

From My Place: Teaching the Holocaust and Judaism at the University of Mississippi Fifty-Three Years after James Meredith

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Abstract. *This essay explores classroom dynamics when students identify and connect their own painful experiences to structural racism or ethnocentrism exhibited in the Holocaust or parts of Jewish history. The intrusion of this proximal knowledge can be an obstacle to student learning. If engaged by professors, however, I argue that proximal knowledge can be a catalyst that promotes learning. Social scientific theory provides a useful lens for helping students to better grasp and contextualize both their old experiences and the new materials that are being taught in the course within the larger structural frames of race, religion, and ethnicity that they have selected, but may not fully appreciate. Reflective guided journaling is an essential part of the learning experience.*

I am trained as a Hebrew Bible scholar but tenured as a professor of sociology at the University of Mississippi, where I teach courses on the Holocaust and Judaism.¹ My social locations as a disabled, African American woman reared in the northeastern United States, and the well-documented racist history of the university and the region, provoke an unusual reaction in many of my students: classroom conversations about the persecution of European Jewry or the Church's antisemitic history inevitably awaken students' anxieties. Students find it difficult to focus on the Holocaust or Judaism because their knowledge of southern history and their personal experiences with

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Christian ethnocentrism and racism against African Americans intervene to create a powerful, painful – and sometimes awkward – distraction. In hindsight this is not illogical, but for me it was unexpected.

In this essay, I argue that teaching the Holocaust and Judaism, particularly within the contexts of the University of Mississippi, requires understanding the history of structural racism and ethnocentrism broadly and how these concepts relate to Jewish history. It also requires us to think about how concerns that might be trivial in other contexts – a professor's social identity, students' social locations, or the physical location of a university – can influence students' perceptions about the course materials. I problematize in sociological terms student responses to courses about the Holocaust and Judaism, and I proffer that social scientific theory provides a means for understanding and resolving challenges caused by proximal knowledge that binds the legacies on the syllabus with the legacies in students' knowledge-base. Finally, I suggest reflective journaling as a resource to help students connect the relationship between these familiar bodies of knowledge about racism and ethnocentrism to new knowledge about the Holocaust or Jewish history that they seek when they take my courses.

The essay is titled "From My Place" for several reasons. The title refers to my status in southern culture where African American woman still are customarily relegated to silence and the expectation of servitude. It is a multivalent reference to the physical, geographic, societal, and subcultural spaces that I occupy simultaneously. I engage the power of visual acuity and the significance of my brown body in this essay because these influence perceptions about my courses and statuses or social locations much more than do my degrees from Vanderbilt and Boston University. Simply, while many Americans would like to think that Barack Obama's two-term presidency signals or confirms that the United States is finally post-racial, it is not (Feagin 2013, 8). Race and gender matter all too much.

W.E.B. Du Bois, the first American sociologist of religion, and Magnus Hirschfeld, the German Jewish physician and social scientist who first coined the term *racism*, understood well the connections between African American and Jewish experiences (DuBois 1936; Hirschfeld 1938). During the upsurge of Nazism in Germany, Hirschfeld characterized the Third Reich's emergent philosophy as a "race war," writing:

My aim in the following pages is to examine the racial theory which underlies the doctrine of race war. It is hard to be dispassionate when one is oneself numbered among the many thousands who have fallen victim to the practical realization of this theory; but I am sure that an objective exposition and study are indispensable, and I trust that my readers will find me fair and unprejudiced. (Hirschfeld 1938, 35)

Not only did Hirschfeld see the interrelated racial crosscurrents in Europe and in the United States, but he wrote: "In almost all the countries of Europe and America there flourish increasingly the germs whose activity will soon or later (unless the peril is recognized and averted) induce paroxysms of racism akin to that which devastates Germany at the present time" (Hirschfeld 1938, 35). Louis Marshall, the 1921 president of the American Jewish Congress, wrote about this relationship, as have scholars such as Richard Frankel, Sander L. Gilman, Juan M. Floyd-Thomas, and Eric L. Goldstein (Frankel 2013, 235; see also among others, Gilman 1985; Floyd-Thomas 2014; Goldstein 2006).

Students also rightly connect racism against African Americans to antisemitism against Jews, but they sometimes conflate points of distinction. This oversimplifies the degree to which religion in the Deep South was co-opted for intolerance. In Mississippi, for example, a complex nexus of ideologies joined Christianity in the service of racism against African Americans, and to some lesser extent Jews (cf. Langmuir 1990; Goldstein 2006). Stuart Rockoff maintains that in some historic moments, racialized ideologies functioned against Jews more vociferously than at others. For example, in the 1890s, Jews who were perceived as granting black sharecroppers too much liberty suffered reprisals from whites. Southern Jews also experienced heightened antisemitism during Jim Crow, especially between 1950 and 1960 (Rockoff 2006). During this period, the University of Mississippi admitted Jewish students, but they were compelled to attend Christian church services.

Thus, the need exists to explore the classroom dynamics that occur for student learners when traumatic histories intersect with students' proximal knowledge. By recognizing the proximity in knowledge between the subjects that I teach and the experiences of my teaching constituencies it is possible to clarify connections between the history that students know and the history that is being taught.

What Is Proximal Knowledge?

