
RADICAL HONESTY

Truth-Telling as Pedagogy for Working Through Shame in Academic Spaces

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Since I started teaching Africana Studies and Cultural Anthropology, in all my courses during every semester, I conclude the first class session with an introductory monologue. I think about this monologue as a first step in my pedagogical practice of “radical honesty.”¹ The monologue sets the tone for the semester and provides students with a sense of the type of truth-telling that will be encouraged as we educate one another about race, gender, power, difference, and oppression:

I am Professor Bianca Williams. You may call me “Doctor” or “Professor Williams.” I identify as both an African American and a Black American. My family is from Jamaica, I was born in the Bronx, and grew up in Orlando, so depending on the day, situation, and political circumstances, I may claim membership in multiple communities. However, it is important for you to remember that *African American* is not always synonymous with *Black American*. *Black American* or *Black person* includes those of Caribbean and African descent and incorporates a variety of experiences that are diverse and sometimes significantly different. Historical and contemporary African American experiences make up a portion of Black experiences, but they do not encompass all of what Blackness is. I identify as a woman, and I prefer the pronouns of *she* and *her*. The people in this room may identify in a variety of ways in relation to gender, and you should ask and use the pronouns they request. I was brought up in a working-class family. As a first-generation college graduate and PhD, I am currently hesitantly middle class, and learning everyday what that means. I am heterosexual and a Christian and live with the sometimes invisible battle of generalized anxiety

disorder. I am a diehard Duke fan, so if you're a Tar Heel fan and want to pass this course, you should probably keep that to yourself (smile).

These are my multiple identities, and I share them with you because I know that they index things that may become significant as I teach you. They act as signifiers for the racialized, gendered, sexualized, religious, and ability-related experiences I've had over the course of my life. These experiences undoubtedly influence the way that I teach, the topics I decide to teach, even the way I choose to organize the syllabus before you. And this is not just the case in this classroom, but in all of your classrooms—even in those so-called “neutral” and “apolitical” disciplines, like biology, math, and English literature. All of your professors are biased, and they bring their prejudices and biases to academic spaces. I choose to be honest with you about how my identities connect to some of the biases I bring to this academic space, while also acknowledging your identities and the stereotypes about me that YOU may bring to this space. As a cultural anthropologist, I don't believe in the fiction of objectivity. I believe that the experiences we have, the identities we embody, and the positions we hold in systems of power impact how we see and navigate the world. This is not only true for me but also for you. Your identities and your biases influence how you will read for this course and the perspectives you choose to share during class discussions. I highlight these issues at the beginning of this course as an effort for us all to constantly be aware of the prejudices we bring into this space, as we attempt to learn from one another, share our cultural knowledge, and engage in dialogue that just might shift and transform our current ways of thinking and being. Thank you and I hope to see you during the next class.

In most courses, thick, heavy moments of silence pervade the classroom as students take in all of this information. In my introductory courses, where freshmen are the majority of the population, mouths hang open with surprise, because some are stunned by this much direct talk, truth-telling, and insight into their professor's life. After class, some students come up to me to introduce themselves and say that they look forward to learning more about power and their identities throughout the semester. Others try to slip out of the classroom unseen, never to be heard from again. The monologue sets the stage for truth-telling, modeling my expectation for the type of deep awareness, reflexivity, and critical thought I expect from myself and my students throughout the semester.

In this chapter, I offer radical honesty as a concept that describes a pedagogical practice of truth-telling that seeks to challenge racist and patriarchal institutional cultures in the academy. In particular, I focus on those cultures and processes that sometimes trigger encounters with shame. Radical honesty emphasizes the significance of personal narratives and opens a space for

creating strategies that enable “self” to the classroom, while companies their bodies in academic fields such as Black feminisms envision radical honesty as a foci:

1. *Truth-telling.* Professors and racialized and gendered in the classroom, while examining there. They tell their experience when these
2. *Valuing narrative and* narratives as important in the classroom for voids between individual institutional and systems
3. *Acting.* Radical honesty of speaking truths (all of the word *honesty* er and authenticity, when out beneficial and effective honesty provides tool influences praxis—that outside the ivory tower fundamental teachings Barbara Christian, belief and knowledge as tool

Shame and the Haunting

Academic institutions, particularly which I have taught and earned fathom that one day I, a woman front of the classroom. Even and with increasing numbers I am frequently reminded that learning were not initially created spaces were not made for u