



THE WABASH CENTER

JOURNAL ON TEACHING

CONVERSATION

“Keepin’ it Real”—When Scholarship Meets the Political: A Conversation with Shanell T. Smith

Shanell T. Smith

Hartford Seminary

Diane Shane Fruchtman

Rutgers University

ABSTRACT

In this conversation, Shanell T. Smith shares her strategies for incorporating politics into the classroom via an explicitly politicizing technique, “Keepin’ it Real.” She discusses the process of considering what to include and how to include it (and why we must!), and offers a window into how it might look in the classroom, using examples from a class on Mary that she teaches in an online seminary setting. Smith emphasizes the importance of modeling personalized scholarly inquiry for our students, including and especially the openness and vulnerability that make our scholarship matter both to us and to the world we share.

KEYWORDS

politics, #metoo, Mary, positionality, instructor modeling

Diane Shane
Fruchtman

Thank you for joining us, Dr. Smith. Before we get started, I wanted to share with our readers how this interview came about. So, I first encountered your work through a poem you wrote following the Charleston murders in 2015, ([Smith 2015](#)). You captured so well the anguish of many of my Black students, colleagues, and friends, and also clearly conveyed how non-Black folks (whether Christian or not) could help, to begin with by listening and attempting to empathize. The poem asks all Christians to reconsider using Scripture as a means of healing without, first and foremost, offering care for the individual in crisis.

I began following you on Twitter shortly afterwards, and have been continually inspired by your blending of scholarship and politics, both in the public sphere and in the classroom—not to mention in your books and articles. As we were bringing together new voices for this issue you came immediately to mind, particularly because you had recently tweeted about an exciting New Testament and reception [class](#) you were teaching—“There’s Something about Mary,” ([Smith 2015](#)) I thought this would be an amazing opportunity to pick your brain about your teaching at the intersection of antiquity and the political.

I'm so grateful to you for sharing your work and your insights with us. I'd like to begin with one of the tweets that made me think we needed your voice for this issue. In this tweet about your Mary class (see Figure 1), you highlighted student engagements with ancient materials that were both deeply personal and deeply political. Is this a primary goal for you in your pedagogy?

Figure 1: #TheresSomethingAboutMary Tweet



Shanell T. Smith: The goal is making scholarship applicable to everyday life. Scholarship has to *do* something. If all we do is engage pre-modern primary and secondary texts, and wax poetically about methodologies and various forms of scholarly critique, with rote recapitulation, but do not teach our students *how* to use them in real life situations, then what good does it do? Scholarship becomes this abstract glob of information that evaporates as soon as the class ends. However, something *amazing* happens when we not only engage scholarship, but take it a step further and apply it to contemporary life. Employing scholarship in the context of real life—for example, engaging the political—not only helps students move beyond the mere retention and regurgitation of concepts, but it also compels them to be more ethically responsible, and helps build community among the students.

Diane Shane Fruchtman: So, to take a step back, can you tell us a bit more about the class and the context in which you are teaching it?

Shanell T. Smith: I teach at Hartford Seminary in Hartford, CT—an intentionally multi-faith seminary where my students are, first and foremost, awesome! They are Christians, Jews, and Muslims, and they vary in terms of their future (and sometimes present) professional placements. These may include careers in ministry, education, non-profits, politics, et cetera. I have students at all levels, and no familiarity with the tradition or traditions is required for them to take this class.

I teach it as an online class, but much of it would work in in-person courses as well. It's an introductory course that's meant to help students acquire foundational knowledge of a tradition, and to enhance their ability to engage in constructive dialogues with diverse groups.

The class is called "There's Something about Mary," and it's an opportunity for students to learn about these biblical women in their ancient contexts and consider how, why, and for whom their New Testament accounts were written, using a variety of critical approaches. But it also asks students to think about the political, theological, and ethical implications of these stories for today, and to practice wading into dialogues about these texts respectfully, with theological and ethical sensitivity, especially across faiths.

Diane Shane Fruchtman: You can really see this dual focus, on the ancient and the "now," even in your course description, which is really engaging (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: “There’s Something About Mary” Course Description

Course Description:

Yes, there certainly is something about Mary! But which one? The Virgin Mary? Mary Magdalene? Mary of Bethany? Who are they? How are they presented in New Testament texts and other early Christian writings? What was their relationship with Jesus? How are these Marys depicted in art, music, film, and other forms of contemporary culture? What is her legacy? That is, how have these Marys been interpreted, and what are the implications thereof? How do these women influence issues concerning the construction of gender and sexuality, surrogacy, rape culture, martyrdom, motherhood, women’s roles in both secular and sacred spaces, unjust social systems, etc.? But it’s never just Mary, is it? What is that something about you that you bring to the discussion? Do you have any biases or assumptions? Would one of these Marys give you the side-eye for judging them when you. . . ? We will engage these questions and more employing critical methodologies such as historical, literary, rhetorical, and postcolonial criticisms, and gender studies including feminist theory, womanist biblical hermeneutics, and masculinity studies. There is something extraordinary about Mary. And we will love her!