I contrived the term proximal knowledge to describe linked bodies of information employed by my southern, mostly Christian students, both white and African American, as they learned about the Holocaust and Jewish history. I use the term to describe the associations that we make when we encounter something new that in some way strikes us as similar to something that we already know. (I subsequently learned that the phrase finds similar use in the psychology literature.) Initially the points of congruence may seem inscrutable or only vaguely familiar. Nevertheless, the new precept becomes linked, if only tangentially, to snippets of stored information from our previous interactions and familiar histories (Gibson and Pick 2003, 9).

By definition, then, proximal data are limited by blind spots. But as with visual perception, students fill-in the blind spots to make sense of present perceptions in order to obtain a coherent, if incorrect, picture. This is a crucial point. When we are ill-informed, we are more prone to rely on stereotypical thinking – that which is simple, safe, and makes us feel sane (Johnson 2014). This reflex helps resolve the cognitive dissonance that occurs when we are confronted with painful and discordant ideas, especially when they concern our group (Tavris and Aronson 2007).

The Racial and Religious Frames

The concept of racial framing is derived from sociologists Erving Goffman and Joe R. Feagin. Feagin examines the centuries-long ways in which African Americans' experiences have been perceived by whites and framed (2013; cf. also, Goffman 1974). According to Feagin, framing is an integral part of socialization practices and is key to the ways that whites see themselves and Others. Here, I add the notion of religious framing to include the ways in which Christianity is similarly normalized in western culture and simultaneously frames the religious Other as outside of the norm. As with racial framing, religious framing goes back to practices that are centuries old. Religious framing can be seen in the second century CE when all but Orthodox Christianity was defined as heretical. Moreover, Jews and pagans were rendered second-class citizens according Constantine's Law, the Laws of Justinian, and the Laws of Theodosian

(Jacobs 1938, 3–7). By the fourth century CE Christianity was declared the religion of the Roman Empire (Fredriksen 2002, esp. 23–30).

Learning the history of the Holocaust can be traumatic for students, and discussing theoretical frameworks may increase anxiety among students who are unfamiliar with how to talk critically about race or religion. This is true for at least two reasons. First, students may be more encumbered by color-blind racism or forms of ethnocentrism than even they realize (Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; Risman and Banerjee 2013). Second, discussing race frankly is generally difficult and often results in the use of euphemisms and other rhetorical strategies designed to avoid awkwardness. This is especially true for whites, who typically engage in “verbal pirouettes” to avoid appearing racist (Bonilla-Silva 2014, 212; Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000, 50).

In contrast, sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s survey-based research finds that “in general blacks tell it like they see it” with regard to racism (Bonilla-Silva 2014, 212). But they (and their white classmates) struggle with Christianity. When confronted with the Church’s anti-Jewish and antisemitic history, these students typically employ a strategy known as refencing (cf. Allport 1957). They seek to exonerate Christianity by bracketing off the Church’s racism as exceptional. For example, they may claim that Christian perpetrators or bystanders during the Holocaust acted un-Christ-like, but they characterize these un-Christ-like people as exceptions despite all evidence that they were the rule.

Students, both white and black, select these strategies intuitively. Thus, communicating successfully with them relies at least in part on understanding their propensity both to employ proximal knowledge that may be factually unreliable and to use strategies to avoid challenging ideas about themselves or about cherished institutions. The following example is not about the Holocaust or Judaism, but it demonstrates how readily students use their proximal knowledge to protect an idea that is important to them, even if it is counterfactual. In 2009, in an attempt to show that all religions have fundamentalist elements, I showed my “Introduction to Religion” class a PBS documentary that portrays Muslims in a position unfamiliar to most Americans – as victims of Hindu fundamentalist aggression. When questioned about the film on their next test, all but one or two of a hundred students incorrectly identified Muslims as the aggressors. Students continued to misidentify the Hindu aggressors on two subsequent exams, even after I attempted to disabuse them of their false impressions in post-test discussions.

These responses astonished me at the time, but they are not inexplicable when we consider that most of the students were young children during the September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Their worldview was shaped during the American war in Afghanistan and the global war on terrorism. Therefore, presented with a faintly similar scenario – violent religious extremism involving a group that had been widely vilified in their memories – students improperly conflated their proximal knowledge about Muslims and religious extremist violence despite the historical evidence on the screen. While I recognized students’ errors and even marveled at their consistency, I was ill-prepared to help students confront their obvious ethnocentrism concerning Islam. My attempts to stress tolerance without explaining the probable underlying factors at play in their thinking were ineffective.

I now realize that social-scientific theory can be mobilized to teach students how to separate notions of individual responsibility from societal culpability, but also to recognize their own biases through informed awareness. When students learn about what they are likely to experience and can judge where their perspectives fit on the spectrum of

attitudes from ethnocentric to ethnorelativistic, they more readily identify racism or ethnocentrism in the social history of the context at hand – the Holocaust – rather than the one in their heads.

In hindsight, this misidentification of Muslims as perpetrators could have been handled more deftly and with a different outcome. Employing social construction theory, students' responses could have been contextualized, as could their impulse to answer as they did. Next, students could have been required to consider several scenarios involving victims of religious violence, some contemporary but also some more historically rooted, such as examples of Christian aggression against Jews. Using peer evaluations to discuss this assignment on religious intolerance in small groups, students amongst themselves would have been required to identify aggressors and victims. Finally, the question of why the Muslims in the PBS film were the victims of Hindu extremism could have been revisited in a guided journal exercise. A series of questions by which students could judge their own views about the film and Muslims would have enabled them to confront this experience in light of the other scenarios and explore why they judged as they did.

