

# Life as an Object: Teaching Lived Experiences Alongside Theories

*One of the fundamental challenges for the educator, maybe more so for one who trades in the fields of humanities, social sciences, or liberal arts, is to be able to share the real, concrete, and empirical manifestations of the curriculum. Although theory is undeniably important, providing purely conceptual and abstract tools to our students may not be the best way to foster their understanding of the reality of lived experiences. Preferably, the educator should operate with a constant back-and-forth between lived experience and its theorization. This can be achieved by reflecting on the works of literary writers in relation to the works of sociologists.*

## The Relationship Between Literature and Social Scientific Discourse

The role of the sociologist is to debunk everyday notions. The distinction between everyday notions and social scientific discourse operates through an epistemological rupture that distinguishes the former from the latter (Bourdieu, 2001, p.172). Without this distinction, no theoretical knowledge would be possible.

In his canonical writings about the relationship between the ideal and the material, Karl Marx explains how everyday notions act as ideologies (Marx, 1972). We know that our minds process information through mental shortcuts, analogies and generalizations (Massey, 2007, p.9). Without this inductive generalization, our minds would always rely on deductive reasoning, which would translate into an

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energy vacuum to the extent that mundane acts would not be achievable (Massey, 2007, p. 9). We also know that schemas are necessary to organize the world around us into cognitive categories, and that experimental knowledge might be ill-suited for basic reasoning (Brubaker, 2004, p.71). For example, a child will learn that the stove can burn his body based on a categorization of warm and cold based on experience. Yet, the same child would be ill-advised to test if the stove burns his hands, then subsequently try his feet, his mouth, and so on. All this is to say that both philosophy and cognitive psychology allow us to understand that different types of knowledge operate in a hierarchy of functions rather than in a hierarchy of importance.

It is at this point in our reasoning that we need to come back to Marx. His insights on ideologies as veils that hide the true nature of economic disparities has been the object of many scholarly debates,

yet out of the debates comes a contemporary consensus: the relationship between the organization of society and its mental production is not a pure, simple, causal one (Marx, 1972). Cultural production reflects the organization of production, the allocation of resources, and the fundamental antagonisms between groups in any mode of production. These fundamental antagonisms are the sites of concrete struggles for the distribution of resources, privileges and their inherent coercion. In other words, the narrative of a movie like *The Pursuit of Happiness*, which emulates meritocracy, is as much a reflection of the mode of production as the novel *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair, which criticizes the exploitation and sanitary disaster of the meat-packing industry at the turn of the 20th century in the United States. Both the social relations and their symbolic counterparts are central in the understanding of lived experience.

Based on Marx’s insight on the relationship between the organization of society and its mental production, literature and social scientific discourses might not be as distinct as we may at first think. My goal in the following lines is to demonstrate, with three specific examples of sociological topics (the institutionalized horrors of slavery, Jim Crow, and 20th century European antisemitism), how the contribution of three specific writers (Morrison, Faulkner, and Kafka) can help integrate a pedagogy that provides both a sensible experience and an explanation of the topic. This, in turn, can be a valuable tool for the classroom.

## Hauntings of the Past

Slavery is the total control of the body of the enslaved, all the way from the hands to the reproductive system. This state of dehumanization is fueled by complete coercion: physical and mental torture. It is almost

impossible to imagine. The instructor who engages with their students on a purely abstract level fails to communicate the intense state of pain, humiliation and dispossession experienced by slaves, yet slavery is an important topic to examine because it gives us insight into the persistence of acts of racism today.

The growing of indigo, cotton, and tobacco on the territories that were stolen from the Indigenous peoples of the United States led to a growing demand for slaves and their labour. The latter was achieved by an increase in the demand of picking by the slaves (Baptist, 2014, p.103). If quotas were not achieved, the slaves were disciplined with physical abuse (Baptist, 2014, p.113). The fear that resulted from such violent coercion led many slaves to develop ambidexterity (the usage of both hands for picking at the same time), which, in turn, led to heightened expectations of productivity and further abuse (Bap-

tist, 2014, p.113). The growing demand on the bodies of new slaves became problematic with the prohibition of the importation of slaves in the United States in 1807. To address this issue, the slave owners resorted to a practice that was already common and widespread in the Antebellum South.

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The first anti-miscegenation laws of the Antebellum South never formally enforced prohibition of sex between white men and Black women (Khanna, 2011, p.27). Indeed, sexual assaults from the masters were incentivized by the production of offspring who became enslaved themselves and were valued higher than non-mixed slaves (Khanna, 2011, p.28). With the abolition of the slave trade and the growing demand for cotton in the late 1800s, the Antebellum South began the practise of “breeding” slaves as an economic strategy to fuel a domestic slave trade (Baptist, 2014, p.238). Babies born into slavery were not only offspring of the masters and assaulted Black women, but children of slaves themselves. Most were separated from their families, and many were sold in the new territories stolen from Indigenous people.

