

SOCIAL BIOGRAPHY

PRACTICE OF CRITICAL FAITH AND TRANSFORMATIVE PEDAGOGY

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In this essay, I explore *social biography* as a practice of *critical faith*, exploring the ways that shared biographies open creative interpretations of faith practice, representation and political action. Through a critical reading of the *Represent to Witness Summer Youth Leadership Institute* (R2W), I trace the ways learning and teaching subjects configure and critique culture. Problematizing the assumptions of subject and identity formation, I draw from critical pedagogy to analyze R2W's work in transformative education.¹

SOCIAL BIOGRAPHY AS UN/LEARNING NARRATIVES AND RE/TELLING STORIES

R2W emerged out of the collaborative work of Michael James and Deborah Lee of the PANA Institute² at the Pacific School of Religion. Developed for Asian/Pacific Islander (API) and other young leaders of color, R2W “seeks to nurture critical consciousness, values of justice, anti-racism, class solidarity, and a strong self-representation among young API leaders.”³ James’ and Lee’s early survey of Bay Area API churches revealed that religious education for such communities served as a simultaneous *fortification of religious and ethnic identities*. This intersection of faith/religion and culture/nationality structured a sense of identity, social commitment and theological grounding for API diasporic churches.⁴ An initial invitation to youth participants generated largely positive responses. Over time, participants from PI—Samoan, Tonga, Hawaiian, Filipino—and Latino (Mexican) communities outnumbered those who arose from East Asian heritages (Chinese, Japanese and Korean), exposing R2W’s unique appeal to underrepresented PI youths.

¹ Michael Peters describes critical pedagogy as a fundamental critique of implicit metanarratives at work in pedagogy. See Michael Peters, “Introduction—Naming the Multiple: Poststructuralism and Education,” in *Naming the Multiple: Poststructuralism and Education*, Critical Studies in Education and Culture Series (Westport, Conn: Bergin & Garvey, 1998), 2-3.

² Institute for Leadership Development and Study of Pacific and Asian North American Religion

³ Michael James et al., “Interview with Represent to Witness (R2W),” March 20, 2009.

⁴ At a recent PANA gathering on March 25, 2009, several Samoan pastors observed that in most Samoan diasporic communities, congregational membership depends upon ethnic identity. Faith and culture are, in a sense, conflated. This undermines the implicit assumption that religious education—or more broadly, pastoral work—is separate from culture, i.e., a counter-cultural engagement with social values. Mary C Boys, *Educating in Faith: Maps and Visions*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 76.

The program's commitment to situate ethnicity, sexuality and class at the forefront of religious education upholds the Freirean resistance against "banking education."⁵ R2W privileges participants' social locations as constitutive of learning itself. There prevails therefore a simultaneous gesture of retrieving individual biographies *and* critiquing pre-established norms/values/ways of meaning-making. Holding both in tension constitutes the program's pedagogy of critical faith.

As a teaching/learning practice, critical faith encourages participants to question, analyze, respect personal experience/knowledge, study major social issues, and develop faith/spirituality and witness.⁶ At each gathering, R2W opens with a "check-in," i.e., self-introductory practices that name each participant's concern for the day. These "check-ins" are demarcated by shared "accords" that nurture and problematize or individual stories, defining a habitus akin to liturgical thresholds—liminal moments where time, space and encounters are differentiated from the every day.⁷ As trust increases and personal check-ins deepen, the political, economic, religious, historical and colonial forces at play in participants' lives are exposed. This is most apparent in "life mapping" activities that encourage participants to mark significant life events alongside historical moments in their communities. In these practices, individual narratives emerge from the broader political, religious and economic webs that enwrap a people's experience. The weaving of individual and social histories invites participants to find resonance across diverse

⁵ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1986), 60-61.

⁶ Discerning modernity's influence upon the theological shifts of the Second Vatican Council (a "turning to the world," as it were), Joe Holland and Peter Henriot postulate an analytical circle that situates human experience at the center of theological reflection. R2W echoes the same premise in its pedagogical method by privileging participants' contexts as the starting point to learning. These parameters are similarly articulated as social biography, spiritual practices, social analysis, study and research. See <http://www.represent2witness.org/programs/index.htm>. See Joe Holland and Peter J Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*, Rev. and enl. ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1983), 7-9.

