

Pornographic Provocations, or Kyles in the Classroom

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Tears filled his eyes, but never quite made it to his cheeks, now flushed by the labor of proving himself pitiable. Self-deputized, seventeen-year-old Kyle Rittenhouse killed two people and maimed another at a protest, spurred by the killing of Jacob Blake by a white police officer, in Kenosha, Wisconsin. With semi-automatic rifle in tow, Kyle had traveled to the neighboring state of Wisconsin, out of a sense of duty to, in his words, “protect people.” As he stated his case on the stand, Kyle became emotional. For many his impassioned outburst was another demonstration of Kyle’s extraordinary virtue, inspiring a kind of kinship and pathos not-guilty verdicts are made of.

Kyle was more curious to me. His tears did not connect with me in the ways they landed with Middle America. Like Middle America, I too was struck by Kyle’s immaturity and naivete (his media team earned every penny they were paid). Still, I approached this innocence with suspicion. I examined it critically, interrogating my rush to absolve him of the kind of wisdom necessary to deliberate as an adult. Sitting there with the full weight of a criminal trial on his shoulders, surely Kyle was emotional; emotional enough to break down on the stand. However, fear and remorse are not the same thing, and neither mitigated the damage done on that night, nor the consequences that accompany accountability.

“He had the courage to do what needed to be done,” they said.

“To keep those niggers and nigger lovers in line!”

“They may put up with that rioting in other places, but not in these parts.”

“Kyle was a protector.”

“Kyle was extraordinary.”

“A patriot who took a stand against lawlessness,” they said, with no mention of the laws he broke himself.

While Fox News pundits praised him, black folks, activists, and our allies feared for our safety. Gathering around water coolers and dinner tables we grappled with the juridical implications of Kyle’s actions. Surely the imminent not guilty verdict could be interpreted as an endorsement of vigilantism from the American justice system. Would seventeen-year-olds, shaped by conservative rhetoric, officially be given license to operate as an extension of the law? How would it affect those who were just learning to stand in solidarity with the marginalized? But most of all I wondered about formation, the formation of Kyles across the nation, and even more close to home, the Kyles in my classroom.

Despite our assumptions, all “Kyles” aren’t built the same. In my four years as a professor I’ve encountered many a Kyle...

Kyles that complain to the chair when you let them disrupt your class,

Kyles that relish in course evaluations more detailed and critical than any paper they ever submitted for the actual class.

Kyles that will do the written work, but tune out on their computers each and every class,

Kyles who find any and every reason not to attend classes with racially-charged subject matter,

Kyles who seek to bond with me through hip hop, swapping top fives and concert stories,

Kyles who come to office hours when something is sparked in them during my lecture,

Kyles just coming out.

Kyles who are quiet as a mouse but shock you with their brilliance in almost every assignment,

Kyles who have declared themselves feminists and can run theory with the best of them.

Kyles who make excuses for the Kyles who do violence.

Kyles who go over and above, above and beyond,

The Kyles who expect A’s, despite the fact they have seven missing assignments.

Kyles who enter the room every class period with the celebratory salutation, “Hello Dr.!”

Kyles who are searching for meaning and trying to figure out the cacophony of messages, raised by “very fine people...”

Who watch Fox News religiously

Whose uncles and brothers are police officers and don’t understand why black people won’t just comply with the law,

Children of second generation immigrants, but the good kind, from Italy, Ireland, and Croatia.

And then there are Kyles who are unwilling to acknowledge my expertise,

Kyles that will challenge every idea that comes out of my mouth, usually with a source to the contrary from Breitbart News.

Kyles that take the day off to travel to Washington DC in celebration of Donald Trump’s Inauguration,

Kyles whose written work divulges a disdain for identity politics and who brazenly don bright red “Make America Great Again” hats as a goading tactic.