Data Sources

These narratives involve reflections on my classroom experiences since 2006, and involve two types of students. From 2006 until 2009, when I was an assistant professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religion, I taught a number of religion majors and minors. In 2010, I transferred into the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, where I teach about similar topics – Judaism and the Holocaust – but I now draw students who are majoring in psychology or sociology, who are pursuing either a double major in religion and sociology, or who are minoring in sociology. I find that the critical analytical framework that students learn in the social sciences allows them to approach Jewish history differently than do religious studies students. Therefore, students' academic training is an important determinant of how extensively they are willing to explore the racial history of Jews. I have employed a grounded theory approach that reveals the emergence of recognizable patterns of student behavior (Strauss and Glaser 1967). These patterns of behavior are not unique to my students; they are evident in the classes of my colleagues, who teach other traumatic legacies at the University. The patterns also resonate with the social-scientific literature.

Stereotype Priming and Social Location

In a typical classroom discussion when I raise antisemitism as the root cause of the Holocaust or when I mention the Church's long history of antisemitism, my students almost always talk about racism against African Americans or their perceptions of "true" Christianity. This proximal knowledge seems to emerge for three reasons: (1) the racial history of Oxford, Mississippi, the site of riots in opposition to James Meredith, the first African American student to enroll at the University in 1962; (2) Christianity's complicity with anti-Jewishness in Mississippi's homogeneous religious landscape; and (3) the combination of my and my students' social locations – our race, gender, sexuality, social class, religion, and other visible or assumed markers of social status. Since race and a particular brand of conservative Christianity remain arguably the most salient features of southern life, it is not surprising that students select race and religion to frame their responses to teaching about the Holocaust and Judaism. This double framing comes

partly because of my social identity as an African American and partly from students' incorrect assumption that I am Jewish, points to which I will return later.

Let us consider how intertwined ideas about race and religion may work with social location to activate proximal knowledge in the classroom. From a social psychological perspective, surely a key contributor is stereotype priming – “the incidental activation of knowledge structures . . . by the current situational context” (Bargh, Chen, and Burrows 1996, 230; cf. also, Chambon 2009) According to John Bargh, Mark Chen, and Lara Burrows:

Many studies have shown that the recent use of a trait construct or stereotype, even in an earlier or unrelated situation, carries over for a time to exert an unintended, passive influence on the interpretation of behavior. Such passive, automatic effects of priming need not be limited to social perception. Recent research has shown that attitudes and other affective reactions can be triggered automatically by the mere presence of relevant objects and events, so that the evaluation and emotion join perception in the realm of direct, unmediated psychological effects of the environment. (1996, 230)

While the reasons for African American slavery and the brutality of Jim Crow in the United States are very different from the extermination of six million Jews and six and a half million others during the Third Reich, the underlying racism prevalent in both cases is remarkably similar. Forms of societal withdrawal from the stigmatized group, discrimination, scapegoating of stigmatized populations, stereotyping, and physical violence all occurred in both contexts (Allport 1957). The similarities in situational forces at play in both the Jewish and African American contexts align these forms of proximal knowledge and account for students' responses to the class lectures and course materials (cf. Zimbardo 2007, esp. 210–12). At a university where hundreds of white Mississippians famously erupted in armed protest to maintain a segregated campus, and in a state and region where the most strenuous opposition to racial equality has been led by Conservatives in the name of Christianity, it is easy to understand how students at my university conflate religious domination and racial politics (cf. Lichtman 2008).

Students' and professors' social locations are also salient, because visual perception plays an important role in the process of placing new knowledge in the context of what we already know. Optical information is certainly augmented by nonvisual factors (Chambon 2009, 283), but in the classroom, the ways that visual acuity informs students about me is key. Therefore, when I place the prejudice that led to the Holocaust within the context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideologies of race science, my brownness awakens students' connections with racialized southern history, particularly after students learn that leaders of the American eugenics movement, who argued for the inherent inferiority of African Americans, expressed the desire to secure Nazi propaganda materials from Joseph Goebbels, who in turn used American race science to justify Nazi atrocities against persons with disabilities (Poore 2009). While students rightly discern the similarities in patterns of European and American racism, these intellectual associations are triggered by the social categories, students' experiences with ostracism, and the visual (cf. Jonas and Sassenberg 2006; Allport 1957). Moreover, students who have experienced being ostracized as members of an out-group are more likely to perceive ostracism than those who are not (Sacco et al. 2011).

Students make these connections effortlessly. During a class on German antisemitism, a young freshman awkwardly recalled a comment from her father about African Americans: “My father says, they should all just go back to Africa.” In a class discussion on medieval laws against Jews (pagans and others), another student described a Tennessee family’s Halloween effigy of an African-American child that was knifed in the back and hanged by the neck. Neither of these examples are reflections of medieval or modern antisemitism. I suspect that both were triggered, at least in part, in the minds of these white students by the visual presence of their African-American professor.

