Gender, Sexuality, and the Bible: Teaching for Social Justice

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ABSTRACT

Courses on the Bible, gender, and sexuality offer many opportunities to promote social justice in the classroom. Instead of emphasizing course content, this article focuses on practical strategies and tactics that incorporate social justice into the everyday teaching of these courses. Drawing on feminist, queer, and affect theory, as well as practical experience, I propose and discuss four questions for assessing classroom practices and materials: Is it welcoming?, Does this joy need to be killed?, Does it work?, and Is it fun? The article also addresses course design, the selection of readings, assessment, and course pacing from the perspective of teaching for social justice.

KEYWORDS

Pedagogy; Queer; Hospitality; Killjoy

In this essay, I will discuss how teaching courses on the Bible, gender, and sexuality can function as a practice of social justice. I will focus on three classes that I teach in regular rotation: an introductory class on “The Bible and Social Justice,” an intermediate course on “Feminist Biblical Interpretation,” and an advanced seminar on “The Queer Bible.” While the content of courses such as these suggests connections to activism and activist hermeneutics, I am especially interested in how the pedagogical framing can cultivate and enact social justice, both within and beyond the classroom. The work of social justice begins with how we think about our classes — not simply or even primarily their content, but rather how we orient, and are oriented toward, our students. I will sketch a pedagogy of social justice vivified by four questions: Is it welcoming? Does this joy need to be killed? Does it work?, and Is it fun?

These framing questions are adapted, gleefully and promiscuously, from feminist and queer theory. Is it welcoming? opens onto the idea of hospitality, which has a well-established genealogy in feminist pedagogy, while also resonating with some recent developments in queer theory. Sara Ahmed’s work on the “feminist killjoy,” in both The Promise of Happiness and Living a Feminist Life, prompts my second question, Does this joy need to be killed? The “feminist killjoy” is at once an insult, a survival strategy, and an avenging angel; she also

1 The term “fun” is admittedly a risky choice, and will no doubt rub certain readers the wrong way. As I discuss below, I am interested in naming a space of pleasure, enjoyment, and play. “Sparking joy” is one way of describing this response; however, in 2020 it may be too closely associated with Marie Kondo and the disposal of unwanted belongings. “Pleasurable” gets closer, but also suggests desire and/or jouissance in a way that moves beyond and outside of the kind of response by students I describe here. And so I have stuck with “fun.”
complicates and challenges a pedagogy of hospitality and unconditional welcome. My third question, Does it work? is borrowed from affect theorist and Deleuze scholar Brian Massumi, who offers it as a flexible alternative to the rigidity of Is it true? In the context of biblical interpretation, this query opens a new way of approaching the hermeneutic endeavor. The final question, Is it fun?, is my own. This line of questioning reflects my ongoing negotiations of the worlds of biblical scholarship, teaching, and “Theory,” as well as a sense of growing frustration with the assumption that reading for social justice means adopting a position of sorrow or grief toward biblical texts and worlds.

As I describe below, these four questions, and the forms of engagement that they represent, stand in partial tension to each other, if not outright opposition. And yet asking these questions — and asking them together — helps open space for a pedagogy of social justice, grounded in micro-practices in the classroom. After some brief framing comments about my own institutional context and courses, I will describe and explore these four questions in greater detail. In the final portion of the essay, I will demonstrate how these principles can be applied in the classroom, with particular emphasis on practical pedagogical concerns.

Institutional Contexts (And a Peek at the Classes Discussed Here)

It is a well-recognized move in feminist writing to address explicitly where I’m writing from. While I will take up the question of identity in greater detail below, I want here to offer a few comments on my institutional context, as well as the three courses on gender, sexuality, and the Bible that I teach regularly and which inform my writing and thinking in this essay. I teach at a private small liberal arts college in the southern United States, with an enrollment of around 2000 students. While the college is historically affiliated with the Presbyterian Church (USA), this affiliation has little effect on the day-to-day functioning of the college. However, the curriculum does require all students to complete three Bible or Bible-related courses, two in the first year. This requirement can be met either through a Great Books-style humanities sequence, or through courses offered in the Religious Studies department. Two of the courses I will discuss, “The Bible and Social Justice” and “Feminist Biblical Interpretation,” count toward fulfilling this three-course requirement; the third, “The Queer Bible,” is an upper-level seminar style course, with enrollment limited to Religious Studies majors and minors.

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3 This requirement is tied to the college’s endowment and thus basically unchangeable.
4 A handful of courses in Philosophy and Greek and Roman Studies also count toward this requirement.
5 A (happy) side effect of the curriculum is that many students develop an interest in Religious Studies and choose to major or minor; we have a significant number of minors in particular.
Across these three classes, a few generalizations about the students are possible. As at most institutions in the U.S., students choose their courses based on a mix of interest in the material, the need to fulfill various requirements, the day and time of the class, and other personal concerns. There are often at least 1-2 students who are enrolled purely because of scheduling reasons; I have learned to be careful how I phrase the first day inquiry, *Why do you want to take this class?* The majority of students have some kind of Christian background, though there are also other religious traditions (particularly Judaism) represented, as well as a healthy number of “nones.” Many students are involved in community service or volunteering in their free time; a subset are more explicitly interested in “social justice.” The classes skew female, though there are also male and nonbinary students enrolled. Students’ relationships to queerness are likewise diverse: some identify as LGBTQ; most are familiar with popular conversations and activism around feminist and LGBTQ issues; a few have some background in “feminist theory,” “queer theory,” or related scholarly forms of discourse. Their background with the Bible is equally mixed.

