify to what it's like to have a white grandfather whose first question when I was born was, "How dark is she?" I can speak to being in the car when the cops pulled my father over "Just to see what's going on here" when he was driving a group of nine-year-olds (me and my friends) to a sleepover. I've been asked "Where are you from?" as a not-so-subtle code for "What race/ethnicity are you?" all my life. And I know what it's like to feel invisible when I hear white acquaintances make derogatory or fearful comments about people of color, thinking that they are in a safe space with only white auditors. Not that I share all of these details in the classroom. But as a professor, I know that a well-placed personal story can enhance the feeling of realism for students—the awakening of a sense that these things happen to actual people, not just literary characters—because I can testify in the moment that similar things have happened to me.

My training in Women's Studies and inclusive pedagogical philosophies taught me that personal identity is something you can deliberately deploy at strategic moments in the classroom. But through the Ignatian Mentoring Program, I now realize that this type of pedagogy is not just a disciplinary approach: it's an Ignatian principle. When I first read "The Heart of a Teacher: Identity and Integrity in Teaching" by Parker J. Palmer in *A Jesuit Education Reader*, I was moved by the notion that academia often asks us to separate our personal self from our public selves (including our performative, pedagogical selves), which can result in a kind of detachment from both those we teach and from our own subjectivity. I hit this passage and felt like Palmer was speaking to me aloud:

> This self-protective split of personhood from practice is encouraged by an academic culture that distrusts personal truth. Though the academy claims to value multiple modes of knowing, it honors only one—an "objective" way of knowing that takes us into the "real" world by taking us "out of ourselves."
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> In this culture, objective facts are regarded as pure while subjective feelings are suspect and sullied. In this culture, the self is not a source to be tapped but a

danger to be suppressed, not a potential to be fulfilled but an obstacle to be overcome. (322)

Palmer's words remind us that it is risky to teach from our full selfhood, but that it is a necessary and joyful sort of risk. I feel affirmed that my personal knowledge can actually enhance my approach to the material and class conversations. Indeed, I have come to realize that any hesitation I previously had about teaching the history and literature of racial passing in the United States meant that I was missing out on the chance to teach a core part of my field, and also missing the chance to engage more deeply with students on a larger topic that is dear to me: racial justice and racial sympathy.

I have also recognized more fully the significance of teaching empathy, particularly in the online environment. Thus, part of my project for the Ignatian Mentoring Program involved adapting a lecture I often give on the significance of the idea of the "moral imagination" in my traditional ENGL 205 course for a video lecture in the online environment. The lecture begins with an overview of the work of contemporary fiction writer Claire Vaye Watkins, the author of *Battleborn* (2012 award-winning short story collection) and *Gold Fame Citrus* (2015 debut novel). Watkins writes about environmental change and unforgiving landscapes, imagining a not-too-distant world where water is scarce. When asked in a University of Michigan *LSA Magazine* interview about why she writes "about the intersection of geological time and human time," Watkins responded with a meditation on empathy:

> …it's sadly unsurprising that we so struggle to act in a way that is considerate of future generations, ecosystems, or other species. It seems we're not good with abstract empathy, except, most interestingly, when it comes to art. So a novel about drought [*Gold Fame Citrus*] seemed a good place to experiment with the collision of abstract conundrums that are tough to grasp with emotional immediacy, such as the draining of aquifers, and immediate, corporeal concerns that the reader would feel as she read, like thirst. (48)

Reviewers use words like "terrifying" and "unsettling" yet "beautiful" to describe Watkins's first novel. And notice that Watkins's account of her work suggests this, too: she wants to think about how both physical embodied experience and interior emotional experience work together to form our humanity and our understanding of society, sometimes in disconcerting or uncanny ways.

