

VARIETIES OF LATIN@ RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS
Reflections on the Writing Intensive Requirement Transformation

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In December 2009, I participated in the nine-hour seminar designed for converting a regular “core” course into a course that meets the writing intensive requirement. This proved to be a valuable learning experience for me, and I am therefore writing my reflections now while they are still fresh. The experience for me has resulted in a fresh and improved writing component to my existing core course: Varieties of Latina/o Religious Traditions. I will teach the course next during this summer, 2010.

The learning goals for this course are lofty; I expect students to acquire a grasp of some basic religious studies jargon, and to apply them. Key concepts such as myth, ritual, and symbols provide students with a linguistic template to synthesize, compare and contrast the religious expressions within Latina/o communities both in the past and today. This exercise will enable students to integrate this distanced perspective into their understanding of religion more generally. The thesis question for the course requires students to think both creatively and analytically: is there something we can call “Latina/o religion?” If so, describe it. If not, why not? Central to this question is the religious studies *raison d'être*: What is religion? Students will develop methods to identify and describe religious expressions, and to contextualize those within a Latino/a social reality.

Writing, of course, facilitates this process. Hitherto I have required four formal writing assignments for this course: two in class midterms, and two film analyses. Cinematic representations of Latina/o cultural traditions serve as key texts for student analysis. However, since the seminar I will change the writing requirements for the course, and I describe those changes below. In brief, I will require informal writing assignments, and will require a long paper that integrates the total course materials. But, in order for me to fully process and articulate the ways in which writing in

my course will be transformed, I need to preface this discussion with a reflection on the seminar discussions, exercises, and readings.

A SKEPTIC IN THE CHURCH
OF HUMAN SCIENCES

As a student of the *postmodern* age, I maintain serious doubts about the so-called “human sciences”—in so far as this discourse is based in a modern notion of a universal human subject with categorical (read: able to be put into categories) variations. Modernity taught that humanity could be dissected and categorized according to a scientific theory of classification. Yet, humans have a history, they have a society, culture, and personalities that vary radically, making it impossible to accurately predict behavior as if forecasting weather patterns or diagnosing disease. Hence, I am suspicious of educational science. A sage senior professor once told me that teaching is about trial and error—you fix the things you’ve done wrong. This attitude does not incline me favorable toward a writing workshop. Yet, Doug Hesse understands and appreciates the issues I raise, and rather than proposing a universal model, his approach is to propose a variety of techniques and strategies for purposes of trial and error.

I have participated in three writing workshops with Doug Hesse, and each one I found helpful mostly because of Doug’s practical and even philosophically pragmatic approach to the material: “truth” in teaching writing is largely what works to produce virtue. Paraphrasing William James, like the optical glass, if the religious or philosophical lens improves vision, then it works! And, like the prescription lens, not all truths fit all frames, correcting blurred vision. When applied to teaching writing, pragmatism brings into sharp relief my perspective that not all teaching strategies produce improved writing for all students. Hence, as I experienced and understood

it, Doug's approach was to 1) help teachers appreciate students' learning needs, and; 2) present a variety of strategies to employ at one's discretion, rather than a universal formula designed to work in all places at all times.

Equipped with this background, however misguided, I believe I was able to gain the most from the core writing intensive transformation seminar inasmuch as I was able to perfect techniques, accepting some of the information and rejecting other aspects. However, if I was not already familiar with Doug's pedagogy, I would have felt stifled and frustrated by some of the seminar discussions and by the readings especially. Overall, I found John Bean's *Engaging Ideas* to be quite useful. It provides a wide range of writing problems, situations, goals, while delimiting many useful strategies and specific techniques to teach writing across a broad curriculum. This, however, was also my first critique: the examples used to illustrate points were far too unfocused. That is, Bean drew examples from Biology and Economics in addition to English Literature and what he calls "religious studies." As the examples increased in enormity and generalization, my trust in the text shrank. I think a volume focused on the humanities alone would be generalized, but would suit me better in trusting its advice.

My second criticism of the text unfolds also around its generality: I was unconvinced by the premise that the teaching narrative textually presented is universally applicable across the college curriculum. My experience and my reading of the literature leads me to conclude that variations in instructor identity greatly vary how students respond to course content. According to the "AHSS Teaching Task Force Recommendations," chaired by Barbara Wilcots, and dated July 29, 2007, teaching evaluations, like teaching itself, must be contextualized: "Contextualize student evaluations, considering course, student, and instructor characteristics that research shows may affect assessment of teacher effectiveness."