Social Location and the Racial Shift

In a lecture hall, we think of ourselves as professors first. Teaching the Holocaust from my place has taught me that my self-ascribed master status – the most salient of my many positions in our stratified world – differs vastly from my students’ perceptions of my master status, depending on the students’ own social locations (Ferris and Stein 2014). As a result, my place can impede my effectiveness as an educator because the visual perception of my blackness trips a racial minefield for white, southern, Christian students.

In my mind, I am a trained professional with a solid education. That is my master status. But for many of my white students, black female bodies clean their homes, cook their food, and raise them as surrogate children. Little wonder one student complained in a course evaluation that I was not “nurturing enough” in the classroom. In students’ minds, my brownness is inseparable from the role that I should occupy in southern culture, a role that carries low status and little authority. This low-status position is rarely challenged before white students meet me, because most have never been taught by African Americans. Indeed, they barely if ever interact with us except in the most facile of ways (Carr 2012).

The visual image of an African-American at the podium invokes proximal knowledge by making a racial shift, thereby associating Jews under the Third Reich with African Americans under Jim Crow. One explanation for this shift may be an adaptation of what psychologists call perceptual filling-in. Perceptual filling-in occurs “when structures of the visual system interpolate information across regions when information is physically absent” (Weil and Rees 2011). Scholars have used perceptual filling-in to explain how the white gaze views black bodies (cf. Yancy 2008). Jungkunz and White write,

The practices of surveillance envision raced bodies, properly “arranging them” and identifying misplaced or out of place embodiments – the black body in white space as threat, the white body in black space as threatened. It is through these practices of targeted surveillance that we come to know race and know where race belongs. The making and maintenance of white privilege is accomplished through the seeing state and its blind spots; together these naturalize and stabilize race. (2013, 436)

In this light, students perceive me as misplaced. They are confused because my physical appearance is dissonant with their knowledge of blackness in the United States; their confusion shows in the halting ways in which they talk about race in class (Tavris and Aronson 2007). Instead of focusing on the Holocaust or Judaism, as they might with a white professor, they instead use their visual acuity to fill-in information about me according to stereotypical notions of what I represent to them, and

their proximal knowledge derived from their upbringing and white racial framing. One of the biggest indicators of this is the fear that students exhibit as if I would do violence to them. The contrasting reaction is belligerence – as if to ask me, “How dare you?”

Social Location and the Religious Shift

Like race and racism, Christianity is a prominent feature in most Mississippians’ lives. My Christian students have a post-Holocaust sensibility that is influenced heavily by conservative Christian pro-Israeli rhetoric despite its problematic genesis in anti-Jewish theology. If students knew about the injustice against disabled people here in the United States throughout the Jim Crow years or in Nazi Germany and if I had a visible disability, they might draw on their proximal knowledge about disability and race in the South (Zeige 2012; Poore 2009; Sofair and Kaldijan 2000). If I were a different person, they would likely draw on knowledge related to that identity or set of social locations.

Religious affiliation is therefore the basis for a second type of shift, one that occurs for both white and African American Christian students. Religion has shaped American identity since the Colonial period (Lugo et al. 2008). Nowhere is this more apparent than in the deep South. In Mississippi, religion is nearly monolithic: 81 percent of Mississippi residents are Protestant – the second-most Protestant state in the nation behind Alabama’s 82 percent – while fewer than .5 percent of Mississippians are Jewish (Lugo et al. 2008, 100). Jewish identity traditionally has been relegated to a space in between white and African American Christians (Rockoff 2006).

Although I was raised a Christian, my passion for Judaism leads most students to presume that I am Jewish. I do little to disabuse them of this notion. But students presume that when an African American woman and perceived Jew teaches about the history of Judaism or takes a critical perspective on the Church’s role during the Holocaust, it must reflect my personal animus against Christianity. Students become defensive, and sometimes lapse into denial.

Interestingly, African American students, who also are likely to see me as misplaced, find a comforting resonance in their mental associations between America’s racial past and twentieth-century Jewish history (cf. Allport 1957). In one sense, they appear to view their proximal knowledge as redeeming. While race is a frequent topic of discussion in private with other African Americans, my classes are likely among their first formal discussions about racial prejudice in mixed company. The victims’ or survivors’ stories that I tell clearly render racial prejudice as unequivocally indefensible. White students agree. But many African American students live with memories of grade-school teachers in Mississippi who even today justify slavery as God’s will. Thus my classes may be the first time that they have ever felt vindicated before their white peers. Debunking false claims associated with eugenics or exposing the discriminatory Nuremberg laws that treated Jews as second-class citizens rings true. But this respite is short-lived. When we turn to the antisemitic history of the Church, particularly during the Holocaust, the tenor of the class changes dramatically for African American students. They find this course material almost intolerable. Some students feel that discussing this history is disrespectful to the Church and “proof” of my Jewishness. United in an uncanny alliance, African American and white Christian students declare me a sinner in need of salvation, as more than one student has told me.