My teaching career has been littered with Kyles. This is far from surprising. In fact, their existence is part of my impetus for teaching. So much of my understanding of teaching is shaped by my faith in the life and love of Jesus and the wisdom of bell hooks, who sees aspects of the vocation of teaching as sacred. She writes, “To teach in a manner that respects the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin.” Inspired by Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh who underscored wholeness—that is unity of the mind, body, and spirit—in the enterprise of

teaching, hooks advocates for pedagogies that welcome all aspects of students' and teachers' personhood to the classroom. On a good day, if I am operating in my purpose, teaching and writing are done in communion and conversation with God as an extension of my ministry. It is a sacred act, a ministry of conscientization in the pursuit of justice and transformation, accomplished by touching more than students' minds, but their being. This union of doing and being is the work of eros in the classroom, evidenced by the buzz of erons that fill the room. These erons, Katie Cannon offers, are the erotic particles emitted anytime an individual is engaging head and heart. Eros, hooks contends, helps us self-actualize and grounds our wisdom, facilitating how we know what we know. It is in these moments that eros does its good work of rearranging, debunking, and pushing students toward change.

I prioritize creating an atmosphere of intimacy, truth telling, and belonging in the classroom as a way of inviting erotic energy and exchange into the space. We do not approach religion as a mere set of principles or a community practice. It is more than the belief in a deity or deities. It does not just lie flat, but is dynamic, impacting the perspectives, ethics, and identities of every student, each of whom come with a nagging desire to find their place, their belonging in a world constantly hurling images and ideas of what it is and who they should be. In the erotic laboratory of my classroom, these perspectives, ethics, and identities, so often accepted without scrutiny, come under the full weight of counter-hegemonic texts, activities, and methodologies and their disruptive effect on the social imagination. My aim is that my classroom functions as a place where students will come to know their own voices more clearly, through the development of critical consciousness. I want this for the liberation of the marginalized in my classroom. I desire this for the Kyles of the world as well; for our liberation, for their wholeness. It is also required for our safety, which in the most horrific of times seems predicated on their sense of reality.

This work holds danger, particularly from those whose power is dependent on the systems this kind of teaching seeks to tear down. For the hoarders of power, it inspires violence of all kinds, especially the pornographic. It is pornographic in the sense of taking pleasure in that which takes rather than gives life— parasitic, exploitative, objectifying and degrading of the humanity of others. The pornographic has its place in the racialized history of America. It has repeatedly been a tactic of white dominance.

In these dynamics of relating, dominion over black people and all products of black life, especially pain, are used for sensation, with no regard for feeling. Engaged pedagogy shuns such dehumanizing behavior, yet it is often lurking in the shadows, waiting for the next chance to antagonize and diminish.

"Did you hear?" His excitement bubbled over in his voice. "The verdict is in."

Which verdict? I wondered.

In addition to a series of clashes at demonstrations against police brutality across the nation, some men in Georgia had run a young black man (see how that works) off the road and killed him while he was out jogging. White vigilantism was trending.

"Not guilty on all counts," he exclaimed, with a smug purse of his lips.

And then something strange but familiar. His attention turned to me as though he was waiting for something; or better yet, he salivated at the opportunity to make a spectacle of black pain, to rip the veil, and expose it to his friends. Existing beyond the constraints of oppression, he, this eighteen, perhaps nineteen-year-old, sought an impassioned response. Void of recognition, empathy, or reciprocity, he imposed his curiosity, gawking into the intimacies of my interiority for sport. These pornographic provocations helped him count the distance between him and me, and its permanence, so long as we both shall live.

Kyle relayed the verdict to me not as a casual exchange of today's news, but as a provocation to inflame. It was an exercise in provocation for entertainment, reminiscent of Sarah Baartman and the pseudoscientific

gaze of her sophisticated spectators. I had readied myself for the unwanted sexual gaze. The professorial cape, accomplished through a tunic, large blazer, or long flowing dress was foundational to my professorial wardrobe, effectively obscuring any intimate engagement with my body. Yet, while this was lacking in physical violation, a libidinous lust was nonetheless present, and its stultifying racial dynamics very much felt.