“The Bible and Social Justice” is limited to first-year students and explores how the Bible addresses three topics related to social justice: race and ethnicity, disability, and LGBTQ sexuality. We look at both how these themes are treated in the Bible (often negatively) and how interpreters and activists have used the biblical text to fight for social justice (often creatively). “Feminist Biblical Interpretation” is an intermediate-level course (and the most popular course I teach at present). In the course, we explore feminist, womanist, postcolonial, lesbian, and trans reading strategies. The definition of “feminist” I use in the course is intentionally broad, though we also discuss critiques of feminism, as well as how feminist biblical interpreters might respond. “The Queer Bible” is an advanced seminar centered on queer approaches to biblical texts; enrollment is limited to majors and minors in Religious Studies. This course also privileges more experimental or challenging methods. As I write in a section of the syllabus entitled “Vision of the Course”:

This course is not simply about reconstructing the history of sexuality in the ancient world (or worlds), or learning what other scholars have said about sex, sexuality, and the Bible. Instead, you will be actively involved in generating new forms of knowledge. The “queer Bible” emerges as we read it; you are an essential part of shaping what it looks like. Reading queerly is destabilizing, disturbing, difficult... and deeply rewarding. The more you open yourself to and embrace this project, the more exciting and rewarding the outcomes will be.

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6 All three of my courses discussed here count as electives in the Gender and Sexuality Studies program, which offers an interdisciplinary minor.

7 The curricular requirements (including a Bible course in the first semester) suggest that all students will come to intermediate or upper level courses with some experience in the academic study of the Bible; of course, this looks different “on the ground.”
While this spirit of participation animates all three courses, it is especially pronounced in the Queer Bible, both because it is the most advanced course and because queer theory as an academic discipline especially invites this sort of play with knowledge formations.

Pedagogical Orientations

With these backgrounds established, I want to turn now to the pedagogical formations that shape all three courses (and, indeed, my other classes as well).

1. Is it welcoming?: Toward a hermeneutics of hospitality and generosity

The first orientation I have found helpful is the idea of a “hermeneutics of hospitality.” I first encountered this phrase only a few years into my teaching career, from a generous and fiercely feminist colleague I met at a teaching and learning workshop. The workshop was one week long; we were immersed in a discussion of how to approach the first day of class and what sort of community to cultivate in the classroom when that colleague, Beatrice Lawrence, brought up the idea of a “hermeneutics of hospitality.” She suggested that we approach our students with openness and generosity, modeling for them how we might, in turn, encounter texts and ideas very different from what we consider familiar, acceptable, or even “true” (more on this push against “true” follows below). For Beatrice, hospitality named a way of being in relation, and it suggested that relationships are essential, for teaching as for living. One thing that we do in the classroom is to learn how to “be with” others, how to listen and respond and even respectfully disagree. A “hermeneutics of hospitality” captures all of this.

Hospitality is also bound up with generosity. This generosity plays out in many ways: in the generous sharing of ideas, in serving as a charitable and open-minded listener, in assuming good intentions both among fellow learners and in the texts and ideas under discussion. Generosity and hospitality push up against the hermeneutics of suspicion, inviting us to a more measured, open, and flexible consideration of texts and people alike. And generosity means being generous in sharing credit, in citing and acknowledging others, in intentionally positioning ourselves in community (as opposed to a pedagogical model of “the sage on the stage” or a scholarly model of the lone genius). This applies in scholarship as well.

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8 I use first names here as a way of enacting the principle of hospitality and recreating that space in the essay. I am inspired in the practice by Maia Kotrosits’s interweaving of first-person voice and experience in How Things Feel: Affect Theory, Biblical Studies, and the (Im)Personal (Brill Research Perspectives in Biblical Interpretation 1, 2016).

9 The phrase “hermeneutics of suspicion” describes an attitude of suspicion toward a text and its ideology, as well as the way texts compel certain readings. The phrase was first used by Paul Ricoeur in Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 30. The hermeneutics of suspicion have a well-developed history as a method of feminist biblical criticism; for a classic treatment, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 53, 57-61.
as teaching: the longer I continue to work as a scholar, the more persuaded I am that who and how we cite are central concerns in the ongoing effort to make scholarship reflect and align with the work of social justice. Much like efforts on social media to “amplify” specific voices, the strategic use of footnotes and bibliographic entries — and, especially, the inclusion of a scholar’s work in the classroom and on the syllabus — is a practical micro-practice of social justice. It also reflects both generosity and hospitality.

Of course, hospitality and generosity can be put to misuse. Not all guests are good guests; not all communities are welcoming communities. Hospitality can be abused, coerced, or withheld. Queer voices, in particular, have often offered incisive descriptions of hospitality made contingent upon acting or being perceived a certain way: consider the experience of many LGBTQ students returning home to less-than-welcoming families over a university break. Yet the kind of hospitality that Beatrice described, and that I find crucial in creating a classroom environment that reflects and cultivates social justice, is clearly grounded in intentionally feminist practices. Maurice Hamington argues for a specifically feminist practice of hospitality:

At a minimum, feminist hospitality drives at a nonhierarchical understanding of hospitality that mitigates the expression of power differential, while seeking greater connection and understanding for the mutual benefit of both host and guest. Accordingly, feminist hospitality does not assume autonomously acting moral agents; the feminist hospitality that I propose creates and strengthens relationships, but not without the risk that comes from the vulnerability of human sharing.

