

# Teaching Can Be Dangerous: Embodied Learning in Carceral Spaces

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## Once you're in, you're in.

A loud clang signals  
That the doors behind you are locked.

This was not my first time at a prison.  
But, this was my first time teaching in the prison.

And, I did not come alone.  
I brought students with me.  
Undergraduate students who were  
eager and anxious,  
Curious and cautious  
Pensive and hopeful.

Several weeks before,  
I came to the prison with my colleague.  
I came in  
eager and anxious,  
Curious and cautious  
Pensive and hopeful.

These emotions mirror the emotions I feel  
On the first day of class.

## Section I: Dislocation

When I enter the prison,  
I enter the prison full-bodied.  
Never disembodied.  
But my body transverses the unfamiliar.

*Routines to enter the space.  
Rituals of dislocation.*

Walking through metal detector.  
Handing over the little I can take in with me,  
My keys.  
Keys that are sometimes confiscated  
until I depart.

Officers sometimes give a quick pat down.  
Bodies searched.  
Emotions heightened.  
Anxious...Cautious...and pensive.  
I will never get used to someone searching me.

Unnerving  
Another's hand on my body  
Prompts awareness.  
Did I take that out of my pocket?  
Are my clothes too tight?  
Am I going to draw unnecessary attention  
by what I'm wearing?

And yet,  
As a black woman, I recognize  
That the same surveillance I feel  
In the prison can sometimes be felt  
behind university lecterns.

No pat downs in the classroom.  
Body not physically touched.  
But clothes evaluated.  
Hair questioned.

Are my clothes too tight?  
Am I going to draw unnecessary attention  
by what I'm wearing?  
By how my hair looks?

I ask those same questions  
When I stand before any group of students  
Knowing that the curves of my Black female body  
Doesn't conform to the typical white male  
professor that stands before them.

*Routines to enter the space.  
Rituals of dislocation.*

Yet, at the prison, what I wear  
And how I look  
Can have real consequences  
For those I seek to teach.

***My body...dislocated and yet transgressive.  
Transversing the unfamiliar space...prison.***

Embodiment becomes a central way  
to know and learn in prison.  
Embodied emotions  
Embodied presence  
Embodied oppression.  
Embodied resilience.

I entered the prison with great excitement.  
I entered as a Black woman  
Who understood what it felt like to live  
in a racist, classist, sexist system.

*What does it mean to enter a space where you are confined?  
That's what I do every day as women of color.*

*What does it mean for you to enter a space where you are under  
surveillance?  
That's what I do every day as women of color.*

*What did I already know about what it means to live in  
Systems of oppression?*

Our ways of seeing...dismissed.  
Our ways of feeling...mocked.  
Our ways of knowing...devalued.  
Our ways of being...despised.  
Our ways of doing co-opted, exploited,  
And used for the "good" of others.  
Emotions embodied.  
Presence embodied.  
Oppression embodied.  
Resilience embodied.

Disparities abound.  
A pure paradox

The way bodies like mine  
are overrepresented in some spaces  
And underrepresented in others.  
Misogynoir.

Black Americans.  
Incarcerated in state prisons  
at nearly 5 times the rate of white Americans.  
Black women.  
2.1 percent of bodies like mine  
tenured associate and full professors  
at US universities and colleges.

Structural disadvantage,  
Racial subordination,  
Over policing  
of bodies like mine  
Is present in places where  
We are both overrepresented  
And underrepresented.

Their policies sought us out  
And Stabilized instability.  
Already unarmed,  
But disarming us further.  
Perhaps they think we learn better caged!

A history that has persisted.  
A people that has resisted.

Whether in the prison or in the academy,  
Our ways of knowing dismissed.  
Our ways of being despised.  
Our ways of doing co-opted, exploited,  
And used for the "good" of others.

Whether in the prison or in the academy,  
Similarities abound.  
Making me wonder  
If the places I teach and learn  
Are bred from the same stock.

Me in this carceral space  
Is a humble attempt to  
write the wrong  
so others can read  
the inequity that manifests  
wherever bodies like me are recruited  
for the "good" of others.

I thought this embodied knowledge would give me a leg up  
In my attempt to relate with the incarcerated women I would  
meet.

In many ways,  
I thought I would relate more to the incarcerated women  
Than my colleagues in the academy.

When several incarcerated students  
Decided they no longer wanted to be in  
Me and my colleague's class,  
I needed to know why.  
"Why did you drop our course?" we asked them.  
"You talk too much about race in your course,"  
one of the women responded.  
"But, you and your university students can leave.  
We can't leave.  
If what I say in the class  
gets misconstrued,  
and that misunderstanding  
gets back on the block,  
it's life or death for me."

I left stunned.  
For the first time ever  
I realized that  
Teaching can be dangerous.

Teaching in carceral contexts helps  
us come to know differently.  
Embodied knowing.  
Emotions embodied.  
Presence embodied.  
Oppression embodied.  
Resilience embodied. And once you come to know in your body,  
It's really difficult to forget it.