African American students, who on one hand experience equanimity during the racial shift, seek solidarity with white students during the religious shift. Sociologists use the

term cultural resonance to account for the likelihood of adopting ideas when an innovation connects with a group's cultural orientation (Braun and Genkins 2014, esp. 1258–60). Cultural resonance may account for why white and African American students find comfort during the religious shift. Students unite based on embedded values that are associated with aspects of southern religious subculture. Importantly, however, neither group of students validates my role as educator. Neither group examines the course material as social-scientifically viable or historically accurate, a common occurrence with female African-American professors (Pittman 2012). Instead, students reduce lectures and readings to mere opinions that are no more valid than their own. Psychologist Derald Wing Sue and colleagues, who write about microaggressions – everyday verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities directed against persons of color – would term this dismissal a quintessential microinvalidation (Sue et al. 2007, 274).

Sociological Theory as Entry Points

Sociologist C. Wright Mills provides a useful path for dealing with these racial and religious shifts. Mills distinguishes between two types of problems: “personal troubles of milieu” and “public issues of social structure (Mills 1959, 8–9). Personal troubles of milieu are private and occur within an individual. Public issues of social structure transcend individuals and have to do with the structure of institutions. Whether war, divorce, or unemployment, Mills suggests that we frequently ascribe to individuals problems that are in fact institutional in origin, and he urges us to use what he terms “the sociological imagination” to determine their actual source. In the context of the classroom, Mills would say that the sheer magnitude of white guilt over racism renders it a public issue whose source – and thus remedy – is more appropriately addressed at the institutional level. Of course, this does not absolve individuals of their racism, antisemitism, or ethnocentrism, but by helping us understand the larger social forces at play in the creation and maintenance of race-based barriers, it helps to free individuals from feeling responsible for the weight of this history. Thus students can separate their individual prejudices (and concomitant accountability) from larger institutional failings.

Students learn that many of the perceptions and prejudices of social actors result from ingrained socialization processes. This is not to imply that humans are only passive recipients of environmental racism. But using the sociological imagination helps students understand where their views originate and informs them about the privileges associated with being a part of the dominant group. Rather than the problem being solely or primarily about individual bias, students learn about the institutional or structural nature of racism and ethnocentrism. They learn the ways in which dominant voices formulate the racial and religious frames for societal knowing and being; and in so knowing, they can begin to challenge and rethink their value system (cf. Feagin 2013). Inevitably this aspect of the class is the beginning, not the end, of a lengthy process of reflection and reconciliation.

Likewise, social construction theory explains how arbitrary markers of human difference – such as skin color – become meaningful over time. I simplify social constructionism for students by highlighting what I call the three I's: (1) influential *individuals* have ideas or ideologies; (2) they negotiate these amongst themselves to develop the big *ideas* that undergird societal structures. Once these ideas have been reified, that is, materialized into a policy or law, (3) *institutions* (religious, familial, political, military, government, and so forth) propagate these reified ideas through primary and secondary socialization (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Classes on Judaism and the Holocaust

reveal southern students, white and black alike (albeit for different reasons), as afflicted with the all-too-human inability to see one's self and one's racial or religious group as anything but righteous and good, especially in the face of gargantuan, indefensible, and immoral events like the Holocaust (Tavris and Aronson 2007; Feagin 2013). But like the sociological imagination, social construction theory helps students learn that good people are capable of causing great harm (Goshal et al. 2012; Milgram 1975). By separating the personal from the structural, students find spaces to consider their views without feeling judged. Equipped with these critical analytical tools that give students a safe distance from their individual feelings, they are poised to make sense of their proximal experiences, but more important from my perspective as a professor, they are better able to learn about the Holocaust and about Judaism.

The notion of separating personal responsibility from institutional and structural problems hinges on helping students to understand how we come to know in the first place. Knowing how we know depends on grasping the role of institutions and socialization processes. I begin by defining institutions as entities tasked with meeting basic human needs. Generally, societies consider family, religion, government, politics, economics, and the military as the six basic institutions. I explain that institutions inculcate their members with the ideas that societies' most influential members have reified by means of primary and secondary socialization processes. Primary socialization, I explain, comes from the people who rear us and is, in the end, the most difficult to change, whereas secondary socialization comes from educators, for example. To highlight the process of knowing and normalizing, I use a practical example, the use of stop signs. I draw an octagon on the board and ask the class what it is and what it means. Without fail, students identify it as a stop sign. I then ask, "What do you do when you see it?" In unison, they usually reply, "We stop." Occasionally, one or two students admit to going straight through without stopping. For those students I ask, "What are you supposed to do?" This makes the point equally well. That is, all of society's members, whether pedestrians or drivers, know that drivers are expected to stop at the sign, even if they do not. I provide them with background material about the history of the stop sign to underscore the point that they know and obey normalized signs even though most of us know nothing about the sign's origins, whether they work effectively, and so forth. This lesson in understanding how we know and normalize calls attention to how ideas that we as individuals have no part in forming become integral parts of our individual daily practices and value systems.

The conversation shifts to the roots of American values. I sometimes show a picture of the Founding Fathers. In a Christianized country that has a legacy of slavery and Jim Crow, I argue the values that we are taught are necessarily antisemitic and racist against African Americans. I make the point that even African Americans learn negative tropes about African Americans. At this junction, I turn to Mills's personal versus structural analysis (1959). Combining Mills with Berger and Luckmann (1966), in effect, helps us to know that the pervasive nature of these views makes them societal rather than a matter of an individual condition or a personal moral failing. Our discussion of prejudice is key here. By now students have learned that if they have erroneous knowledge (such as, the Jews killed Christ) and in the face of new data, they are unwilling to change their views, the responsibility is no longer merely societal, but personal (Allport 1957, esp. 8–9).