This kind of hospitality makes any classroom endeavor — but especially the project of reading gender and sexuality and queerness with and against the Bible — much more welcoming, in every sense. As I will describe in greater detail below, the beginning of the semester is an

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10 Many students who have found space to explore or embrace their LGBTQ identities at college or university struggle with when, how, or whether to come out about these identities while at home. Some face pressures from their families or other communities; for others, the struggle involves internal questions of identity and belonging. Two useful analyses with grounding in queer theory are Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Queer and Now,” In *Tendencies*, pp. 13-34 (New York: Routledge, 1994) and Ahmed’s discussion of queer unhappiness in Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2010), especially chapter 3 (pp. 88-120).


12 Hospitality casts a longer shadow in feminist theory and feminist pedagogy than in the equivalent queer spaces; this may reflect assumptions about the gendering of hospitality as maternal or otherwise feminine or feminized labor. But queer theory, too, has considered hospitality in various ways. To consider, ever so briefly, a few examples: Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s classic work on queer counterpublics in “Sex in Public” offers an articulation of alternate spaces of hospitality and welcome; in *Unlimited Intimacy*, Tim Dean describes cruising as a practice which “entails a remarkably hospitable disposition towards strangers”; Heather Love argues for the importance of hospitality to Leo Bersani’s queer ethics. While these forms of hospitality are not pedagogically directed, they nevertheless help chart a space for queer hospitality as a
especially crucial time to create a space of hospitality in the classroom: both as a way of modeling how to be (with others) in a class and as a way of setting the feel of the class meetings to follow.

2. Does this joy need to be killed?: Teaching with and as a “Feminist Killjoy”

In the classroom and beyond it, hospitality and generosity are counterbalanced by the figure of the feminist killjoy. Here I draw on the work of feminist and queer theorist Sara Ahmed, as well as the ways her work on the feminist killjoy has been taken up in feminist and queer pedagogy. In *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed sets herself the task of exploring happiness and the ways it is produced and circulated between objects. She also takes up those figures who seem to be opposed to happiness: the “angry black woman,” the “unhappy queer,” the “melancholy migrant,” and the “feminist killjoy.” Unlike the “happy housewife,” a figure who “works to secure not just ideas of happiness but ideas of who is entitled to happiness,” the feminist killjoy resists compulsory happiness scripts. Furthermore, she “kills joy” by refusing to participate in good-natured misogyny, by not laughing at the rape joke, by resisting the limited horizons of expectations. Ahmed does not invent the feminist killjoy—the phrase has a long history—but she repurposes her, in part by taking seriously the central image. As she writes,

> Feminists do kill joy in a certain sense: they disturb the very fantasy that happiness can be found in certain places. To kill a fantasy can still kill a feeling. It is not just that feminists might not be happily affected by the objects that are supposed to cause happiness but that their failure to be happy is read as sabotaging the happiness of others.

In her subsequent work, Ahmed further develops both her description and her political direction of the figure of the killjoy: *Living a Feminist Life*, her most recent (and most popularly pitched) book includes both “A Killjoy Survival Kit” and “A Killjoy Manifesto.”

The feminist killjoy now seems to be everywhere—to her credit; she is very much needed! But I am especially interested in how this figure helps us in the classroom. Here, I turn to the work of Meredith Minister, whom I met along with Beatrice at that same teaching model for the hospitality of the classroom.

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16 For example, there are 666 “feminist killjoy” available products for sale on Etsy as of December 2019; Amazon includes many more.
workshop. In our conversations there, and subsequently in her published work, Meredith pushed us to use the feminist killjoy as a way to think about the classroom and the work we do within it. Her argument is simple but compelling: Some joy needs to be killed in the classroom. A killjoy pedagogy does not kill indiscriminately. As Meredith writes,

Active killjoys do not kill all forms of joy. A killjoy focuses, rather, on killing joy that emerges from racist, sexist, homophobic, and nationalist assumptions because these forms of joy produce joy for some at the expense of others. Moreover, killing joy kills the banal, unspoken joy of feeling satisfied in comfortable, yet problematic assumptions.17

This passage comes as part of a larger discussion of pedagogical responses to sexual violence in Meredith’s important book Rape Culture on Campus. But the argument speaks, as well, to social justice pedagogies more broadly. Some joy should be stopped. Nevertheless, “killing joy” is violent language; it is harsh and unpalatable. Do we really need to be killing joy in the classroom, rather than gently, lovingly, hospitably reorienting it? And yet this is entirely the point: to be a killjoy is to refuse to act with niceness, to refuse to follow certain scripts.