This recognition, as well as the anger that sat at the pit of my belly, set my body ablaze. White hot and prickly, I could feel the heat in my neck and in my face. Boxed in like a caged animal, between the lectern and his desk, I stood as he gawked. Others, sensing the tension that had now filled the classroom, began to watch as well, as the room devolved from a space of inquiry and wonder to a site of pornography as students consumed me for their voyeuristic delight. Their stares, it seemed, aimed to snuff me out as another casualty of the ubiquitous power of whiteness, to eat upon my flesh in a ritual of victory over the black professor who really thought the world could be different. Poking and prodding at the wounds of justice and accountability deferred yet again, Kyle was titillated by the idea of exposing my pain and parading it for the class—not for the sake of solidarity with my sentiments, but to use them in the manifestation of his own power.

And I resented him for it. I resented the lot of them—

The Kyles who exacted the violence,
The Kyles who sat on the jury,
The Kyle of a judge and his flagrant manipulation of the law, to the benefit of the Kyles who believe it is their job to protect America from my freedom.
The Kyles whose power was so deeply entrenched in this institution that it was clear there would be no one coming to my rescue.

What do we as educators do with these provocations, in light of our own humanity? How do we, those who prioritize coming to the classroom whole, invite others to do the same? How do we, in the fullness of ourselves, navigate the very human response of anguish? Auntie bell and Katie Cannon offer much wisdom regarding generating eros in the classroom, but left no instructions for those moments when the classroom becomes a site of the pornographic. They did not equip us for the moments when we would stand naked and raw before our classes unseemly and psychically disrobed. Yes, we can bring our passion to the teaching moment, but what of our pain? Our pain we must stuff down, tuck in, airbrush away... far away, lest hopelessness have its way. The work of resilience seems to require dissociation or compartmentalization if these moments are to be survived, lest the rage spill over onto the very minds we are so committed to exposing to alternative possibilities or power.

I lose sight of these things in moments of despair. The weight of it often seems too heavy to bear. How does one remain just and responsible, human and whole, when students make the sites of our pain the breadcrumbs that lead them back to their power? Satiated by our suffering, the provocateur pokes and prods, peering into the contours of these sentiments too weighty for them to comprehend. Yet they hunger for the way it stimulates their own sense of sovereignty and supremacy. For surely, they would never find themselves in this kind of predicament. Their whiteness, like Kyle's, renders them immune from the turmoil of suppressing true feeling, while always being expected to ascend to one's higher self.

With no place to stuff my anger, frustration, and disillusionment, I said a simple prayer, "God be with me."
Those four words stood in for a more elaborate petition: Use the anger they so desperately want to witness.
Wrestling with the competing postures of rage and responsibility, I scanned the room watching the faces.

The Kyles I enjoy in the classroom,
The Kyles who have shared their passions, questions, and fears,

The Kyles who were still trying to figure out inhabiting their bodies,
The Kyles who followed more confident Kyles because it was easier.
The other students were watching too, unable to look away from the spectacle.
It was their faces that helped me find my center and return to the mission and the method.

My teaching is done in conversation with God—“God, be with me.” I prayed.
With no place to stuff my anger, frustration, and disillusionment, I decided to use the anger they
so desperately wanted to witness, to connect with it and be led by my indignation as well as care
for my students.

Words began to form in my mouth, almost without my consent, but I welcomed them. Riding them for dear
life, I leaned into these words, uncomfortable to hear, but seasoned with the care Kyle denied me. These
words laid us all bare, tapping into the grave reality of the situation:

Me: a black educator grieving for the countless times a connection and sense of responsibility this
country might never have for me or those who mean my good,
and The Provocateurs: “Those who need, but also hate. Those who hope for life, but those who
are susceptible to the wooing of death, to become its agents,” to use the words of theologian and
professor Willie Jennings.

Likening those gathered together in the enterprise of theological learning to the crowd that wants Jesus
crucified, Jennings calls to our attention to the longing present when crowds gather. The crucifying crowd
sought connection to the divine, and the students, if bell hooks was right, sought “to be touched by knowl-
edge.” Reflecting on this longing humanizes these young men and helps me to recognize that people mimic
what has been taught until other options prove more beneficial. Professors are not the only ones who enact
rituals of control in the classroom; students for whom the classroom is a site of contestation often seek to
assert the same kind of control in the name of patriarchy, white supremacy, heterosexism, and so on. But so
too do these students hope for life. What does it mean to teach toward the humanity of these students too?