⁷ In R2W, these "accords" are: Step up (to speak more when one is lent to silence) / step back (to offer space for others to speak when one is lent to over-share); Right to Pass, i.e., to allow one's self to withdraw when needed; Respect, i.e., to see another in new ways (*re-spect*); Amnesty, i.e., to suspend personal conflicts while engaged in the practice of sharing individual stories/narratives; Confidentiality; No Capping, i.e., to suspend all put-downs—even those undertaken among familiars—to ensure safe spaces for sharing; and Take one's inventory, i.e., to focus on articulating/interpreting one's own narrative/issue and not those of others.

contexts. Individual narratives thus become *social* biographies, the interwoven discourse of the whole. For James, social biographies evoke the *retrieval*—not the mere affirmation—of individual agency. This simultaneous gesture of learning (from another) *and* unlearning (one’s assumptions) constitutes the practice *conscientization* that Paulo Freire describes as necessary for humanization.⁸

METHOD: RE-CODIFYING THE SELF AND COMMUNITY

Religious educator Daniel Schipani locates three transformative gestures within Freirean pedagogy: the *investigation* (close study) of one’s context, the *thematization* of common threads that undergirds one’s experience, and the *critique* of values that structure individual identity.⁹ When deployed to analyze social problems, these gestures expose *value codes* that are repeatedly fortified by community practices. Fostering social change thus involves a *re-codification* of given values that leave individuals beholden to dehumanizing social structures.

As a strategy for self-naming, social biographies re-codify—and thus subvert—hegemonic values that structure API life. Among R2W’s newcomers, for example, the label “working class” evokes an ambivalent relationship to the broader socio-economic system of North American life. To identify as working class assumes a “failure” to adequately assimilate/buy into the American dream. It is a marker of exclusion and marginalization.¹⁰ As

⁸ Peter Roberts, *Education, Literacy, and Humanization: Exploring the Work of Paulo Freire*, Critical Studies in Education and Culture Series (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 2000).

⁹ Daniel S Schipani, *Conscientization and Creativity: Paulo Freire and Christian Education* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1984), 4-6.

¹⁰ I witnessed this ambivalent relationship to (working) class identity during a problem-posing session. After having undertaken a community crawl in San Francisco’s Sunnyside Housing Projects—home to a significant amount of PI immigrants—student-participants were asked to reflect/discuss the question: “Does one choose to live in the ghetto?”

While not exclusive, those who rejected the veracity of the question comprised largely R2W alumni and/or student-participants who typically arose from middle class contexts with access to progressive (private?) education. The belief that ghetto populations were, in a sense, responsible for their dehumanized circumstances proved common among *first* time R2W participants who were predominantly—and interestingly enough—*men*. As open discussions arose, shifts occurred, with more students supporting the stance that ghetto tenants do *not* choose to live in their neighborhoods. At a later conversation with Lee, we discerned that this divide reflected the values that were taught/transmitted within participants’ immigrant churches/communities, i.e., the importance of agency/self-responsibility/autonomy in socio-economic progress. Fetishizing individual effort, in a sense, blinds one to the

participants learn to articulate their social biographies, however, they reorient the potency of a “working class” identity from that of an “outsider” to one committed to political engagement and transformation. To be working class lends one a critical perspective for social activism.

For many R2W participants, the re-codification of one’s identity has direct implication to their relationships with family, church and “ethnic homes.” Indeed, participants have often remarked how R2W—popularly advertised as a “church retreat”—exposes them *not* to the complexity of learning about God but of knowing themselves!¹¹ In the practice of *re-naming* their location, accountability and identity, students trump the *misnaming* that sexist, classist and discriminatory structures hoist upon their bodies. Their biographies challenge—to quote Judith Butler—the potency “of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains.”¹² By sharing personal struggle and shame—not to cull sympathy, but to *teach*—participants disrupt citationality itself, rendering impotent regulatory practices that encourage the silence, complicity and invisibility of the individual within the collective.

THE PROBLEM AND POSSIBILITY OF “REPRESENTATION”

While R2W “seeks to nurture a critical consciousness...and a strong self-representative voice in young leaders,”¹³ there prevails within the program a colonizing dynamic that echoes Gayatri Spivak’s anxiety around “human rights.” For Spivak, “rights discourse” reflects categories and principles of European and North American political worldviews.¹⁴ Its prescription against

broader social structures that actually define/contour how agencies are constituted. Thus, participants who believe that ghetto populations *choose* their lot fail to see that such “choices” themselves are born out of unjust structures.