I am not always the feminist killjoy I wish to be in the classroom (or, for that matter, in the department or on the committee or during other administrative meetings). But the figure of the killjoy continues to inspire me, and to give me strength when I feel myself wavering. She makes frequent appearances in text message exchanges with other academic friends, as we urge each other to resist the exploitation of the neoliberal university18 and to hold out against the structures of injustice, macro or micro, in our universities and classrooms. And I have found the feminist killjoy also a gift to give my students, a way for them to name the labor they find themselves doing on campus, in their classes, in their friendships and relationships, and with their families. Having a name for something can be a powerful gift. So too can a sense of not being alone and of having tools. No doubt, this is why Ahmed offers a toolkit for feminist killjoys in her Living a Feminist Life.19

And because the killjoy is a figure and a position, we do not have to be killjoys always in order to benefit. Indeed, I often find myself balanced between cultivating hospitality and killing joy. This, too, is essential, and social justice oriented, classroom work.

I often find myself working to strike this balance when teaching the book of Esther. The story of Esther, the beautiful Jewish heroine who saves her people from genocide, is both an exciting story and one with particular importance to many students (especially Jewish students enrolled in a predominantly Christian institution, though also queer and trans students, who resonate with its “coming out” plot). After the many stories of misogyny,

17 Meredith Minister, Rape Culture on Campus (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), xxiv-v.
violence against women, and other texts of terror, reading the book of Esther can feel like a reprieve. And yet: is this story really so hopeful? There is Vashti, banished in the opening chapter for refusing to display her naked body to her husband’s drunken guests (Esth. 1:10-12). There is the competition among young women for the King’s favor, which can be read as either a patriarchal and misogynistic contest, or as trafficking. There is the extreme violence against Haman and the enemies of the Jews that the text celebrates (Esth. 9:1-17). And there is even the question of whether Esther receives her due in her own story, or whether this is another account of women taking the risk and making the sacrifices, while men (in this case, Mordechai), receive credit. But then there is also the queer possibility that inheres in the figure of the eunuchs, as well as the hope of Esther’s “coming out” story.

Teaching this text, then, is a struggle. I aim to kill joy, but not to murder hope. I have found it most helpful to consider all of these readings, while also weighing them against each other. On a practical level, this means assigning students to read the book in its entirety, then presenting them in class with four or five varying readings, offering different takes on the question of whether the book is liberative or oppressive. I do this with the help of a one-page handout that includes pull quotes from four or five scholars on the meaning and significance of Esther. From this handout of possibilities, students choose a reading they find especially compelling and then construct a larger argument advocating that position; they then present to each other. And then we discuss, together, what sorts of joy each reading might cultivate or kill. The goal is not to find a single “correct” (or “safe”) reading, but to dwell in the difficulty and possibility of the story. This is killjoy reading.

3. Does it work?: Moving beyond anxieties of correctness

My third pedagogical orientation in teaching about gender, sexuality, and the Bible builds on a remark from Brian Massumi in his unconventional and often thrilling introduction to Deleuze and Guattari, entitled A User’s Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Massumi proposes,

The question is not, Is it true? But, Does it work? What new thoughts does it make possible to think? What new emotions does it make possible to feel?

24 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 75-82.
What new sensations and perceptions does it open in the body?\textsuperscript{25} Massumi is writing about Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy, not about feminist or queer theory (though his work does bear some influence over the latter); his work has barely penetrated into biblical studies. And yet the questions he asks here offer a valuable way of entering into feminist and queer modes of biblical interpretation. From the introductory course to the advanced seminar, students tend to enter the class preoccupied with the question “Is it true?”, sometimes in the guise of “Is it correct?” or “Is it (morally) (politically) (ideologically) (strategically) right?” “Does it work?”, in contrast, does not start from binary assumptions. It opens space for multiple possibilities, iterations, and versions. It suggests that “it” is something made — socially constructed, to use one set of language from queer theory, but also made by us, in a way that at once empowers and unnerves students. As the class progresses, “not, Is it true. But, Does it work?” is a useful touchpoint for students encountering queer theory, or the idea of a queer Bible, for the first time (or even for the not-first time). My goal in teaching is to show my students multiple ways of looking and thinking.

Furthermore, But, Does it work? offers a hermeneutic starting-point that suggests a number of other important and destabilizing ideas in queer theory and queer hermeneutics. I will mention just one here: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s call for reparative reading as a political and interpretive practice. In an essay (and later book chapter) entitled “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” Sedgwick describes contemporary criticism and literary theory as preoccupied with “paranoid reading” (including that old feminist biblical studies standby, the hermeneutics of suspicion). As a recuperative, plural alternative, she calls for multiple divergent voices, weak theories, and “reparative readings,” which she describes as “exquisitely [attuned] to a heartbeat of contingency.”\textsuperscript{26} Does it work? is one way of inviting these other readings into a space previously occupied by a single paranoid reading. This question, unlike Is it true? suggests multiple possibilities: as such, it creates an opening to think multiplicity, variation, and contingency.

As a pedagogical framing, I have found Massumi’s brief comments here incredibly useful — so much so that I include them as a “Queer Epigraph” on my Queer Bible syllabus. More recently, I have begun introducing Massumi’s questions in “The Bible and Social Justice” as well, where my students — all first years — often find themselves struggling with the question of what it means to interpret the Bible, and how a single text can sustain multiple, contradictory readings. Massumi’s reflections offer another way of sussing out the possibilities and multiplicities that inhere in texts, while also reflecting on our own critical assumptions and positions.


