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It is November 2004 and as I walk into the classroom, I am certainly not cheerful. But I am not expecting sobbing. And, that is exactly what I heard — and saw — when I reached the seminar table. The sixteen of us were used to the acoustics of the room, the blackboard's awkward tendency to move when written on, even the brass door midway up the back wall. What we were not used to was the sight and sound of a young man crying. In this moment in a course entitled "Que(e)rying Religious Studies," the heart of education was rendered momentarily visible.

As I reflect on that moment months later, I realize that the memory exemplifies what Deborah Britzman (1998; 2003) has called "difficult knowledge" — knowledge that challenges the framing of education as progress or development; knowledge that is more than merely cognitive, more than merely experiential or conscious; knowledge that "interferes." For the students — and for myself as teacher — the classroom opened out to make analyzable what we (as teachers and students schooled in how to act and, indeed, be within the settings of higher education) suppress, ignore, even repress. The tears were polyvalent, revealing the effort to be gay and lesbian positive amidst the miseries of everyday life, as well as the clash between desires for knowledge to move us and the puzzle of what to do when it does so in unexpected ways. Much of the educational force of that moment for me is occurring later — in what Britzman labels (following Freud) "after-education." (Britzman 2003). I feel as though I have looked at this — and forgotten it — many times before. The moment reveals education as, according to Freud, an "impossible profession" — where learning to love and loving to learn (Britzman 1998) are entangled with resistance and a "passion for ignorance," where education is contradictory at its very heart. Here there is an echo of comments on the unspeakability of education (Griffin 1992)

and Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's (1992, 1) questions: "Is there a relation between crisis and the very enterprise of education? . . . Is there a relation between trauma and pedagogy?"

## The Course

"Que(e)rying Religious Studies" is a 200-level religious studies course, cross-listed with women's studies and lesbian, gay, bisexual studies at Hobart and William Smith Colleges. At the top of the syllabus for fall 2004, I wrote:

What do religion and sexuality have to do with each other? This course considers a variety of religious traditions with a focus on same-sex eroticism. In the process, students are introduced to the fundamental concerns of the academic study of religion and lesbian/gay/queer studies. Among the topics considered are the place of ritual and performance in religion and sexuality, the construction of religious and sexual ideals, and the role of religious formations in enforcing compulsory heterosexuality.

Beneath this rather dull opening follows a list of (too many) books, assignments, and office hours. Organized in a quite recognizable genre, the syllabus reveals that on that November day, we were somewhere between Mark Jordan's *The Silence of Sodom* and Kelly Brown Douglas's *Sexuality and the Black Church*

. Somewhere between Catholicism and race, between silence and sexuality, between illusion and disillusionment.

Any course is, though, much more than the syllabus. It is a community of inquiry and of accountability. It is the conversations that emerge, the actions that happen, the psychic events that take place, the papers to write and/or grade, and the letters that appear years later on transcripts or in my mailbox (literal or virtual). Courses are, in many ways, the tangents we take — those that seem to avoid but work in the interest of education. And they are, in fact, moments in time that become (we hope) moments in memory.

## The Moment, Then and Now

More than just an ordinary day in November, this memorable Wednesday was the morning after the 2004 United States elections. In addition to the presidential election results, students were still absorbing news that eleven states had passed referenda "against" gay marriage. We were disproportionately gay/lesbian and almost 100 percent "gay positive" or allies. (Why does that

matter, I wonder now?) I was, myself, distraught at the reelection of a Republican administration as well as the results of the various referenda. I had watched throughout the campaign with horror as Republicans marshaled overtly anti-gay/lesbian tactics, entangled with particular understandings of religion and morality, toward their ends. I had been hurt when left-leaning acquaintances saw the gay issue as a distraction from what really mattered.

I was distraught. But not, I have to admit, surprised. It felt more to me like *déjà vu* than surprise — the stresses of visible gay and lesbian lives read as “progress” contradicted by the results of the referenda echoed earlier contradictions I had witnessed across the decades. What was more surprising to me was the student dismay, a reaction to what they eventually described as “unbelievable.” I was unprepared, that is, to see that this was their first visible challenge to hope — a challenge students in both classes had, perhaps, not recognized before, but that was not new. The sense of trauma was palpable. All their education — including this course — did not prepare them for this vicissitude of everyday life. My surprise emerged, Britzman teaches me, from the ways the noise of sobbing interfered — simultaneously recalling my younger self and differing so much from my early-twenty-first-century teacherly self, challenging the construal of education as information and distancing through intellectualization evident in my syllabus, facing me with the reiteration of something I learned before and did not want to learn.

Even in November 2004, “Que(e)rying Religious Studies” was about return: I had taught the course twice before. And I had learned how difficult it was before. After the second time, I posted the [syllabus online](#). My remarks, then, were simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar when I reread them recently:

The teaching of a course at the intersection of lesbian/gay/queer studies and religious studies poses some special challenges. Like many such interdisciplinary offerings (e.g., women and religion), students sometimes enroll in the course with preparation in one area and not the other. In addition, students who enroll in a course on this topic often have experiential or existential reasons for being there which can pose a variety of problems — ranging from “I am X so I do not need to read about X” to emotional difficulties with material. Current events and the cultural location of religion and sexuality at any given moment seem also to shape the course; thus, the first time I offered it (about five years ago) all students began with the notion that religion and homosexuality were hostile to one another. In 2003, my students all assumed that they were congruent initially. In any case, the course tries to offer a critical introduction to religious studies (understood as a non-theological approach to the study of the human, cultural phenomenon of religion) and to lesbian/gay/queer studies (understood as focusing on the social construction of sexualities) and to the ways these two topics are related in our time. It is an exciting course to teach; and it is sometimes painful. But, given the centrality of sexuality in many of the most heated disputes about religion these days, it seems an important way to help

students think intellectually about some things that our culture may be teaching them are outside of the realm of intellectual reflection.

### Getting Specific

What is a difficult topic? My initial ideas (in a sort of free association) were: a complex topic, a hard topic, an uncomfortable topic, a resistant student, an emotionally laden topic, a politically loaded topic. Hard topics led me to gendered knowledges: hard subjects and soft ones. The conjunction of Britzman's work with a young man's tears, though, leads elsewhere — to a depth of psychological wondering about education as symptom, to the dream of religious studies and the repetition compulsions that we embody as its practitioners. While Britzman's discussions of psychoanalysis and education raise innumerable questions about education's relations to gender and sexuality, her work does not (as far as I know) touch on religion. And yet, as Judith van Herik (1985) made clear years ago, psychoanalysis is entangled with religion — both its enactments and its repudiation. So, too, is education entangled with religion, historically and in the present, globally and in the United States. (See Henking.) By turning my teacherly eye to psychoanalysis, Britzman leaves me with new questions about the implications of her work for teaching religion, teaching religious studies.

As I write this essay, I think about topics I do not want to teach but feel obliged to teach. Those are the truly difficult topics for me and I wonder if this is narcissism. Where does the difficulty lie — in the students, in the subject matter, in me, in the spaces between? And how do we ensure that education is not merely repetition, but truly works through (pace Freud) us all to enable us to live the misery of everyday life in hope? What happens when religious studies meets lesbian/gay/queer studies? What is the place of tears in teaching and learning?

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