- Diane Shane Fruchtmann Looking at the course description, I notice a few things. First, it’s unapologetically political, and secondly, it’s, simultaneously, unapologetically personal. You start with presentations of various Marys in the New Testament, but quickly move to how those presentations are received and then reinterpreted in the present, and in controversial contexts to which your students are not just invited, but mandated to speak and *feel*.
- Shanell T. Smith “Mandated” is such a strong word, and honestly, it unsettles me. The reason being that I am also aware of, and sensitive to the fact that I have some students for whom these topics may be triggering. My assignments come with a caveat to “proceed with caution” or that they may be “triggering,” and request that students for whom engaging such “real life” topics is traumatic or retraumatizing to contact me, and we created an assignment just for them in which they can still learn the objectives for that day’s work.
- Diane Shane Fruchtmann You do a lot of work to help your students feel comfortable engaging in the political, and you’ve developed a process for it—“Keepin’ it Real.” Can you tell us about that?
- Shanell T. Smith I use this tactic throughout the entire semester, in each exercise. The first step is to determine the “so what”: Reflect on the primary and secondary texts assigned for the week, consider their main arguments, and decide what you want your students to take away from the readings. Why are these points important for them to know?
- I include in each module a brief lecture on the text that includes a broad scope of the historical background and traditional and other (contextual) interpretations (womanist, feminist, postcolonial, queer, and so forth). When determining which interpretation I want to highlight—which never means it’s the *right* one—I try to think how the text at hand may justify, contribute to, or emphasize a particular (and often contentious) contemporary issue.
- Diane Shane Fruchtmann So you start with the issue, and the contemporary connection. How do you stay aware of what your students are following and preoccupied by in the “real” world?

Shanell T. Smith I teach adults, many of whom are full-time or second-career students. What I follow is what is pressing in social media, what I hear in the hallways, in the news.

I have a very creative, out-of-the-box, I-won't-shy-away-from-it pedagogical style. I am a firm believer that we must talk about these texts and how they affect us today—in our contemporary circumstances.

Diane Shane Fruchtman And the next step in your process is how you connect our “so what” to your students’ lives here and now (and in the future, hopefully).

Shanell T. Smith Yes. The second step to the process is “Keep it real.” You consider, and reflect on, contemporary issues—social, political, cultural—to which the readings and concepts may apply, and you “Keep it real.” You make scholarship relevant by putting your students in conversation with issues they should be aware of—systemic oppressions such as the “Cradle to Prison Pipeline™,” hot topic issues such as a woman’s right to abortion, being inclusive of the LGBTQI+ communities, and so forth. You need to be explicit about the theoretical and political considerations that go into the tasks you expect them to perform. There are various ways to engage scholarship with the political: by engaging social media, videos such as children’s cartoons, music videos, via the creation of scenarios, and so forth.

This is perhaps the most difficult part of the teaching tactic because it requires professors to “get out of their own way.” It necessitates them moving beyond a sole focus on scholarship, and being vulnerable and taking risks in terms of assignment creation.

Diane Shane Fruchtman Can you say more about how we can “get out of our own way”?

Shanell T. Smith Be willing to take risks. Be willing to be vulnerable in the classroom. Be willing to ignore or resist the unspoken, but oft-assumed rule that scholarship—*serious* scholarship—can’t be fun and engaging. Embrace your inner child and let your creativity flow!

Diane Shane Fruchtman I hate to bring this back to brass tacks, but it does sound like this takes a lot of effort and time on the part of the instructor.

Shanell T. Smith It depends. The time required depends on two factors: the length and requirements of the assignment and the emotional energy that it sometimes necessitates.

But it’s worth it: Something beautiful happens when students are required to think beyond scholarly concepts, and are invited to apply it to contemporary life. They are intellectually stretched, and become ethically responsible.

Diane Shane Fruchtman I can really see that in some of the assignments you shared with me, both the intellectual stretching and the cultivation of ethical responsibility. The choice of topic, even, is sobering and necessary: you do a whole week on “The Virgin Mary and Rape Culture.”

In the first assignment you shared with me (see Figure 3), which is from this week of the course, you do a few things that seem really exemplary.

Figure 3: Mary and #MeToo Images Assignment

Task 1: Mary and #MeToo Images

This is going to be very interesting. In fact, I cannot wait to see what you will do here!

Post an image that represents *to you* an engagement with “Mary and the #MeToo Movement.” I have intentionally left this topic very broad. In five sentences or less, interpret the image. (Why did you choose it? How does the Virgin Mary relate to the image? How does the #MeToo Movement fit in? Give us your thoughts.) Don’t forget to provide us with the source.