4. Is it fun?: A queer feminist plea for pleasure and play

The final principle that orients my pedagogy in teaching about the Bible, gender, and sexuality is the simple question *Is it fun?* Instead of turning to a feminist or queer theorist, I want to introduce this principle by way of a short example. Not long ago, I attended a small biblical studies conference where I presented a paper on queer theory and the Song of Songs. Drawing on Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s work on “sex in public,” I argued for reading several key scenes in the Song as exemplifying sex in public and sexual counterpleasures. I also included in my paper several lengthy quotes from Berlant and Warner, including a famous passage where they describe attending a performance of erotic vomiting. During the discussion period after the papers, another scholar pressed me on my use of seemingly anachronistic (and, by implication, frivolous) queer and feminist theory to read ancient texts. He was especially insistent on asking *but why?*: why use these methods, why try to find feminist or queer ways to read, why politicize ancient literature at all. I gave several answers, none of which satisfied him, until finally I addressed my own institutional context: at a liberal arts college in the south — the Deep South, no less — with many religious students, this work was necessary because of the sexual and religious traumas my students already brought with them to the classroom. This answer pleased my interlocutor — and the audience — in a way that my other answers (describing the pleasures of queer theory, of intellectual play, of *Does it work?* as a hermeneutic) did not.

Reflecting on this experience, I am irritated both by my own answer and by the ease with which it was accepted by my audience. It’s easy to trace in this response a set of tacit assumptions about the American south, grounded in regional bias. From Chicago, where the conference was held, Memphis seems too parochial, too religious, too backwater, too in need of liberal salvation. (And this is Memphis — to say nothing of Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana, our neighbors to the south and west, and the home states of many of my students.) But I also think the answer reflects an assumption, held by this scholar but also by many others in the field, that to do feminist or LGBTQ scholarship is to do the work of commemoration and mourning. Here the feminist killjoy emerges in another guise — she is the one who kills the joy of the Bible, by reminding us of the Bible’s misogyny and its often horrific treatment of women. LGBTQ scholarship has its own iterations of this figure. This is, indeed, an important part of both feminist and LGBTQ and queer biblical criticism: documenting the dark places in the Bible. The feminist focus on “texts of terror” that Phyllis Trible laid out in her influential book of the same name has analogues in LGBTQ and queer biblical hermeneutics, including the focus on the “clobber texts” used against LGBTQ people (e.g. Lev 18:33, 20:13) and, more recently, documentation of transphobia in texts such as Deuteronomy 22:5.28

27 Berlant and Warner, “Sex in Public.”
Students often expect that a class on queer or feminist biblical interpretation will follow a conventional tack: solemn documentation of a series of horrors. Of course, both histories of sexuality and queer theory have challenged this assumption on both historical and theoretical grounds. But also, I want to suggest that to limit feminist and queer hermeneutics to such documentary approaches — approaches which are, from a theory and method perspective, profoundly boring — is to commit an epistemological and pedagogical error. Interpreting the Bible — even, especially, interpreting with gender and sexuality in mind — can also be exciting, pleasurable, even fun.

I have chosen “fun” and not, for example, “rewarding,” to describe this pedagogical framing for several reasons. First, I want to get away from the capitalist, outcome-driven framing of a term such as “rewarding.” Second, I have found that casual and vernacular language often offers insights or speaks truths that are foreclosed in my traditional academic lingo. Third, I have sought to echo the language used by our students to describe their experiences — and in this context, “fun” is high praise indeed. It is also worth noting that this turn to “fun,” while opposed, for example, by the Frankfurt School, resonates with feminist and queer theory and activisms, including the discussion of pleasure in recent works such as adrienne maree brown’s Pleasure Activism and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha’s Care Work.

Pedagogical Implications

With these principles set forth, I want to turn now to a demonstration of how they help guide the everyday in course planning and in the classroom.

Class structure and organization

When I first began teaching, I viewed designing a new course as an opportunity to cram as much information as possible into fifteen weeks (and, by extension, into the minds of the students). The order of this information mattered less to me than its quantity; I defaulted to teaching material in either historical or canonical order. As I gained my footing (and realized that the focus on quantity was really benefiting none of us — the students, the subject, or myself as the teacher), I began to experiment with other ways of organizing the progression of topics and weeks.

I have come to favor a course organization that begins with the familiar and moves toward complications, permutations, and perversions — into the terrain of *But, Does it work?* It is tempting, given patriarchy and kyriarchy and homophobia and the other structures of oppression under which we live and teach, to begin the class with a radical shock or break (it also feels pleasingly cinematic, as innumerable movies about inspirational teachers have shown). But often, students do not actually learn well under these conditions: research suggests that relaxed attentiveness, not radical disorientation, is best for acquiring knowledge. But my reasons for beginning with the familiar and moving into the unfamiliar have to do with social justice, as much as pedagogy. When the classroom begins as a space of hospitality and generosity, students are more able to follow along on the journey into disorientation and *Does it work?*

By way of example, I will describe how this structure plays out in “The Queer Bible.” Structurally, the class is divided into five units, which are “scaffolded” according to both content and skills. Each unit also has an accompanying assignment or assignments (with the exception of unit IV, in which students work on independent research projects). The units are as follows (here I quote from my syllabus):

**I. Queer Foundations.** This first unit of the course introduces basic issues, problems, and methods that we will pursue throughout the course. We will consider what it means to do a “queer reading” or to “queer the texts.” We will consider foundational texts on sex and sexuality from the Bible.