By contrast, none of the situations, techniques, or strategies presented by Bean for teaching writing were contextualized within a student body, faculty, and national reality that varies according to race, class, gender, erotic identity and more. While I understand that that project would have required a meta-discourse, even some cursory remarks or qualifications

would have greatly improved the book's plausibility. Finally and perhaps most generally, the text completely lacked a critique of the literature, and a critique of itself.

Bean references data as if they were sacred revelations. Data are of course bias, skewed, and should be treated critically for they displace many key factors influencing teaching—especially minority issues that by definition are insignificant in information collecting that privileges large clusters. Still, I found the information useful and below is how I factored it into my core course, with my own criticism.

LATINA/O RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS: Writing to Learn/Learning to Write

Perhaps the first classification I find troubling is the easy distinction Bean makes between writing intended to teach content, and writing intended to teach writing. I find really very little distinction in my own course. I always teach writing. I take time in my courses to explain each assignment in great detail, which enables me to teach composition techniques including grammar issues. Yet, I am incorporating the techniques Bean suggests, especially the impromptu writing assignment. In the next section of this essay, I provide a course description, with amendments I made after the seminar. Similarly, I have provide before and after narratives of my writing assignments in the hopes of demonstrating learning and progress in my own teaching and writing!

VARIETIES OF LATINA/O RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS Course Description and Learning Objectives

As a seminar in the core curriculum under Communities and Environments, the thesis question of this course focuses on the varied religious traditions practiced by people of Latin American origin in the United States. What are Latina/o religious traditions? How can they be studied and described? We explore this question through a variety of secondary texts, film, and art. It is not possible to completely understand the religious expressions of a cultural group within one academic semester. It is possible, however, to study patterned myths, rituals, and symbols within

history and society to better fathom religious traits characterizing groups of people in time and place. Toward this end we rely on a methodology used in “comparative religions,” also known as “history of religions.” This framework requires that we ask broad general questions about the place or *environment* of religious “phenomena” constituting Latina/o traditions broadly, while focusing specific historical examples. At the core of this task lies the question: “What is religion?” More specifically, from the various representations of religion we seek to glean how (many) people of Latina/o origin in the U.S. ordered experience, understood reality, made cosmological sense of themselves and others, and anticipated death.

In other words, what is the U.S. Latina/o religious experience? How has Christian theology shaped and informed this distinctive historical reality? What is the character, the nature, the quality of “religion” and “spirituality” in U.S. Latina/o history and society? How do we answer this question, and why is it important?

In order to address this question, this course attempts to *map* and understand a small part of the complex religious traditions of Latin America, with special attention to their expressions/reformulations in the United States. Our *comparative* approach seeks to uncover the similarities and differences in various U.S. Latina/o religions, asking: How can Latina/o religions be characterized and represented? Is there a distinctive quality in Latina/o religious expression that cuts across space, time, and *theological* boundaries? Even more, how has religion contributed to a sense of identity and power for Latina/os in the U.S.? Is religion a tool for keeping Latina/o people oppressed, and/or can religion, Christianity in particular, liberate people from material oppressions?

There is of course no “scientific” solution to this inquiry. Instead, the outcome of the course is to gain perspective, and to be able to articulate that point of view convincingly, using evidence, especially through writing. Instead of a definitive answer to the question about the existence of a “Latina/o religion,” students should gain 1) a working understanding of the major terms and issues in the study of religions; 2) a familiarity with key texts and traditions within Latina/o religiosity; and 3) an understanding of the historical background and social contexts out of which Latina/o religions emerge.

Our trajectory roughly follows the demographic profiles of Latina/os in the U.S.: over 60% of the Hispanic-American population is of Mexican origin, and thusly that group orients the first part of the course. The second half focuses on the Caribbean diaspora (Puerto Rican and Cuban), and Central and South American immigration.

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING IN BRIEF

FIRST MIDTERM: 16 October (20 points)
SECOND MIDTERM/ FINAL: 13 November (20 points)
FILM REVIEWS: 2 @ 20 points each (40 points)
October 9: & November 20
Class Attendance and Participation, including group discussions: (20 points)

MIDTERMS: Each reading unit will be introduced with a series of terms and questions, reading and test “prompts.” I will draw from these exact prompts for the midterms. Midterms will require the entire class period to complete. Each student must provide a blue book, and in-class exams must be written in ink. There is no minimum length for the exams, but the highest grades will be awarded for answers demonstrating detail, depth of analysis, critical insight, and proper grammar and general writing skills.