I’ll start. The image below is called “Consecration to the Immaculate Heart of Mary” (straymonds.org). What stands out to me is the way Mary is pointing to herself (indicative of self-identification #MeToo). Her face appears to be arrested between a sad face and an almost-smile. Someone is telling her, “It’s okay. You’ll be okay.” But she can’t get there. She doesn’t believe it. So she does her best in front of the “camera.” She is hurting but is trying to “be strong” in front of others. “Fake it until you make it,” you know? Perhaps she knows no one would believe her.



Meanwhile her other hand *appears* to be in the act of volunteering, but *not quite*. If I view her as saying “yes” to doing a good deed for God, she seems to have some concerns. She knows God. . . but she. . . (*This is quite triggering for me, but there you go.*)

Diane Shane
Fruchtman

First, you ask your students to bring in their own images. We talk elsewhere in this issue about ways to diversify the sources we use in class, and this seems like a perfect example of how to do that organically. But secondly, and I think most importantly, you model your own answer, and include your own vulnerabilities there. Do you get any pushback from students about sharing in this way? Do you think the fact that they’re seminarians makes them more inclined to “Keep it Real” with you?

Shanell T.
Smith

I do not think any of this affects their receptiveness to “Keepin it Real.” To be transparent, they do the assignments because it is part of their assessment (laughs). But in all seriousness, I do not ask my students to do an assignment that I have not exemplified and illustrated myself. I cannot ask my students to be vulnerable if I am unwilling to be so. Their responses to real-life, often “hot topic” scenarios emerge from their own experiences and upbringings—all of their “stuff”—and not simply or only from their faith tradition.

- Diane Shane Fruchtman Do you think the atmosphere of the class and their sharing is affected by the “intentionally multi-faith” mission of Hartford Seminary?
- Shanell T. Smith It doesn't shape it for me. I would run this course the same way if I were at a Christian-based institution. One of the main things I teach my students is that we are human beings. We each come with our own experiences, traumas, and life learnings that are not based in our faith traditions. The latter does not make up the entirety of who we are.
- Diane Shane Fruchtman So, speaking of trauma . . . The second exercise you shared with me directly confronts trauma, in a way that it would be really hard for a student to deflect from, I think. This is, essentially, a role-playing scenario where you set the stage quite vividly and then ask your students to take over just at the moment the fictionalized dialogue partner says something explosive (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: “There’s Something About Mary” Assignment

Task 2: Scenario: “Was Jesus a Rape Baby?”

It's a cold day in November, so you relish the heat that encompasses you as you enter the mall. It's not even Thanksgiving yet, and folk are in there in droves shopping like there will be nothing left to purchase after today. Passing by a place that specializes in making cinnamon buns (hehe), you stop when you see an old friend from college, and the following conversation ensues:

You: Hey _____! How are you? Are you getting ready for the holidays? I see you've already gone shopping. (You look at the 5 bags from various stores sitting between her/his/their legs as she/he/they waits in the long line.)

Friend: Hey (uncomfortable pause) you!

You: It's _____. I haven't seen you in a long time! How long has it been?

Friend: (thinking) I think the last time we saw each other was at the “Going Wild. . .”

In unison: “. . .Party in 1985!”

You: OMG! (You lower your head in embarrassment.)

Friend: Hey. You gonna be here for a while? You wanna get some coffee?

You: Sure! I'll meet you by Cafe-La-Creme and find us some seats.

(Five minutes later your friend joins you at the table.)

You: So are you getting ready for Christmas? Do you celebrate it? It's a crazy time of year, right? All the excitement and the magical feeling. . .

Friend: Well, yes and no. I am a Christian, but I only celebrate the gift-giving aspect of Christmas. (hmm?) I refuse to celebrate any theological aspect of it because the way Jesus came about was downright disrespectful and included a sexual assault on Mary. I am a survivor of sexual abuse. I got three daughters and a son of sexual maturity (whatever that means), and I cannot condone that kind of violence—especially at the hands of God! I love him, but Jesus was a rape baby. . .

You respond by saying. . .

**** Students will:

State whether they agree or disagree with their friend, and respond accordingly.

Include each secondary article paraphrasing the main ideas, what shocked you, intrigued you, angered you, etc.

From Mbuwayesango's (2016) article, include how sexuality is used as a strategy in biblical texts. Although her article references texts from the Hebrew Bible, how might her work be applicable to the discussion of Mary's conception of Jesus in the New Testament texts? Was she a rape victim?

Include the following topics/terms: consent, historical info about girls/women ages and betrothal in the first century, power dynamics, "God as predator" ([Woods 2017](#)), "good girl" ([Everhart 2016](#)), purity, Mary's fear. . .