**II. Queer Permutations.** This unit moves from classic texts into new frontiers in queer theory and the Bible. We will consider a range of queer readings that bring new perspectives to the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and a few non-canonical texts.

**III. Queer Explorations.** In this unit of the course, we will pivot from reading existing scholarship on queer theory and the Bible to generating new queer scholarship. We will read a text of queer theory that does not address the Bible and then explore how we might use it to generate new readings of biblical texts.

**IV. Queer Critiques.** Here, we will consider some important critiques of queer reading. The goal of this unit is both to assess what you have already read and to avoid these pitfalls in your research paper.

**V. Queer Syntheses.** Here, you will develop your own research and contribute a new idea to the queer reading of the Bible. This portion of the course draws together everything prior.

As these descriptions suggest, the course is structured to move from “traditional” or “familiar” texts about the “queer Bible” into increasingly unconventional ground. Unit I includes the stories of David and Jonathan, Jesus and the beloved disciple, and Ruth and

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31 For example, *Dead Poets Society,* or the recurring trope where a new teacher turns to rap to teach Shakespeare.
Naomi; we also consider the “clobber texts” that seem to condemn homosexuality and transgender identity, as well as some ways that queer scholars have reread this material. Unit II continues to explore the same queer reading strategies, but applied to texts that do not explicitly deal with homosexuality or gender identity. In Unit III, no biblical texts are assigned, only readings from queer theory. Students are assigned to a small group and must write a paper together, an activity that leads to both anxiety and new queer knowledge. Unit IV calls the very premise of the class into question, by critiquing “queer reading” as a method (from feminist, trans, and homonational perspectives). And the final unit shifts the responsibility for knowledge production fully to the students.

I follow a similar progression in “Feminist Biblical Interpretation” — first setting out foundations, then turning to unconventional and/or unfamiliar texts for feminist reading, then complicating the category of “feminist” (including womanist and postcolonial critiques). “The Bible and Social Justice,” an introductory course, follows a similar structure, repeating it for each of the three units (race and ethnicity, disability, LGBTQ sexuality); this repetition helps teach students how to learn. In all the courses, I end with presentations of some sort (panel presentations in “The Bible and Social Justice” and “The Queer Bible,” lightning pitches in “Feminist Biblical Interpretation”). These presentations play an important role vis-a-vis hospitality: they signal that this knowledge is yours now.

In all of these courses, the goal of this structure is the same: to begin by creating a familiar and hospitable space of learning, then to move into something unfamiliar, even defamiliarizing. At the beginning, the killjoy function is as expected: to kill the joy of prejudice and harmful assumptions brought into the classroom. But as the class progresses, as our class readings and discussions begin to question and critique what we have established earlier in the semester, the joy of certainty is also threatened. Womanist and postcolonial critiques assert a killjoy function toward “white feminism” (which has concealed itself as “feminism” as such.). The Bible’s generally negative (or, alternately, messianically ableist) view of disability kills the joy of viewing the Bible as a text on the side of social justice (an assumption many of my students bring to the class). This critical labor is counterbalanced by exploring how the Bible might also be read against itself — by learning, along the way, to ask But. Does it work?.

32 “Homonationalism” describes how tolerance and support for LGBTQ rights is used to promote and consolidate nationalist ideology. While it is often assumed that the nation is heteronormative and the category queer, as well as LGBTQ people, are naturally opposed to the nation-state, homonationalism allows us to see how the former are co-opted to support the latter. The term was coined by Jasbir K. Puar in Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). Puar provides a concise introduction to the concept and its development after Terrorist Assemblages in “Rethinking Homonationalism.” International Journal of Middle East Studies 45, no. 02 (2013): 336–339.

33 As the name suggests, “lightning pitches” are extremely brief presentations; they are accompanied by a handout. Prior to the presentation, each student prepares a one-page handout that provides an overview of the project, emphasizing visual design and including only what information is most important. Presenters bring copies for everyone to class. The presentation begins when the handout is distributed. The audience has 1 minute to look over the handout, the presenter speaks for 4-5 minutes explaining the project and handout, and there are 2 minutes for questions. All stages are timed; no overtime is allowed.
While these pedagogical goals (welcoming, killing joy, moving beyond a single correct reading) are in partial tension with each other, this structure is the best way I have found to allow all three to come into play.

Which Authors to Read and Why

Intentionality in choosing readings is one of the easiest ways to promote social justice in course design, beginning with the act of choosing readings. Certain corners of the feminist biblical studies Internet (admittedly a tiny subset of the Internet as such) have become dedicated to calling out and publicly shaming exclusively male conference panels, volumes, and other forms of knowledge production. More recently, Feminist Studies in Religion published a series of blog posts and organized a conference panel on the problem of the “manel” (the all-male conference panel) and the “manthology” (the all-male edited volume or anthology). Occasionally similar complaints bubble up concerning other forms of diversity, including race, ethnicity, and nationality, but gender continues to dominate most of public conversations.

