

Thelathia “Nikki” Young, Emory University



Thelathia “Nikki” Young is a doctoral candidate in the Ethics and Society Course of Study in Emory University’s Graduate Division of Religion. Her research focuses on ethical issues of race, gender, and sexuality, and she finds particular interest in the ways queer communities possess, embody, and enact moral excellence. Her dissertation “Black Queer Ethics: An Investigation into the Ethical Norms of Kinship and Family” investigates the moral norms of kinship and family that foreground the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality. Young is also Director of Ambassadors for the All My Children Project, a program in which she mentors and teaches college students to reflect critically and organize campus activities designed to raise awareness about the consequences of anti-lesbian, -gay, -bisexual, -transgender, -queer, and -questioning (LGBTQQ) bias within ethnically diverse families and communities. Young has recently accepted a Visiting Assistant Professor position in women’s and gender studies at Bucknell University.

I am a doctoral candidate at Emory University, currently focusing my research efforts on my dissertation, titled “Black Queer Ethics: An Investigation into the Ethical Norms of Kinship and Family.” It is a work in Christian social ethics that draws on ethnography — interviews with over forty Atlanta black queer people — to talk about family and the values, norms, and practices that surround, inhibit, and inform it. It is an enrapturing project that merges my scholarly interest in ethics with my deep desire to hear and share stories. My attraction to the topic comes from my own deep yearnings for family, and the project itself actually calls me to be a scholar-activist in the classroom, in the space at my writing desk, and in a few social action spaces that I mention below.

As a scholar-activist, I engage in praxis-oriented ethics in an attempt to do work that is respected inside the academy and relevant outside of it. I draw on this ethics training to shape and be shaped by the people, discourses, and social realities that contribute to immediate and long-term human experiences. Our experiences certainly give us multiple lenses through which to perceive the world and our contexts, but they also provide impetus for us to morally engage

them. My efforts to engage the world as a moral agent begin with the notion that critical reflection and purposeful action are equally foundational to one's position as a scholar and as an activist. I have learned, through the research and writing of my dissertation, that the scholarly processes of researching, analyzing, reflecting, and writing are imaginative and ethical acts that can be — or at least spark — social change. In fact, Eve Ensler, activist and author of *The Vagina Monologues*, shared during her reflections for the *This I Believe* series that iteration and naming have great power. More than that, she claimed that what we write and name through our writing has transformative power: "One person's declaration sparks another....Freedom begins with naming things, and humanity is preserved by it."

There are three moves that I make as a scholar-activist working to preserve humanity. These moves affect the method and subject of my research, the pedagogy and content of my classrooms, and the drive and aims of my activism. First, there is disruption. This disruption is significant because it aids in recognizing and naming realities and circumstances, and it does so in a way that jars and dismantles what is believed to be or simply accepted as normal. Disruption is an essential task that calls for a critical lens and imaginative conversation, which leads to my second move — collaboration. Collaboration requires an ability to come together in community — without having to *unify* and place our differences under erasure — and work in partnership as a way to learn from one another, express compassion, stand in solidarity, and support one another's intentions. Because collaboration is imaginative, transgressive, dialogical, and embodied, it forces us to simultaneously live in and transcend difference. It also requires that we pay attention to the dynamics present between and among us due to the intersections of our multiply constituted identities. Attending to one another in this way sparks the third move — action. As I mentioned above, scholarship is active. Activism is certainly active, and teaching is active as well. Each of these spaces is deontological since they foster our ability to make choices about what to *do* with one another while critically considering how those actions will impact our dreams and hopes for the world we want to see.

In my dissertation, I speak of these moves slightly differently. I suggest that ethical praxis rests in three significant moments — recognizing, listening and telling, and doing. Recognition is, at its foundation, the first and necessary acknowledgment that we exist simultaneously as individuals and as members of families, communities, and societies. The process of seeing one another — granting subjectivity — marks our ability to know and be known to one another. According to Ricoeur, this process also allows us to learn new modes of being that, in turn, improve our capacity for knowing ourselves. This knowing, I suggest, is the first step of attention, and attending to one another — through listening and telling — and is always reflective *and* active. Listening, truly hearing, and ingesting the sounds and silences of one another's realities is a vital response to recognition, and it is a natural element within the process of knowing. Telling confronts and even interrupts the silences of our stories. These silences — imposed and assumed — create a chasm in ethical discourse and moral action,

especially when marginalized communities are most often voiceless. As this is the case, listening to and telling the stories of marginalized people is the beginning of the ethical task of doing work in the community.

My work in the community is inseparable from work in the academy — literally. As a mentor and teacher at Candler School of Theology's Youth Theological Initiative, I worked beside, listened to, and thought with students about the direct relationship between theology and social justice. As a member of the Queer Progressive Agenda (QPA) Study Group, I think and plan ways to healthfully sustain activists, grassroots organizers, and organizations with Atlanta activists and scholars. As the Director of Ambassadors for the All My Children Project, an Atlanta-based organization that fosters dialogue and community-building among queer persons of color, their families, and religious communities, I have learned to imagine new possibilities for showing solidarity and enacting community. In each of these settings, I have focused on ways to foster critical reflection about human experience and contemporary cultural and ethical issues.

I engage in praxis-oriented ethics and activism in each of these settings by learning, teaching, and exemplifying the ways that recognizing, listening, telling, and doing are both scholarly and active. I affirm in these spaces that, despite its limits, recognition is a response to marginalization, signification, and invisibility. Especially with the youth, I explain that despite the logicentric nature of stories, listening and telling are key elements of collaboration. I remind my students that their own stories create room for experiential reflection and embodied responses across difference. I also remind them that listening and telling as sacred action invites us to translate — not defend — our experiences to one another. This translation, this border crossing, brings out some of the best qualities of being human in relationship with other humans. Finally, in these spaces I both experience and illustrate that bearing witness to one another's lives and grounding ourselves in tangible empathy calls for action. Doing ethical work, I have learned, means engaging in just relationships, disrupting norms and behaviors that further marginalize people, and imagining new modes of being through iteration and action, word, and deed.

Resources

Ensler, Eve. *This I Believe: The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women*. Edited by Jay Allison and Dan Gediman. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006.

Ricoeur, Paul. "Appropriation" in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*. Edited by John B. Thompson. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998: 192.

