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## Justice, Science, and Pedagogy

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By Myrna Perez Sheldon

As we consider the role of justice in pedagogy and scholarship, I want to ask a simple but difficult question:

What is our ethical task?

Do we desire to be right? Do we desire to be powerful? Do we desire to be empathetic and other-oriented?

Earlier in my academic career, I understood my pedagogical task to be equipping students to see science as a social activity, and perhaps even to recognize how science is complicit in social power and oppressions. I'm no longer able to think of my task solely in those terms, partly because I am jointly appointed in two departments, neither of which are the history of science or medicine. But also because this no longer is enough for me. The time that I've spent in feminist and anti-racist spaces has emboldened me, and stripped the shyness I once had in thinking of my work as an ethical task, of seeing my work as necessarily and unapologetically political. And I also learned of my own deep ignorance; of the decades of thought and debate over the relationship between theory and activism in fields that take on feminist and critical-race methodologies, and who claim, as Michel Foucault has expressed, that theory should not, prompt ["the kind of curiosity that seeks to assimilate what it is proper for one to know, but rather that which enables one to get free of oneself."](#)

In the past few years, I have found some moral clarity in reading Gayatri Spivak; the postcolonial theorist and feminist writer. What I find intoxicating about Spivak is her articulation of the value of humanistic learning that is not primarily concerned with rebuking science. Spivak, is after all, a literary theorist. In a 2014 collection of essays titled [Readings](#), she describes what she believes is the deep value in literary reading:

*This is what training in literary reading offers beyond the conventional definition of literature— a painstaking learning of the language of others. This training can also come through cultural rearing, often compromised by gender and class. In other words, only women and servants must think of others, the colonists and*

*their children think of themselves, and the queer generally remain in hiding. This is a general description as I move through India. It is amazing to see in my own class how different the treatment of women and servants is, to observe how the children and the colonists behave.*

*Literary reading can, if given the chance, undo this, and not just in India... A literary education can direct one to noticing these otherwise ignored details...*

By a literary education Spivak has far more in mind than the simple mechanics of comprehension, grammar and composition. Reading literature, in her view, is a way of training the imagination to consider and care for the needs, perspectives, and troubles of those distant from us in terms of geography, worldview, class, race, religion, and gender. This is a necessary feature of social justice, one which is far harder to ingrain than we might imagine. Yet Spivak does not believe we can forcibly instill this in anyone—rather, we can only craft the conditions this other-orientedness needs to arise on its own.

Spivak's is a beautiful and terrifying vision of the ethical project. It's a vision in which we cannot control the outcome; if we attempt to control it, we destroy any possibility of social justice. In seeking power, particularly when we fervently believe ourselves to be right, we destroy what was good about our moral system in the first place. Much of the evil in the world was committed by people who urgently believed in the righteousness of their cause. As Spivak explains, "everything that is medicine can turn to poison if the person or the collectivity who is using it is not trained to know how much to use, when, and how." Reading, literary reading, can give us a "training of the imagination that makes revolutions last."

Spivak has prompted me to think about "making revolutionists last" in the design of my courses—and to ask, what is it in particular can the history of science and medicine do—in my case, in a feminist classroom—to train the imagination? I'll just give a brief example from a graduate course I taught last fall, titled "Feminism and Eugenics": in the Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies Program at Ohio University. In the course, I ask WGSS graduate students to engage with the history of hereditary and evolutionary science, and to ask how this scholarship differently illuminates our understanding of feminist theory and activism. The students came to the course with little or no background in the natural or medical sciences, and quite frankly, limited initial interest in the history of science. But over the course of the semester, through reading primary and theoretical texts on the intersections between population control and feminist reform, our course confronted the relentless logic that held

together American reform movements and white supremacy.

For example, we studied first-wave feminist activists such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman who argued for women's reproductive rights on the basis of white women's ability to whiten America's racial future. Gilman believed that white women and white men shared a bond that transcended their gender divide, and enabled them to be partners in the reproductive progress of their race. As historian Gail Bederman has argued, that although contemporary scholars ["find Gilman's racism surprisingly inconsistent with her gender egalitarianism, Gilman herself would have seen no inconsistency. Her feminism was inextricably rooted in the white supremacy of 'civilization.'"](#)

For students in a feminist classroom, the history of eugenics is challenging reality to face. Because we see the impulses of first wave American feminism as not merely complicit with structural racism, but productive of it. But concentrating on the hereditarian logic that entangled eugenics and feminism helps us to confront with humility this history as well as our own contemporary vocabulary on women's health, reproductive rights, and bodily normalcy.

Engaging with this history of science also pointed our course to moments of resistance. For instance, we examined works by black women on their refusal to procreate in a world where their sons were lynched. In our analysis of authors such as Nella Larsen, we ask how the reality of lynching reshaped modes of sexuality, sexual reproduction and motherhood for black women. Nella Larsen, perhaps most famous for her novel *Passing*, which has been analyzed by Judith Butler and others for the complex entanglement between raced and queered passing; wrote several novels that explored the fluidity and violence of racial categories in Progressive era America.

In her first novel [Quicksand](#) from 1928, Larsen tells the story of a mixed-race woman Crane, and her attempts to find existential fulfillment and racial identity in a marriage partner. American studies scholar Daylanne English [has analyzed this novel](#) for what it reveals regarding the refusals of black women in Jim Crow America to reproduce in a world with the spectre of lynching. English first points to the confidence that male leaders in the African American community had in the promise of eugenics to uplift their community; as English argues, figures such as WEB Dubois and other African-American men were trying to set an agenda for black reproduction and to establish control over modern black women's fertility.

English takes this history to her reading of Larsen's *Quicksand*, when one of the black female character laments, when asked if she will ever marry:

“Someday, perhaps, I don’t know. Marriage- that means children to men. And why add more suffering to the world? Why add any more unwanted tortured Negroes to America?”

For English, this moment in Larsen’s book speaks to a refusal- a refusal on the part of black women to play the reproductive role set out for them. As she argues,

“Here lies the deep structural link between lynching and black women’s reproductive lives. If the essence of racial and gender oppression for African American men is the lynching cycle, for black women the essence of their oppression is the cycle of repeated childbirth within a racist and lynching nation.”

For my course, these readings prompted us to several questions: How is kinship differently configured by new scientific understandings of heredity as well as persistence forms of violence? How do we understand the cultural influence of “natural” and “sexual” selection for women whose selective capacities are robbed from them by lynching? Ultimately, the toolkit of the history of science opened up a different set of questions in this feminist and anti-racist context.

By the end of the course, I do not desire most that the students fully understand and discipline themselves in intersectional feminist theory. Nor do I desire most that they recognize and identify their own privileges, or the privileges of those around them. No, what I desire for them, is what I desire for myself: is that history and theory, might help us to get away from ourselves-in this case, as contemporary feminists, to see clearly and humbly the history of racial supremacy at the heart of early American feminism. And I might even suggest that this might embolden us to set aside our desire for security and power and rightness— most especially when we have come into the world, or moved through the world in such a way to gain some measure of these temptations— and to “dig down deep” and use our securities to address the precarities and violences in our lives and the lives of our neighbors.

And as I say this, it terrifies me. Because I am confronted with an ethical task that requires a willingness to sacrifice much of what I hold dear. I’m not sure what my world looks like in which I train my imagination to consider the refusal to bear children in a world of lynching. But I am convinced it is a thing I must try to imagine, because in a nation where racial violence is daily, structural and state-sanctioned, it is the world I already live in.

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