The feminist critics who call for more representation of women in anthologies, on panels, and (relevant to the discussion here) on syllabi are often perceived as killjoys, in the sense I have described the term above. The feminist killjoy here kills the joy of the panel or anthology (or the hard work of its organizers). Her voice is often perceived as nagging. Her critique is a complaint and perceived as a distraction from the “real” work of scholarship. Furthermore, to take seriously what the syllabus killjoy calls for — better representation — is to take on more work. Many scholars are trained by other scholars with little interest in, or experience with, traditions of biblical interpretation beyond what Elisabeth Schüssler  

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34 These include Twitter and Facebook, in both private Facebook groups and public-facing posts.
36 Or such was the case when I completed the first draft of this essay. Following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 and the subsequent explosion of Black Lives Matter protests in the United States and beyond, there has been a new focus on race and racial diversity in scholarship and teaching, including many calls to include more Black authors on syllabi. As has also been pointed out, this call itself is not new; what has changed, instead, is its heightened visibility in predominantly white scholarly and discursive spaces.
37 See reflections by Joseph, “It’s Not That Easy.”
Fiorenza has termed “malestream” scholarship. And important work by female and nonbinary scholars is often ignored or marginalized, as Sara Parks has shown. To include this work in our syllabi often requires effort — additional unremunerated labor.

But from the perspective of the classroom, I find this less a question of killing joy than of cultivating hospitality. My classes, like many undergraduate humanities courses, are predominantly female. The racial makeup varies by semester, but it is never as white as biblical studies sometimes presents itself as being. And as is perhaps unsurprising in a course called “The Queer Bible,” the students have a range of sexualities and gender identities: queer, straight, gay, lesbian, and bi; trans, cis, and nonbinary; open and closeted; still figuring things out. To present these students with only or even predominantly straight white male scholarship is an act of inhospitality: were this a party and not a seminar, I would clearly be a terrible host. And yet I also think that a seminar is a bit like a party, insofar as it’s fair, and important, to ask what if it were fun? That is, students should not just learn, but enjoy learning. One part of this effort is finding a balance of readings that reflect not the patriarchal, heterosexist, cis-privileged history of biblical scholarship, but rather a vision of how it might be otherwise, in a way that welcomes diversity. Another part of this effort is assigning readings that are actually enjoyable to read and discuss — in their intellectual innovations, in their use of language, in the ways they let us think. Fifteen weeks is too long to spend discussing terrible, boring, or exhausting readings.

The other good news: there is no reason not to produce an exciting, gender-balanced syllabus, particularly in a course such as “Queer Bible” or “Feminist Biblical Interpretation.” A great deal of excellent work written by female and nonbinary scholars already exists, and more is produced all the time. Each time I teach the course, I add new readings and cut others; a good rule of thumb is about 20-25% new material. But I have no concerns about how this will affect the gender balance in the course. As with gender, so too with race, ethnicity, and LGBTQ identities. All of this can, and should, be included in the syllabus. Moreover, a class organized around gender, sexuality, or queer critique offers an especially apposite space to include this work without either confining it to what I think of as the “diversity critiques” section (often, a “traditional” course will include feminist, womanist, and/or postcolonial perspectives in the final weeks of the course) or inserting diverse voices simply as markers of identity positions (“writing as a woman” or “writing as a queer person.”). Instead, queer scholarship, which is often critical of identity claims, offers especially easy terrain for moving beyond this kind of essentialist diversity work.

In calling for greater attention to diversity in crafting our reading lists, I am not issuing a call for a “diversity of ideas” (often a conservative buzzword, at least in the United States). In

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38 Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, 189-190.
a fifteen-week class on the queer Bible, I am uninterested in dedicating any classroom space or time to amplifying the voices and arguments of homophobia. Instead, what I want to do is to challenge the notion that the syllabus is somehow prior to the space of critical negotiation, including conversations about diversity and identity, that we engage in the classroom. And while queer theory may (rightly!) offer a number of critiques of the politics of representation, it is my sense that in the classroom, these politics still matter.

*Hospitality, queer playfulness, and what if it were fun? ... In the space of assessment*

I want now to consider assessment, and in particular, the choosing of assignments. While hospitality, experiment, play, and enjoyment may seem like distant concerns from the perspective of summative assessments, it is worth trying to assess student learning in ways that align with, rather than contradict, the principles of the course. In “The Queer Bible,” for example, partway through the semester, students are assigned to a small group and must write a paper together, an activity that leads to both anxiety and new queer knowledge (more on this below). In the most recent iteration of the class, the theoretical texts the students worked on included work from Kathryn Bond Stockton on queer children, Heather Love on queer feelings, Sara Ahmed on queer unhappiness, and José Esteban Muñoz on queer disidentifications. The inclusion of these theoretical texts is one way of broadening the hospitality of the classroom (by including an additional diversity of voices.) But I find this assignment most helpful for the way it (gently) forces students into a practice of generating their own queer readings of biblical texts, without the scaffolding that reading secondary literature in biblical studies has heretofore provided. Suddenly, *But. Does it work?* becomes a crucial, and compelling question.

In both “The Queer Bible” and “The Bible and Social Justice,” I assign final research papers. While the topic is left open — another micro-practice of hospitality— there are limits to how much a research paper can model social justice. Engagement in social justice often comes through the students’ topics, whether offering a queer rereading of the eunuchs in Esther, using the story of Ruth to put pressure on forced migration, or constructing a biblical critique of mass incarceration. In “Feminist Biblical Interpretation,” however, I have developed

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a final assignment that I think better fits the larger pedagogical goals. In place of a final paper, each student constructs a “Feminist Archive” about a biblical character. The instructions read,

For your final project, you will assemble a feminist archive related to a biblical character from the Hebrew Bible. Your archive will include both scholarly and non-traditional materials. You will choose the character, materials, and organizing principles and write an introductory essay. You will also present your archive to the class.