#### Teaching theology in the prison offers embodied knowing.

Times of racial reckoning  
jolt us all into a place of learning and unlearning.  
The "righting" on the wall  
signals perhaps more than ever,  
our need to "know" differently  
Not a knowing that can be placed  
on the shelf  
When the riots stop.  
Not a knowing that  
Points away from our own  
Complicity  
Not a knowing  
too easily forgotten.  
too easily justified away.  
But an embodied knowing.

We teach what we know.  
Teaching can be dangerous.

**Not knowing**, is dangerous.  
Not knowing perpetuates the death-dealing  
that takes place on sidewalks, churches, the academy,  
neighborhoods, universities, and prison.

Carceral spaces,  
like church pews and university lecterns  
are plagued with unknowing,

Full of teachers who don't understand  
Nor does their faith seek understanding.  
**Bodies disconnected.**  
**Minds forgetful.**

Teaching bodies can do harm.

The "righting" on the wall  
signals perhaps more than ever,  
Our need to know.

Some of us already know differently.  
We know what we lived.  
What our nanas and great grandmommas lived.  
Knowing that remains in bodies like mine.  
Bodies that remember.  
Bodies that speak  
even when our voices are silenced.  
Ways of knowing that can't be dismissed.  
Can't be easily forgotten  
Or justified away.

We teach what we know.  
Teaching can be dangerous.  
Upsetting the status quo.  
Upsetting the boundary lines set by others.  
Often, as theological educators  
We approach teaching with the presumption of knowing.  
We possess all the knowledge,  
And our students are so lucky  
to have someone like us  
to help them to understand,  
help them come to know.

And the urgency of what we know  
Has taken on new demands.  
We possess a need to be,  
as popular society has called it,  
"woke."

And yet, teaching theology in the prison reveals to us  
That we are asleep,  
And have been sleeping for a looong time.  
We are unable to know some things  
Because our own comfort and convenience  
have become idols that we refuse to surrender.

What can we know by teaching in the prison  
That is difficult to know in other teaching and learning contexts?

#### Section II: Dis-Orientation

The week before the "outside" students entered,  
I had an orientation with the incarcerated men  
I would be teaching for this particular class.

"I'm nervous," Sigmund whispered in my ear.  
I had only met Sigmund a couple weeks earlier

when I was doing interviews to see who would be part of this  
class.  
"Why?" I asked.  
"I haven't been around females in over ten years," he responded.  
I smiled warmly at him, as he had a slight shiver in his body.  
"You will be fine," I whispered back to him. "You will be just fine."

Disorientation.  
Young college women in a men's prison.  
Disorientation is not lop-sided  
but experienced by both—those who enter the prison  
and those on the inside.  
Dis-ease felt.

Those who have taught in the prison  
know how disorienting it can be.

The things that we take for granted like:  
Students being able to type up papers, staple items, or use pa-  
per clips.  
Professors lecturing with PowerPoint, showing videos.  
The approval process to bring books and supplies into the pris-  
on.  
Walking through metal detectors daily.  
Paying attention to the clothes we wear.

These are just a few,  
but all of these things force intentionality.  
To prepare for the unexpected.  
To embody flexibility the best way we know how.

Disorienting.  
To have officers disrupt your class to do "count."  
Thirty minutes that can never be recovered.  
A reminder that safety doesn't exist  
Even when there is every intent to create safe spaces.  
Safety is always just an illusion.

Student bodies tense,  
As we move between classroom  
And prison  
And back to the classroom again.

Disorienting.  
Movement abrupt.  
Ajarring.  
Disruptive.  
Unavoidable.

Disorientation is a first step  
To learning.  
Assumptions questioned.  
Mind expanded.  
World exposed for what it is.

What is disorienting for some  
Has become the norm for others.

"Now, what were we talking about?"

Students grasp for coherence,  
To reorient their attention.  
To integrate what they now know  
As real.

Learning can be  
disorienting.  
Movement abrupt.  
Ajarring.  
Disruptive.  
Unavoidable  
if change will ever take place.

Reorientation is a process.  
A learning process  
Of finding our footing  
Amidst chaos.  
To reorient to time,  
Space, situation, and role takes time.

Disorienting circumstances force us to pay attention.  
Reorientation comes most profoundly  
When it is embodied in the process toward equilibrium  
Rather than the arrival of equilibrium,  
The arrival of neatly formed ideas about life...about lives  
Is an illusion.

Prison...it is in this unique, unconventional context  
that teachers are formed in very specific ways.  
Because, some knowing  
is provoked by unconventional methods.

As we are reoriented,  
we start to notice things they never noticed before,  
care about things that previously did not matter.

As a professor, this space proved formative  
beyond teaching in the prison.  
Rather than the arrival of equilibrium,  
The arrival of neatly formed ideas about life...about lives  
I realized that teaching can be dangerous.

#### Section III: Deconstruction

You come to know each other as peers.  
Students in a class.  
Not as felons.

You come to know  
Each other as  
Thinking beings  
And feeling beings,  
But not on a first name basis.