The economic demands of the northern states and England, which were both undergoing massive industrialization, contributed to the perpetuation of the mental and physical torture of slaves (Baptist, 2014, p.321). A sociological explanation such as this, which provides social factors for the understanding of a social transformation, can never truly allow us to grasp the horrors of slavery. It is missing the stories of the subjugated themselves. This is where literature can provide a way to share a sensible experience that can lead to a better learning experience for the student interested in this social issue.

Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* has provided a useful tool to deepen students’ understanding of slavery and its consequences on the enslaved. The novel tells the story of Sethe, an enslaved woman who wins her freedom by fleeing North. The narrative occurs years after she escapes bondage and is set in a house that is haunted. We slowly understand that the ghost that haunts her is her child, whom she murdered to flee the plantation. The haunting in *Beloved* is an analogy both of Sethe’s remorse and of the fact that slavery is still plaguing her existence. While a full appreciation of the novel is, of course, enhanced by comprehensive knowledge of the sociological context of American slavery, an understanding of the sociological context is more complete with an appreciation of the emotional and psychological impacts of slavery, which is made more accessible through the literary form. Sensible experience obtained from immersion in a literary work complements the social scientific understanding obtained from theoretical texts; the use of literature is a pedagogical strategy that activates both.

## **The Past Is Not Even Past**

Following the end of the civil war in 1865, the passage of the 14th and 15th amendments guaranteed constitutional rights to Blacks. But with the failed experience of Reconstruction and the ruling of Plessy vs. Fergusson, Blacks in the South were still experiencing the concrete manifestations of white supremacy. One-drop rules, which classified individuals with any trace of African ancestry as Black, were voted in at various state levels, establishing a formal racialization of Blacks and Whites (Khanna, 2011, p.31). Such legislation was fundamental for the smooth functioning of Jim Crow laws; they were needed to delimit who fell on which side of the color line. The Plessy vs. Fergusson ruling of 1896 made Jim Crow Laws constitutional, initiating the formal segregation of Blacks from Whites in all social institutions, social spaces, and intimate relationships (Khanna, 2011, p.31). As an educator, it is sometimes difficult to explain how the legacy of slavery overlaps with continued systematic racism against Blacks. I believe that the work of the writer William Faulkner helps to illustrate this complexity.

William Faulkner lived in Mississippi when the Jim Crow laws were in full effect. In his novel *Absalom! Absalom!*, Faulkner tells the story of Thomas Sutpen, a poor white man from the Appalachian Mountains who wants to build an estate and a name for his family. He embarks on a trip to Saint-Domingue where, working on the plantations, he accumulates wealth and has a relationship with an emancipated Black woman with whom he has a child, Charles-Étienne Bon. Sutpen leaves his wife in Saint-Domingue and his son in Louisiana and arrives in Mississippi where he coerces Indigenous people to “sell” him some land. He starts a plantation with slaves and marries a white woman with whom he has children. Sutpen’s dream of a respectable plantation life is shattered when his first son Charles-Étienne Bon befriends his son from his new marriage, Henry Sutpen. Charles-Étienne Bon is set on marrying the sister of Henry Sutpen, his own sister. When Henry discovers that Charles-Étienne Bon is Black, he murders him, not because of the transgression of the taboo of incest but because the transgression of the taboo of the color line. *Absalom! Absalom!* is an analogy of the fundamental horrors that are foundational to the Jim Crow South: the land stolen from Indigenous people, slavery, the Black wife and Mulatto children abandoned, and the murder of a Black son and brother because of his attempt to become a regular American citizen.

The color line is explored in other works of Faulkner. His novel *Light in August* explores the lynching of an Octoroon (a man with 1/8 of black blood who looks white but is black according to one-drop rule laws). The victim, Joe Christmas, is accused of killing a white woman—an accusation that was often invoked during lynching in the South, even if it wasn’t true—yet, Faulkner explains that the real norm that Christmas transgressed and the reason for his murder was that he *acted* “just like a white man, and that was what made the people upset.”

As an educator who has taught racism in a number of classes, I've noticed that the topic of Jim Crow racism is of great interest to my students. I've found that a nuanced understanding of the impact of this system of white supremacy is best developed by engaging with the narratives of powerful writers like Faulkner who share the sensible experience of people living under Jim Crow laws. Encountering the hate, pain, betrayal, and violence that characterized the period through literature helps students grasp the sociological phenomenon of Jim Crow racism and understand how its legacy bleeds into our society even to this day.