I challenge students first to examine and recognize what they think and to engage what Berger and Luckmann call the process of alternation, or change (1966, esp. 157–

61). I underscore these societal ways of knowing and normalizing will always be a part of the internal conversation. I argue that these stubbornly malleable notions about religion and race, for example, can be changed. But, as Berger and Luckmann write, the onus for changing is a long-term, personal encounter that one engages repeatedly and over an extended period of time (1966).

The sociological imagination and social construction theory are eminently useful for separating histories, piecing together the ways in which they are parallel or convergent, and helping students learn about difficult racialized legacies. These theories can alleviate student angst that emerges when dealing with such highly charged subjects such as racism, or scrutinizing treasured institutions such as the Church. In Mississippi, while many students deny that racism exists or may claim that they are not troubled by racism, others, both black and white, wrestle with guilt, shame, humiliation, and anger. While it is normal to feel threatened by new information, the discrepancies between our claimed values and the undeniable behaviors such as those that led to slavery or genocide lead students to try to reduce the dissonance by either justifying the actions or by downplaying the troublesome information, for example, by devaluing the veracity of the course materials. The sociological imagination helps students by mitigating against individual guilt that students feel for legacies of oppression with which they view themselves as only remotely affiliated. For example, white privilege – longstanding historical advantages that accrue to white people, and that frequently trigger both denial and guilt in white students – is a public structural issue rather than a personal trouble of milieu (cf. Picca, Starks, and Gunderson 2013). By teaching students how they have been socialized to accept insidious views about race and religion, they may feel less inclined to demonize themselves for the larger histories that comprise proximal knowledge. Self-acceptance is much more fruitful than self-flagellation, and can help white students to appreciate the disadvantages experienced by persons of color, and for Christians to appreciate the historical social position of Jews.

As a professor of religion, I saw students who were distressed by the weight of their proximal knowledge, their personal experiences, and our joint regional and national histories. White students whom I had taught in other classes – students whom I knew and with whom I had enjoyed coffee – visibly recoiled during discussions about antisemitism and the Holocaust. Mary, a former student, promptly dropped my Holocaust Art class after a lecture on anti-Jewishness in European Christian history. I saw her anguish and heard what seemed to me then to be inexplicable defensiveness as she attacked the notion that Christians could be antisemitic. Since this was my first time teaching a Holocaust course, I was surprised and quizzical. At that time, I had no idea that this southern, white Christian woman could be offended about such well-established history that had little to do with her personally. It was unfathomable to me that Mary would personalize the history and even more unthinkable that she might need a safe space where she could sort out the collective and individual culpability in her mind.

Mary would almost certainly have remained in the course had I known to introduce the sociological imagination and social constructionism. These tools prepare students to function mindfully rather than being governed by their emotions. They help students to contextualize their perspectives and feelings, and encourage them to examine the underlying causes of these feelings and the cognitive shifts that they precipitate. White student guilt exemplifies acculturative stress. It emerges because students think they are being blamed for the United States' racist legacy. They feel angry because they do not think they should bear such responsibility and sometimes they feel powerless to do any-

thing about centuries of wrongdoing, even if they are so inclined. They recoil at the implication that they enjoy privileges that others do not. For their part, African American and white Christians are encumbered by shame associated with the Church's historic antisemitism and its failure to intervene during the Holocaust. Christian students frequently apologize in class, pointing out that the Church's actions bear no resemblance to their understanding of who Jesus was or what He would have sanctioned. To be sure, not every religious person or group acted similarly during the Holocaust. Nevertheless, Christian students studying the Holocaust are forced to grapple with the Church's moral failings much like white students confront American racism when we discuss the Nuremberg Laws and other relics of antisemitism in Germany. In both instances, students feel the impulse to justify actions that they admit are indefensible (Tavris and Aronson 2007). Teaching sociological theory helps relieve this impulse, but it is not the only pedagogical tool at our disposal.

The Value of Journaling

Reflective journaling guided by question prompts can also be helpful (Longkai and Looi 2012). Sociology instructors have long recognized the efficacy of journal writing in bringing together students' lived experiences with societal data (Picca, Starks, and Gunderson 2013, 82). I would argue that reflective journaling can also help students imagine past social worlds. Reflective journaling is a dialectical process for learning that invites students to look inward at their thoughts and outward at the situation that is being presented in course materials. For Longkai and Looi, question prompts effectively elicit reflection by providing complex ways that learners think and feel about these connections (Longkai and Looi 2012, 339). In a 2014 class, "Social Contexts of Holocaust Art," I used journaling to help students bridge the distance between their proximal knowledge and the course materials. Students were assigned two journal entries per week in which they examined their views about the readings and course lectures. I observed remarkably less confusion about the underlying structural issues related to the Holocaust than in my previous Holocaust courses. At the end of the semester, one student wrote to thank me for assigning journaling. She called it by far the single most effective strategy for learning in any class that she had taken in college, and she pledged to voluntarily maintain a journal in her future remaining college courses. Overall, the candid nature of the journal entries was astonishing. The exercises functioned as a mechanism for students' critical introspection about themselves and the course materials. The journals also appear to have helped students cope with acculturative stress of learning about the Holocaust.