Also include your own interpretation of the New Testament texts. STAY IN CHARACTER.

Don't forget to respond to two of your colleagues' posts.

Shanell T.
Smith

We should never assume that we or our students will be able to remain objective when engaging the political. It's important to advise students that their emotions, opinions, and life experiences will be touched upon, and affected, in some way. This is a task in vulnerability. For this reason, as I said before, I do not expect anything from my students that I am unwilling to do.

For example, in the same week on "Mary and the #MeToo Movement," this was the first thing my students read (Figure 5):

Figure 5: Caution

A Word of Caution: This week's topic, although an important one, will be triggering for some of you. It was for me. Some of the articles we will read for this week are very provocative, and will incite extreme emotion. Take care of yourself, and do the best that you can.

Shanell T.
Smith

A safe classroom does *not* exist, especially when you engage the political. And that is okay. A professor's task is to create a space where open and honest dialogue can occur, and to be able to turn "hot moments" in the classroom into teaching opportunities.

Diane Shane Fruchtman Do you find that's even more challenging, though, when you're asking your students to "get in character" as you do here?

Shanell T. Smith I ask them to respond to each scenario "in character" because in the "real world" this is how those conversations and topics are engaged. This is how "hot topics" are often experienced, witnessed, or talked about. This is prep work!

But as I said before, the professor will first need to illustrate or answer the scenario first. And there may be some students who need more time to process their responses.

I will add that the scenarios—while based on real life issues—are also based on the primary and secondary texts we read for the week. So they are also expected to express the main ideas of the readings as well as their critique of it (pros and cons) while being in character.

Whether or not a student is expressing their *true* belief on a certain issue is truly uncertain . . . however, the dialogue that follows one's post tells all.

And professors also have to be flexible about the assignments when students are triggered. As long as the student understands the main idea of the article and can engage the primary text, I do not force them to get in character. They are told to reach out to me offline with this request. I also provide a warning/caution *before* we engage on certain topics such as sexual abuse.

Diane Shane Fruchtman It seems like this is a really good environment for them to exercise and do this "prep work"—almost like rehearsing—for things they might encounter outside of class.

Shanell T. Smith Our students matter. What better way to make scholarship matter than by engaging the political that affects their daily lives.

Diane Shane Fruchtman Thanks so much for talking with me, and sharing your assignments for this course. I thought I might give you the last word—is there anything more you want *The Wabash Center Journal on Teaching* readers to know?

Shanell T. Smith This is how scholarship meets the "political." This tactic supports student learning by illuminating scholarly concepts by applying them to everyday life situations. Students retain so much more this way, and it is great practice for students who will have similar conversations in the real world. This particular strategy is transferable to any subject matter and academic context. You already have the scholarship—determine what you want them to know. Life is constantly "happening" all around us providing great fodder for engagement. All you need to do is put the two in conversation, and be creative in terms of assignment construction. Have fun. Never ask your students to do what you aren't willing to do *first*. Take a risk. Be vulnerable, and "Keep it real."

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Everhart, Ruth. 2016. "Our Culture of Purity Celebrates the Virgin Mary. As a Rape Victim, that Hurts Me." *The Washington Post*, December 6. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/12/16/our-culture-of-purity-celebrates-the-virgin-mary-as-a-rape-victim-that-hurts-me/>.
- Mbuwayesango, Dora Rudo. 2016. "Sex and Sexuality in Biblical Narrative." In *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell, 456-64. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Shanell T. 2015. "Christian Band-Aids." *Ponderings*. <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/today/2015/06/24/ponderings/>.
- Smith, Shanell T. 2019. "There's Something About Mary." Syllabus, Hartford Seminary, Hartford, CT. <https://www.hartsem.edu/wp-content/uploads/SC-518-Theres-Something-About-Mary-Syllabus-FINAL-v3.pdf>.
- Woods, Sarah McDavitt. 2017. "Jesus Was a Rape Baby." <https://medium.com/@artscisarah/jesus-was-a-rape-baby-98e652f2d8f8>.

ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS

Shanell T. Smith is Associate Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins at Hartford Seminary, where she is also the Director of the Cooperative Master of Divinity Program. She is the author of *The Woman Babylon and the Marks of Empire: Reading Revelation with a Postcolonial Womanist Hermeneutics of Ambivalence* (Fortress, 2014) and *touched: For Survivors of Sexual Assault like Me Who Have Been Hurt by Church Folk and for Those Who Will Care* (Fortress, 2020).

Diane Shane Fruchtmann, Assistant Professor in the Religion Department at Rutgers University, is a scholar of Christian thought whose research explores rhetoric and the realities it helps construct, particularly in the realms of violence and martyrdom. She is currently working on a monograph, *Surviving Martyrdom: Martyrdom without Death in the Late Ancient Latin West and Beyond*.