### A Prismatic Category

Another topic that I approach with my students is Judeophobia/antisemitism. I use the novels of Franz Kafka—terribly lucid metaphors and stories about life in central Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> century—to help students engage with the ordeal of living in a totalitarian state or experiencing the rise of a discriminatory doctrine that structures itself into a racist, fascist state. The work of Maynard (2017) and Coulthard (2014), among others, asserts that while Quebec society is not void of racism, it is nonetheless a challenge to bring a typical Quebecker born after 2000 to an understanding of what it might mean to experience such terrible events. It would be naïve to think that without having experienced it ourselves we could fully appreciate the impact of living under a brutal dictatorship, but it our duty to remember and try to enrich our experience with knowledge and empathy.

*The Trial* by Kafka takes place in an unknown city at an unknown time. A man is woken up in his bedroom one morning by two police officers who arrest him. He is informed that he is free to go while his trial is ongoing. The novel then takes a nightmarish turn as the protagonist tries to win his trial even though he never knows what he stands accused of. The novel would almost be funny if it weren't for the fact that the novel was written in 1915 in the future Czech Republic, 24 years before the invasion of the country by Germany and its integration into the racist and totalitarian empire of the Third Reich.

One important challenge I've found in my experience as an educator teaching antisemitism—a problem that Kafka's writing can help us to grasp—is to understand the specificities of this brand of racism, which racializes religion. One way of explaining these specificities is to understand the differences between middle age Judeophobia and modern antisemitism. Whereas the first is a type of discrimination and prejudices based on the rejection of the Jewish faith, the second is a modern racist ideology that racializes (that is, forcefully putting someone into a “racial” group) people of Jewish faith (Dufour 2012). This means that conversion was always a possibility to escape persecution in medieval Judeophobia, while it is impossible with modern antisemitism.

With the modernization process instilled by the French Revolution, a fair amount of European countries proceeded to what they called “Jewish emancipation” (Rodrigues, 2010). This meant that the old discriminatory practices of Judeophobia (prohibiting the practice of law by Jews, ghettoization, and the prescription that Jews wear particular articles of clothing) were all abolished on the condition that

Europeans of Jewish faith would assimilate in the “universal” national culture. Yet with all the great social transformations of modernity and the explosion of new political ideologies, this period corresponds to the birth of conservative antisemitism, an ideology that scapegoats Europeans of Jewish faith as being responsible for the destruction of the old world (Rodrigue 2010, p. 196). Medieval Judeophobic tropes are the basis for modern antisemitism. In the twisted logic of the early anti-Semites, if Europeans of Jewish faith benefited from the gains of modernity, they must be the ones responsible for those changes that were considered undesirable to conservatives (Bauman, 1989). Furthermore, since Europeans of Jewish faith were, after all, Europeans who just so happened to have a different faith, and the old stigma markers of the Middle Ages (Judenhut, rouelle) were now forbidden, the anti-Semite saw his enemy everywhere, like a lurking fifth column. To paraphrase Hanna Arendt, you could always convert from being Jewish, but there is no escape from Jewishness. In the mind of the anti-Semite, the European of Jewish faith is a different species that cannot co-exist with non-Jewish Europeans.

Many of us have seen the horrific propaganda of Nazism—images the Nazis and their collaborators propagating images of rats as an allegory of the “threat” of Europeans of Jewish faith to the health of the body of the nation. For many Jews, it was as if they had been transformed into vermin in the eyes of their neighbours. Needless to say, the central metaphor of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, wherein a normal man becomes a despised monster in the eyes of his own family, serves as a powerful tool to activate students' understanding of dehumanization. Of course, the writing of Kafka extends beyond issues of racism and illustrates various social scientific issues. But, in the difficult topic of the specificity of anti-Semitism, Kafka has provided a useful tool.

### Conclusion

The communist philosopher Slavoj Žižek speaks of an ancient Chinese curse that goes something like this: *may you live in interesting times*. With the current social issues of police brutality against Blacks, ongoing colonization and encroachment on Indigenous lands by settlers, the rise of right-wing populism, and the increase of both Islamophobia and antisemitism, these days we live in what seems like an interesting (and depressing) time for sociologists. But it seems like it is also a time where we need to be able to talk about “race” and ask ourselves questions to which both sociologists and writers have long found thought-provoking answers. In the context of teaching, this means that we need to be able to link the lived (or at least empathic) experiences of students with abstract theories. The latter enables them to understand the systemic processes at work and how they can tackle them, while the former enables them to understand that their daily challenges are intrinsic to sociological knowledge.



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