Reflective journaling, especially when it entails a feature that brings into the mix students' individual experiences, offers them multiple opportunities to reflect on how they feel about what they are learning (Picca, Starks, and Gunderson 2013). As they write, students can weigh the differences between how they first felt about an issue and how they feel at the moment. Finally, journaling gives students an opportunity to evaluate preconceived ideas and assumptions against the new materials (Picca, Starks, and Gunderson 2013, 83). Journaling provides a safe space for students because it is non-threatening and private. This is useful especially if students are resistant to the course materials or the person teaching them. While reflective journaling is not a panacea, it provides an intimate space for students to think critically and that alone opens immense possibilities for learning.

Journal assignments have two components, one focuses on the facts of a representative assigned reading and the other on the students' pragmatic experiences related to that reading. By integrating a second question that asks for students' personal views, I achieve the following: (1) I express interest in and learn about how students' think; and (2) I am therefore able to acknowledge the value of their experiences even as I must distinguish their perspectives from the new body of knowledge that I am teaching (cf. Lundskow 2008, xi-xv). While these two goals are ostensibly at odds with my overall goal, together the information that students provide me with helps me to navigate the class more deftly. I am convinced that they will grasp the academic findings if they can stop long enough to hear them.

I form the journal questions based on my classroom observations. I select a key reading as a focal point for two questions for students to address. My task is twofold: (1) Prompt students to engage that single reading and to prioritize it above their own ways of knowing and normalizing; (2) Persuade students to accept the author's expertise as fact.

Sample Journal Question One: John Gager identified several anti-Israel prooftexts that early Christians used to justify the Church's relationship to and its perspectives about Judaism and Jews. But Gager points out that there are also pro-Israel prooftexts from Paul's writings. From the two sets of prooftexts explain how readers *should* make sense of the paradoxes about the Law or Torah, Israel as God's chosen people, and circumcision (Gager 2002). (*Paradox* is the keyword. You cannot successfully answer the question without knowing what a paradox is.)

Sample Journal Question Two: Select two anti-Israel prooftexts from Gager's list and write a candid response expressing your own views about the texts. In your essay, you must address the following matters related to the prooftexts that you selected. Does your faith tradition with which you are familiar hold this position about Jews or Judaism? Do you understand Gager's argument about why this tradition may be misreading the text? Please explain fully. Do you understand why this text may not be saying what you (or the tradition) thought that it said? Please explain fully. After reviewing and thinking about Gager's larger list of anti-Israel prooftexts, do you think these are anti-Jewish, if by anti-Jewish I mean, against or diminishing to Judaism, or ranks Judaism as inferior to Christianity? Please explain.

There is a prompt for each journal question. The prompt's encouraging nature reinforces the correctness of the reading and therefore, the correctness of students' responses.

Sample Prompt for Journal Question One: Journal question 1 is about using the reading thoroughly to reply to the questions.

- 1) What does the word paradox mean? (I suggest that you look it up immediately).
The key to answering this question is associated with the proper use of this word.
- 2) Have you identified the list of pro-Israel and anti-Israel statements in the Gager reading?

- a. If yes, have you found 3 statements – one on the list that deals with circumcision; one with the people of Israel as God’s chosen people; and one about the Law/Torah?
- b. If yes, you must then be able to explain how the passages about these three issues *should be understood* according to Gager.
- c. Remember, how these should be understood may be very different from the ways that these passages may have been explained in Church.
- 3) Have you used the Gager essay to fully to explain how circumcision should be understood? If not, return to this section.
- 4) Have you used the Gager essay to fully explain the role of the Law or Torah? If not, return to this section.
- 5) Have you used the Gager essay to fully explain how Israel as the chosen people of God should be understood? If not, return to this section.

The journals are graded by a rubric that closely mirrors the prompts. The first question is graded based on how well the student was able to mine the readings for accurate responses. The second question is graded based on whether the student answered the key components of the question. The students’ views are not graded. Students can only lose points on replies to question two by neglecting to broach a part of the question.

Interestingly, on one recent assignment, twelve of fourteen students who scored between excellent and good on question one also integrated the new knowledge that they acquired into their responses to question two. In other words, for question two – these students extemporaneously wrote about the new body of knowledge that they gained. For example, they wrote: I believed “x” about Jews (or Judaism) based on my religious upbringing, but now I understand that I was misinformed and I think “y.” Conversely, the students who had difficulty with question one and showed reluctance in accepting its facticity, also demonstrated more reluctance in integrating this new knowledge into their responses to question two.

Toward an Instructional Strategy

I was discouraged from teaching the Holocaust by using comparative models, as though pointing out the proximities between two historical events somehow necessarily diminished one or the other, or obscured differences in societal origins. Some apparently fearing that students would simply rank sufferings hierarchically, argued that discussing the Holocaust with other histories of oppression delimited its uniqueness. But these concerns circumvent the analysis of the common societal threads and patterns that are implicit in these histories of oppression and that resist a sociological analysis. Indeed, the racism and ethnocentrism that is the shared core of these legacies can also be a foundation for teaching them. More profoundly, whether or not we want the proximal knowledge that binds these events to function, it does.