As I explain to students, the fact that Watkins focuses on the "emotional immediacy" of bodily feeling is no accident. Because our bodies are the medium through which we inhabit and process the world, it's hard to imagine ourselves outside of our own bodies and experiences; yet we must try to do so. In fact, the colloquialism of "putting yourself in someone else's shoes" is a key part of moral thought, and we can practice this type of thinking through art.

Of course, Watkins wasn't the first to suggest this type of empathic thought practice. In my lecture, we next turn to Enlightenment thinker Adam Smith, who was a Scottish

philosopher and political economist. Smith suggests in his book *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) that humans have a kind of intrinsic moral sense, something we awaken and reinforce through interaction with others. But there are limitations on what our interactions with others can allow us to understand:

> As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation. Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. (Smith 11)

For Smith, the imaginative capacity allows us to conceive of ourselves in someone else's place, however partially or imperfectly. By invoking "the rack"—a torture device designed to pull the victim vigorously at both ends of the body, using ropes or chains to bind the wrists and ankles and then steadily increasing tension and pressure by stretching the body until shoulders, hips, and other joints in the arms and legs would be dislocated and separated—Smith asks the reader to consider the horror of being stretched to the breaking point, experiencing prolonged agony followed by permanently damaged muscles, ligaments, cartilage, or bones. Even the thought of experiencing such torture causes us to realize that we would never ourselves want to be "upon the rack," and thus why would we as a society ever tolerate anyone else being subjected to it? The visual of a 16th-century woodcut of someone being tortured on the rack (from John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments of These Latter and Perilous Days, Touching Matters of the Church*, also known popularly as *The Book of Martyrs*) is the final piece of my lecture that brings it home for students. They quickly grasp the significance of Smith's argument about imaginative capacity, and Watkins's argument about "emotional immediacy"—or what the Xavier Core curriculum calls the "moral imagination."

By the end of the semester in my ENGL 205 course, students have already been practicing their moral imagining, although we haven't precisely referred to it as such. I take the opportunity to remind them that the Core Guide: "Ethics/Religion in Society" description for ENGL 205 reads, in part:

> This course will explore important ethical questions within the context of the creative imagination. Literary study fosters understanding and empathy with diverse perspectives, facilitates social criticism and change, teaches students to develop skills of critical thinking and rhetorical strategy, and invites them to reflect upon their personal values as an individual in relation to society.

Thus, through teaching Literature and the Moral Imagination, I have the opportunity to teach *pathos* as a Jesuit value: "An expression or utterance that evokes sadness or sympathy, esp. in a work of literature; a description, passage, or scene of this nature. Now *rare*" (def. 1, *OED Online*). Consistent with Xavier's mission as a Jesuit Catholic University, we develop our moral imaginations in order to feel with and for others.

I was fortunate to have Kristine Suna-Koro, PhD (Theology) as an Ignatian Mentoring Program mentor who spoke with me about bringing the whole self to the classroom, to my scholarship, and to the teaching of empathy. Kristine was also a member of the College of Arts and Sciences Diversity and Inclusion Task Force (which I co-chaired along with Associate Dean Rachel Chrastil in 2017-18), and it was wonderful to be able to discuss a diversity-focused CAS mission statement refresh in the same room with my IMP mentor. The questions that were ultimately added to the mission statement are as follows:

- How do identity, location, culture, and history shape our views of ourselves, of others, and of our world?
- What are the root causes of injustice, and how might we challenge unjust distributions of power?

These questions remind us that our selves are always situated in personal, institutional, and larger historical contexts, and that we must bring our whole selves to work toward justice. And in order to fulfill our commitment to these aspects of the mission statement, faculty and administrators must also work to hire and retain a diverse faculty who have lived experience, as well as scholarly expertise, in challenging "unjust distributions of power." In particular, if we are to teach empathy and face injustice head-on, we need a larger cohort of faculty of color who are encouraged to bring our whole selves—our embodied and imaginative selves—to the classroom, to scholarship, and to administration. Only then will Xavier more fully put pathos into practice.

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