Such a tall order required a reframing. It required me to remember that the classroom was a place of experi-
mentation, and that students in their various stages of development would not always choose the strategies
I desired for them. The care needed was beyond my capacity alone.

The care was so beyond my capacity, in fact, that to expect it of anyone else would be exploitative. Beyond
the fact that for the unwilling party these actions would be ineffective, to demand such a response could be
considered yet another way in which black educators are diminished, pushed aside, and made to suffer. And
yet through this care, nothing was taken from me at all. Instead, as I leaned into the truth of my emotions and
willingly shared them, the atmosphere shifted. I could not with any certainty relay the exact words I offered.
But I do remember taking disclosure into my own hands. In taking this power, the provocateur got what he
wanted, but not in the way he wanted it. His power to expose was thwarted by my willingness. It was in the
authority of this vulnerability that I became more able to speak to the hearts of the many, rather than to the
provocation of the one.

All the more surprising, leaning into the intimacy and vulnerability of that moment, I could hear the sounds of
my words taking root. They reverberated within the walls, penetrated and expanded until their echoes gently
clung to the spaces between their imagination and emotion. And wouldn't you know it, not only did the words
swirl about in the room, but erons too—erons that destabilized the pornographic ethos in the room. I write
this as a means of finding my way back to eros, when the pornographic seeks to disrupt the work of critical
awareness. I add it to my arsenal in the fight not only to call the world to be better, but to participate in adding
to the horizon of opportunities.

Reflecting on this pornographic provocation, I am reminded that in a world that screams otherwise, when
I lean into the wholeness of my personhood, and aspire to reach toward the humanity of my students—the
whole of them—the agenda of the pornographic is bested by a force that reconnects, a love that enables us
to find our way back home to ourselves, and oftentimes to each other.

Notes & Bibliography

¹bell hooks. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994), 13.

²hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 14.

³Katie Cannon, *The Womanist Theology Primer: Remembering What We Never Knew* (Louisville, KY: Women's Ministries Program Area, National Ministries Division, Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], 2001)

⁴hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 195.

⁵Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing, 1984), 53-59. Lorde connects the erotic to the work of creating a more just world. Lorde writes, “the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world” (59). Lorde contends the erotic exists on a spiritual plane, experienced by our innermost being and our bodies through the union of intuition, emotion, and the senses. It connects us to the fullness of our personhood through revelatory knowledge about ourselves and the world that spurs personal and communal accountability. Hence, the erotic is a consci-entizing and guiding agent of truth, or as Lorde writes, “It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves” (54). The erotic moves us from mediocrity to excellence. It heightens our awareness of our desire for connection with one another. It reinvigorates our lives with passion, waking us from strategy of numbness for the sake of survival, and instigates our proactivity in challenging injustice and oppression.

⁶Engaged pedagogy is a method of teaching that emphasizes the wellbeing of both the students and the teacher. Through active participation both engage in learning with an aim of developing critical awareness and self-actualization through mutual labor. Cultural critic bell hooks suggests that this manner of teaching is particularly well suited for people who consider aspects of the vocation of teaching sacred, “who believe that our work is not merely to share information, but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of students” (13). For more, see hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 13-22.

⁷Willie Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2020), 1

⁸Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 143; hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 199.



About the Author

Courtney Bryant is a Womanist scholar, preacher and practitioner. She received her Doctorate of Religion, with an emphasis in Womanist Ethics and Christian Social Ethics, from Vanderbilt University. on the role of the erotic as a divine resource for black women's moral agency, Bryant's scholarship explores how erotic practices—which she defines as sexual and non-sexual bodily manifestations of love— can facilitate individual and social transformation. Bryant currently teaches Womanist Ethics at Manhattan College and serves as the Pastor of Righteous Relations at All Angels Church in New York City. Her first book, *Erotic Defiance: A Womanist Ethic of Freedom and Resistance*, is currently slated for publication with Fortress Press