¹¹ James has always reiterated the implicit irony of social biography within diverse faith communities: most of those who characterize themselves as religious know more about their faith tradition/history than their own.

¹² Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 2-3.

¹³ Jill Mizokami and Lauren Quock, *Critical Faith*, YouTube Video (Predistributed Video) (Berkeley, CA, 2009), <http://www.represent2witness.org/reflections/criticalfaithmovie.htm>.

¹⁴ In making this observation, Spivak was critiquing the implicit colonial discourses being undertaken on a global level, particularly the imposition of “universal rights” ideology upon non-European/American contexts. In doing so, she is both criticizing and re-imaging the methods of humanities education. While the context is different, I assert that a similar observation could also be undertaken within R2W’s commitment to social transformation. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Other Asias* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2007), 18.

perceived systems of injustice perpetuates—rather than dismantles—the unrelenting hegemony of the global North over *still marginalized* experiences/contexts/communities. Hence, for anyone to speak on behalf of (silenced) others deepens the already traumatic colonization of minds and bodies. Still, Spivak insists that while problematic, human rights discourse offers a necessary critique of dehumanizing structures. She suggests therefore the deployment of a “new kind of education” that directly engages the “global South” in the articulation, problematization and teaching of values peculiar to its contexts. Reorienting teaching from the vertical (teacher-to-student) towards the horizontal (encounter among peers), encourages an “uncoercive rearrangement of desires” that allows for the necessary engagement of diverse narratives.¹⁵

Within R2W, participants quickly intuit the ambiguity of justice work, learning to resist the temptation to identify *their* brand of activism as a better “alternative” to (white) hegemonic structures. As they deepen their analysis, participants recognize the importance of self-critique, developing initiatives to *speak back* to one’s community in ways that are honest and provocative. This is especially pivotal for participants arising from PI communities whose long history of intra-ethnic conflict—e.g., Samoans and Tongans—define their broader colonial engagement in North American diaspora.¹⁶ Rather than creating a “brown” collective to subvert “white discourse,” participants learn to expose the discriminatory practices that render them *both* victims and perpetrators of injustice.

To a significant extent, R2W’s transformative potential lies in its resistance to re-write “human rights” discourse in their *image*. The program offers no “alternative vision,” but an

¹⁵ Ibid., 17.

¹⁶ The work of R2W alumnus, Victor McKamie of Carson, Los Angeles, with African-American, Latino/a and Pacific Island youths exemplifies the program’s commitment to reaching out cross-culturally among traditionally marginal communities. See Lauren Quock, “R2W Represent 2 Witness: Seeing the Struggle Through A Short Film Featuring Victor McKamie, Jr. (R2W 2006, CLI 2007),” <http://www.represent2witness.org/reflections/2008seeingthestruggle.htm>.

insistence upon the possible.¹⁷ I suggest that R2W's commitment to social biography stands akin to the *practice* of—not an articulation of—a theological anthropology. While social change remains well within the program's hope, there is privileged regard for the ways in which human beings are *understood, conceived* and *produced*. In honoring individual stories as a way to critique social structures, the multiplicity of human experience becomes the moment for transformation.

In most Religious Education literature, pedagogy is often understood as a “pastoral practice” of care, nurture and guidance.¹⁸ The objects of care/healing are individuals who require formation/teaching. While one can certainly claim a similar assumption within R2W, I assert that the practice of social biography critiques this patronizing tendency because it situates one's ethnicity, class and gender at the heart of the learning encounter; the content of learning itself thus undulates. It is worth mentioning that a common critique of R2W lies in its “failure” to intensify participants' involvement in their home churches. Some return with significant shifts in their understanding of church; others leave their home communities altogether; but almost *all* engage their communities in a critique of the status quo. Indeed, the reclamation of one's social biography rarely results to a “seamless homecoming” but to a fragmentation of home, self and community. I suggest that it is this place of critique, “in-between-ness” and hope that resists the reinscription of ideology and deconstructs cultural hierarchies. Social biography privileges ambivalence as a place of possibility. Thus, teaching and learning elide, with subjects slipping into the other. What emerge are fragments of self—accoutrements of gender, class, ethnicity,

¹⁷ Indeed, Spivak asserts that “...the redressing work of Human Rights must be supplemented by an education that can continue to make unstable the presupposition that the reasonable rights of wrongs is inevitably the manifest destiny of groups—unevenly class-divided, embracing North and South—that remain poised to right them; and that, among the receiving groups, wrongs will inevitably proliferate with unsurprising regularity. ...The task of making visible the begged question grounding the political manipulation of a civil society forged on globally-defined natural rights is just as urgent; and not simply way of *cultural relativism*.” See Spivak, *Other Asias*, 21.