ESSAY GRADING CRITERIA:

1. Does the essay answer the question?
Correct Information:
Well Organized:
2. Does the essay reference information properly?
Lectures:
READINGS:
3. Does the essay analyze, critique, or compare the material?
Class concepts:
Fresh insight and analysis:
4. Does the essay use all possible examples for answering the question?
Minimum effort:
Maximum strength:

DISCUSSION GROUPS:

I will break the class into small “discussion groups.” Each group will be assigned a question or more and must hand in a group

answer. I will also respond to questions printed on the bottom of each page.

FILM ANALYSIS: You are to compare and analyze the films screened in the class. The film reviews should be 2-4 pages, or 500-1,000 words, typed, double-spaced, with Times New Roman 12 point font and 1" margins. It must be submitted in paper ("hard copy"). It should address the following questions:

- 1) What is the *thesis* of the film? What does it mean to tell us, why and how does it do this?
- 2) How does it represent religion?
- 3) What does the film tell us about Latin@ religions?
- 4) How does the film square with (compare to) assigned readings and class discussions?

LATINA/O RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS:

Post Core Writing Seminar Writing Revision

ASSIGNMENTS (in brief): You are required to write a term paper consisting of 15 pages, broken down into three actual papers. The final term paper enables you to integrate and revise the first two essays into a longer, more polished project. Goals for the first two papers are generally uniform, but the content is different. The first paper focuses on Christianity, comparing Latina/o forms of Catholicism with evangelical and Pentecostal traditions. The Second paper asks you to compare the medium-ship based healing traditions extant at the time of colonialism and now thoroughly integrated with Christianity: Santeria and *curanderismo*. I will return both papers to you with comments that will help you to revise them to integrate into the final paper. The third and longer paper asks you to revise the shorter papers in light of my comments, and to compare the forms of Christianity you wrote about to the neo-Indigenous healing traditions focusing on myth, ritual, and symbol, asking if there is enough commonality among them in form if not content to be classified together as an ethnic religious tradition. Papers require you to understand, compare, analyze, synthesize, and integrate materials from readings, class lectures and discussions, and films. Materials should be drawn

from in class sources only. Bear in mind that your audience is religious studies scholars.

PAPER ONE: CHRISTIANITY. This first paper asks you to compare the myths, rituals, and symbols of Pentecostalism to those of devotional Catholicism, focusing especially on the cases of Mexican devotion to Guadalupe, and the Cuban devotion to Caridad. How do these traditions resonate pre-colonial religious practices and inclinations? Discuss both the form of the expressions and the content—that is, what are people praying for? What do they expect? How do they imagine and position Christ within their cosmology? Are these forms of Christianity more alike than they are different, or vice versa?

ALTERNATIVE: Place a practitioner of Pentecostalism in conversation with a Catholic devotee. How do they disagree? How do they agree?

PAPER TWO: SPIRITUALISM: This second paper asks you to compare the myths, rituals, and symbols of spiritual healing traditions ("spiritualism") focusing especially on the cases of Mexican *curanderismo*, Cuban Santeria. How do these traditions resonate pre-colonial religious practices and inclinations? Discuss both the form of the expressions and the content—that is, what are people praying for? What do they expect? How do they imagine and position Christ within their cosmology? Are these forms of community-based indigenized Christianity more alike than they are different, or vice versa?

ALTERNATIVE: Place a practitioner of Santeria in conversation with a *curandero* devotee. How do they disagree? How do they agree?

FINAL PAPER: Latina/o Religions? Our study of Latina/o religious traditions has focused on Mexican American expressions as examples of mainland Latin America, and on Cuban religious systems to represent Latina/o traditions found in the Caribbean. The final paper requires you to synthesize the first two papers. Compare the myths, rituals, and symbols of all the traditions we have studied in the course. Integrate your arguments of your revised shorter papers into a longer sustained theoretical argument about Latina/o religions more generally. Whereas your shorter papers relied heavily on examples and

evidence, this final paper should draw from that pool of resources, integrating them into a longer theoretical analysis about what is religion broadly, and what is Latina/o religion specifically: does such a thing exist? Why or why not? If these traditions are too varied to be classified as a unified whole, explain the differences. If they are similar enough in content if not form than argue

for the essence of a Latina/o religion that transcends individual confessional traditions.

ALTERNATIVE: As a scholar of religious studies, you have read conversations between Latina/os of various faiths. Based on these transcripts, create an argument about the nature of Latina/o religions. Does such a thing exist in the singular? Why or why not?