I am reminded of a story told to me in 2010 by a Holocaust survivor I will call Jirka. With sorrow in his voice, Jirka said he had spent his lifetime unlearning the brutality that he unwittingly imbibed as a child victim at Auschwitz (2010). As a young man, he said, “For me to see an elderly person walk down the street and to [reflexively] think she belongs already in the crematorium” was not a reflection of his personal cruelty, but the result of seeing elderly people taken to the gas chambers (Jirka 2010). Jirka developed a reaction to elders that he only recognized years later after deep introspection.

Seamlessly he had transferred his experiences to a similar but unrelated circumstance. The question, then, is not whether we make these kinds of connections, but what we should do with them when they emerge.

This essay reflects my attempt to confront these connections. I argue for understanding the relationship between the body of knowledge about the Holocaust and Judaism that I teach and proximal knowledge that this course material inevitably elicits in students' minds. This incursion of proximal knowledge into the classroom has many triggers – my students' and my social location, students' lived experiences in the deep South; the sociopolitical legacy of my university – that can divert students, whether for racial reasons or religious ones, from the important task at hand: understanding the complex and often singular sociohistorical dimensions of Jewish history and the Holocaust.

Being mindful of these triggers helps to manage them. For example, I know that my blackness is a powerful visual signal that in students' minds moves the course materials from center stage and supplants them with historical facts and experiential memories about race and region. I plan accordingly, spending the first two or three classes every semester in a race-neutral discussion of sociological concepts that is designed to give my students and me a common vocabulary around genocide. We have few weighty discussions and I intentionally avoid making analogies with southern racial history. Similarly, mindful of students' tendency to make assumptions about my presumed Jewishness, I never mention my religious orientation, hoping to encourage students to think of my personal life as irrelevant to what I teach.

As the semester unfolds, it is possible and in fact desirable to recognize the conceptual similarities between old and new knowledge and to address them explicitly, if for no other reason than they will emerge implicitly. By preparing students in advance for these convergences, I help them anticipate a range of their possible reactions to readings and lectures, and consider ways to make these encounters fruitful. Broaching the linkages in class rather than leaving students to grapple with them on their own ensures that students understand they are about to embark on a intellectual and emotional journey that pushes many students to challenge their beliefs about themselves and about institutions that are important to them. As a result, students understand that it is normal to feel anxious, surprised, angry, or confused by what they will learn. Discussing it in class legitimizes this process. Once students make proximal connections, taking time to discuss them in class clarifies conceptual commonalities between, for example, prejudice in the Third Reich and prejudice in Jim Crow Mississippi. This also ensures that students have accurate information about both the subject matter and the proximal knowledge that is triggered by it.

Above all, using proximal knowledge involves helping students observe their behaviors and urges them to honestly and without judgment identify what they think. It requires moving students to contemplate the relationship between their thinking and socially constructed ideas, which enables them to contextualize what they think and feel. The links between pained histories and the students' proximal knowledge are transformed from impediments into stepping-stones by bringing students to awareness safely, that is, by providing safe spaces that separate individual and societal responsibility, and by gently insisting that students separate what they think they know from actual historical fact.

These classroom conversations do not inevitably devolve into defensive anger or awkward silence. To the contrary, by discussing different legacies, and by providing

theoretical tools (sociological imagination, social constructionism) and methods (reflective journaling) for students to engage them, we provide the “scaffolding” or “bridging” that helps them employ what they know to systematically learn about the new subject (Longkai and Looi 2012). Thus, students can develop self-awareness and find in the classroom a space to safely discuss important topics that otherwise can seem taboo.

This pedagogical strategy is supported by literature from sociology, psychology (especially brain science), and education, and has applications across diverse classroom settings, regions, and histories. Imagine a Ukrainian professor who teaches in Chicago. His parents were Holocaust perpetrators, but his class is filled with Jewish students, some with grandparents who were survivors from Eastern Europe. The class also has German students whose grandparents were perpetrators or bystanders. How can this professor use the rich diversity in his class, including these students’ proximal knowledge, to promote learning? The delicate task of reconciling his Jewish and German students’ different proximal knowledge is vital. In addition, he must consider how his students may perceive his personal social location and how it could function against him. He has the task of repositioning several oppositional sets of proximal knowledge about the Holocaust to teach a history that has vastly different significance for each group of students. He can defuse ethnocentrism by drawing on some aspect of each set of knowledge offered by his students as a part of scaffolding on which he will build for students a new understanding of the course material. He also is obliged to make students aware that some issues will feel painful even though he does not personally intend to cause harm.

Being aware of the role of proximal knowledge in the classroom can help us surmount imposing pedagogical challenges. It can also bring surprising rewards, which I discovered after the 2012 reelection of President Obama, when angry white students at the University of Mississippi gathered to hurl obscenities, including the n-word, at African American students and “their” president. This was not the first such incident on our campus; the 2008 election elicited a similar reaction. But in 2012 I was teaching my Sociology of Disability class, and one of my white students, having learned about early twentieth-century expressions of prejudice against disabled people, made a connection to the racist outbursts on campus. And while one classmate’s facial expression conveyed discomfort, the classroom then became a place for students to build bridges between what they had learned in class and what we were experiencing as a community. This experience helped me see that providing students with the proper cognitive and emotional tools builds a two-way path to understanding. It does more than let students use their proximal knowledge to engage course material; it also gives them a way to use course material to understand proximal events.

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