¹⁸ See Daniel S Schipani, *Religious Education Encounters Liberation Theology* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1988).; Maria Harris, *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989). and Boys, *Educating in Faith*.

personal history and narrative—that could never claim to “speak” nor fully “represent” another.¹⁹

As R2W’s very name implies: the act of representation is *not* an end unto itself. By juxtaposing the power of *witness* with the doing of *representation*, R2W suggests a way out of the temptation to “speak for another.” There is a repetitive quality to representation that evokes not only the phantom of Spivak’s “subaltern,” but exposes too the potency of performativity itself. Within the Christian tradition—the context from which most R2W participants emerge—“witness” calls to mind the confusing encounters of the post-resurrection event: the Emmaus story in Luke (Luke 24:1-35), Matthew’s account of the empty tomb (Matthew 28:1-20) and the Magdalene’s encounter with Christ in John (John 20:1-18). In each of these stories, the moment of “witness” heralds a destabilizing encounter with a resurrected Christ who emerges *simultaneously* recognizable and incomprehensible. The certainty of possibility emerges only at the cusp of the old and the new, out of ambivalence and confusion.²⁰ More poignantly, the witness enters a moment of dying—abjection if you will—that renders the one who sees and the one being seen fragmented.²¹ For Elizabeth Stuart, the act of witness—ennobled as it were in the cult of early Christian martyrdom—subverts binaries of body/spirit, beginnings/endings, self and community. The transformative potency of witness occurs only within repeated acts of *re-*

¹⁹ In a sense, Spivak looks upon representational gestures as catachretic, simultaneously stabilizing elusive subjects while pushing them on the verge of *mis-representation*. George Hartley, *The Abyss of Representation: Marxism and the Postmodern Sublime*, Post-contemporary interventions (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 237.

²⁰ Homi Bhabha describes the location of the Postcolonial novelist in a similar fashion: “Postcolonial novelists do not have an organized subjectivity which instantiates a type and permits the tones and authority of the old narrative voice, anymore than do other writers after modernism. But for them, while the grounds of classic realism are lost, the project of imagining goes on. It remains important for them to *witness* their society, and their writings, which produces images, remain firmly placed in the imagination either of narcissistic egos or of magicians.” Homi K Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), 152.

²¹ Julia Kristeva describes “abjection” as the human horror—rejection/expulsion—that arises from the disintegration of meaning at the moment where the distinction of self and other dissipates. See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, European perspectives (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

membering. It is a liturgical gesture that perennially reconstitutes loss and possibility. Indeed, Stuart asserts that

Christians...die to enter life. ... In embracing death, martyrs queered it, performing it subversively in order to point to its defeat. This queer performance begins at the resurrection and reverberates across the cosmos.²²

Through the practice of social biography, R2W participants embody an ambivalent witness to the multiplicity of their *omni* narratives. They straddle and blur distinctions between self and community, exposing the vague location of the locutor: who indeed speaks for whom? Does one's biography remain one's own in their constant re-telling before the community? How are particular experiences of personal pain/suffering engendered/healed within the collective? In de-centering the stability of one's biography, participants rehabilitate what Susan Abraham calls "[t]he agential caress of the gendered subaltern [who] illuminates the mode whereby mere 'identity' claims become politically viable."²³ R2W participants—as embodiments of the unspeaking “subaltern”—*witness* both to the perennial threat of erasure and the need to affirm a specific social location. In a sense, it is this elusive self who is relentlessly committed to learning *and* unlearning that transcends the impasse of identity politics. It is this willingness to sustain hope—embodied in the constant re-telling of one's biography—that undergirds a fundamental commitment to the possible and so gives birth to political action.

²² Elizabeth Stuart, “Queering Death,” in *The Sexual Theologian: Essays on Sex, God and Politics*, ed. Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood (London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 67.

²³ Susan Abraham, *Identity, Ethics, and Nonviolence in Postcolonial Theory: A Rabnerian Theological Assessment* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 205.

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