They must call you "Mrs. Farmer."  
Not just you,  
But also the "outside" students  
That you bring with you.

Inside students can be addressed  
By their first name,  
The prison officers tell us.

Formal titles  
were more than a formality.  
In the prison,  
It was a requirement.  
A barrier erected  
By prison officers  
For the sake of safety.

Deconstruction  
In real time.

Naming is a political act.  
An identity-marking,  
Reality-shaping invitation  
For us to belong.  
For us to make sense  
of the world we inhabit.

Names are given to us.  
Imposed upon us.  
Often by communities we did not pick  
But bear some responsibility for  
Who we are.  
Bear responsibility for  
Who we become.  
We don't pick our name  
When we come into the world

A barrier to inhibit knowing  
Each other as  
Thinking beings  
And feeling beings,  
But not on a first name basis.

Distance protects.  
Allows for justification, misunderstanding, and ignorance.  
Invites misnomers.

A barrier erected  
For the sake of safety.  
Deconstruction  
In real time.

We all made up stage names.  
An invitation for students to decide  
Who they wanted to be  
And how they wanted to show up  
In the classroom.

To teach is to name.  
Naming is a political act,  
Possessing the authority to define and redefine,  
to classify and de-classify,  
To exclude and invite.  
Reconstruction in real time.

To name is to counter imposition.  
To name is to deconstruct and reconstruct  
Identities and placements in the worlds.

To name is a theological act  
An opportunity to reimagine  
Life together despite  
The barriers erected that divide.

Teaching in prison  
Invites students to name.  
To counter imposition.  
To deconstruct and reconstruct  
Identities and placements in the worlds.

Students engage in the "beautiful messiness"  
Of community(prison)-engaged learning,  
Turning the tables  
Of who teaches  
And who learns.  
Of who knows  
And who needs to know  
Of who names  
And who re-names.

Creating new rituals  
Of learning and unlearning  
Of knowing and unknowing  
Of being and becoming  
That bodies may inhabit.  
Embodied activism.

We teach what we know.  
Teaching can be dangerous.  
Upsetting the status quo.  
Upsetting the boundary lines set by others.

#### Section IV: Dis-Missal

The last day of the semester.  
Class dismissed.

Before today,  
I never experienced students  
Embrace each other as they did,  
Cry as they did.  
The class created a sacred space.

Our privileged bodies  
Had to acknowledge something we  
Knew every week we entered...  
That when the class was over,  
We could leave.

Leave the confinement.  
Leave the surveillance behind.  
Bypass the metal detectors

And the locked doors.

Strict boundaries erected  
to separate those inside  
From those outside.  
A barrier erected  
By society  
For the sake of safety.

Once you're out, you're out.  
A loud clang signals  
That the Doors behind you  
are locked.

Beyond the bars  
Our bodies re-enter the world  
the same way we came in  
eager and anxious,  
Curious and cautious  
Pensive yet hopeful.

Charged with a new task.  
To shed disembodied knowing  
To embrace imaginations  
Bathed in the beautiful messiness  
Of lives in mutual dialogue.  
To create new rituals  
Of learning and unlearning  
Of knowing and unknowing  
Of being and becoming  
That bodies may inhabit.  
Embodied activism.

We teach what we know.  
Teaching can be dangerous.

#### Notes & Bibliography

<sup>1</sup> Ashley Nellis, "The Color of Justice: Racial and Ethnic Disparity in State Prisons" (Washington, D.C.: The Sentencing Project, 2021), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Audrey Williams June and Brian O'Leary, "How Many Black Women Have Tenure on Your Campus? Search Here," Chronicle of Higher Education (May 27, 2021). <https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-many-black-women-have-tenure-on-your-campus-search-here>.

<sup>3</sup> That prison itself is a disorienting dilemma. See Jack Mezirow, Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2000), 103-123.

<sup>4</sup> Willie James Jennings, The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 293-294.

<sup>5</sup> Libby Porter discusses the messiness of community-engaged learning in "Partnerships of Learning for Planning Education," Planning Theory & Practice 16 no. 3 (2015): 409-34.



#### About the Author

**Sarah Farmer** is Associate Director at Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning. Prior to going to Wabash, Sarah served as Associate Professor of Practical Theology and Community Development in the School of Theology and Ministry at Indiana Wesleyan University. As a practical theologian, she has taught in the areas of community development, faith formation, youth ministry, and transformative pedagogy. Farmer also served as an associate research scholar and lecturer at Yale Divinity School and helped direct the Adolescent Faith and Flourishing Program at Yale Center for Faith and Culture. Sarah received her M.Div and PhD from Emory University, where she taught as an adjunct faculty and co-directed a Certificate in Theological Studies Program at a Women's Prison. Farmer co-founded the Youth Arts and Peace Camp in Chester, PA and worked with the Youth Hope-Builders Academy at Interdenominational Theological Center. She is co-author with Anne E. Streaty Wimberly of *Raising Hope: 4 Paths to Courageous Living for Black Youth*. She enjoys action-packed movies, art, finding adventures to do with her children, and listening to her audiobooks.