Each archive includes at least five scholarly (peer-reviewed) and five “pop culture” artifacts; the assignment also entails an introductory essay (explaining the “curating” of the archive), full bibliographic information for each item, and single page handout that serves as a visual “pitch” for the archive. The archive itself is stored online on the campus server.

When I designed this assignment, I was principally concerned with my students’ weak research skills; the archive began as a way to force them to learn how to do research with journals and databases (not to mention how to cite sources and save information in an accessible way). It was an added bonus that students seemed to love creating archives (Is it fun?), much more than writing research papers. But in the course of assigning, overseeing, and grading several rounds of archives, I came to realize that this assignment, much more than any other, actualized the principles of social justice that frame how I think about teaching and that I hope to inspire in my students. An archive is organized but non-hierarchal, inclusive of many kinds of texts and objects (generous) but not all (some joy must be killed). Inclusion in an archive, especially in the case of pop culture objects related, more or less closely, to biblical figures, is less a case of Is it true? than Does it work? And the work of assembling the archive remains the best way I have found of hooking students on the joys of research.

On the importance of The Pause

The final pedagogical strategy I want to discuss is what I have come to think of as “The Pause.” The Pause is just that — a day when we stop the relentless forward progression of the class in order to reflect on how the process of learning is going, what we have learned, and what concepts still feel sticky or difficult. The Pause is not announced on the syllabus in advance; indeed, it is not even set on the calendar. The timing is based on the feel of the class, more than anything else; there is a point when students begin to seem both a bit more frantic and a bit sadder. More than anything, they are tired. The Pause usually comes before the mid-semester point, though not by much. On this day, we set aside whatever readings or in-class activities have been scheduled; this is done in advance because canceling a discussion at the last minute, after the dutiful among the students have already completed their preparations, is to risk anger and a new wave of disappointment. Instead of the scheduled activity, we return to what we have already discussed, going over it again, teasing out difficulties, revisiting questions.
The Pause is an important part of helping students move from *Is it true?* to *Does it work?* It takes time to open to multiple possibilities, as well as to set aside a concern with “getting it right.” The Pause creates space to make this possible. And by allowing more time to consider what has proved most difficult, challenging, or – in the case of any Lacanian article I let slip into “The Queer Bible” – infuriating, the Pause also creates a space for the possibility of *What if it were fun?* This is not to say that Lacan is fun, or that any specific reading is “fun.” But by stopping to take stock and evaluate, students have time to consider, as well, their affective and emotional responses to the texts and questions. The Pause is also a space to breathe, and to let texts breathe. Instead of cramming in material, I ask students what they might enjoy about it — and, as well, what other feelings the material may have brought to light. This space for reflection is a crucial part of queering the Bible. It is also a space for social justice, as it allows students to consider ways of being beyond sadness and suffering.

In *Living a Feminist Life*, her recent and more practice-oriented text on feminism, politics, and affect, Sara Ahmed describes the importance of being able to step outside the killjoy. The killjoy is a position, not an unchanging and eternal entity; she represents a form of critique, as well as a specific mode of engagement with the world. But when being a killjoy kills all of our own joy, then it is time to pause. So too, I have found, in the classroom.

**Final Reflections**

The pedagogical strategies described in this essay may seem straightforward. Begin the course in ways that are familiar — in content, in material, in classroom activities and assignments — and then move into the unfamiliar and then the defamiliarizing: from *Is it true?*, lead the students to *Does it work?* Assign gender-balanced readings, with an eye to other forms of diversity. Consider whether assignments actually relate to the goals of the course. Perhaps a nontraditional assignment might enact principles of social justice better than a research paper? And take time to pause, both in the classroom and beyond the classroom.

But while simple, I have found these principles pay off. When I apply them consistently in my own everyday teaching, the class becomes increasingly reflexive, more generous, kinder. It feels to me as if the students are learning more deeply, as if the ideas are “sticking.” Of course, this is difficult to prove with the traditional tools of academic assessment, which are oriented toward correctness and discipline. But even the imperfect measures that are available – student evaluations, observations by colleagues, student performance on final exams – student evaluations, observations by colleagues, student performance on final exams.

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43 Thus, “Time out from being a killjoy is necessary for a killjoy if she is to persist in being a killjoy.” Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 242.

papers and presentations, informal feedback about the class in office hours or other conversations with students, my own sense of class dynamics—all suggest that something is working, or working better. They also produce a classroom that is a space where I, too, want not just to work, but to exist as a person, a fellow learner, a conversation partner, a host, and a guest.

And so: Create an environment of hospitality and generosity. Embrace the feminist killjoy. Set aside a narrow focus on “correct” or “true,” in favor of an expansive inquiry into what kinds of ideas might “work.” Allow space for pleasure, and for fun. All of these orienting principles signal ways of moving beyond anxiety over correctness to practices of hermeneutic—and real world—creativity, additive work, pleasure, and flourishing.

Works Cited


misogynist/.


