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Against The Grain: Learning And Teaching

Carole A. Myscofski

I'm pleased and honored to receive the DuPont Award for Teaching Excellence, and would like to thank the faculty and staff of Illinois Wesleyan University, the DuPont company sponsors, and, more specifically, the Promotion and Tenure Committee members, Tom Griffiths, Kathie O'Gorman and the other award recipients whose company I am now delighted to join. Many individuals have given tremendous support to me here at IWU, but I also must extend special thanks to the religion department faculty and to my family for cheering me on—in this, my tenth year at IWU and my twentieth year of teaching.

I am particularly pleased to have the opportunity to address this graduating class, among whose members are a redoubtable group of religion majors and minors without whom, well, I might not be receiving this award—for they and their predecessors have been my experimental subjects. And it is about teaching that I plan to talk today—and about my research in Brazil and what I have learned along the way by working “against the grain.”

The metaphor that I'm employing today I have used only as metaphor, that is, I do no carpentry myself. Usually, of course, woodworkers find and follow the grain: it's easier to work with the fibrous structures in wood and thence to work on a large scale with large pieces to build one's case, or cabinet, or table. Cutting against the wood's grain is difficult: it entails deliberate actions athwart the rigid structures already present in the material, but it may reveal hidden contours within the wood—new shapes, new forms, new vistas.

My first academic encounter with the phrase “against the grain” was in discussions with social historian Natalie Zemon Davis and religious historian Robert Orsi, who suggested it as a way of characterizing the work that they and I do. Reading “against the grain” is, if you will, a subversive approach to the official historical documents that one encounters from the early modern period. It entails using the documents contrary to the way they were designed and intended, to draw out materials, insights and understandings that the recorders never intended to preserve. One can see this subversive reading in the work of Carlo Ginzburg, the noted Italian historian who has authored such notable texts as The Cheese and the Worms and “Inquisitor as Anthropologist.” Ginzburg explains that research in the documents of the Italian Inquisition presents certain excruciating challenges. One is faced, he notes, with texts designed and written to a specific end: they are the records of the trials of poor souls dragged before the medieval Christian courts. They were meant to inscribe the proofs of the evils done by the accused and the righteous justice meted out to them. One can, however, find more in those texts. One can, occasionally, rarely, delightfully, find the actual words of unusual individuals caught in desperate situations 500 or more years ago. Thus if one “reads against the grain,” struggling against the assumptions, perspectives, and categories created by the Inquisitors and listening to the odd phrases, grammatically incorrect sentences, and unique explanations embedded in the texts, one can find the truth as seen by the accused, running counter to the truths created by the Inquisitors.

Over the past few years, I’ve been reading Inquisition texts myself, these from the visits of the Portuguese Inquisition to colonial Brazil from the 1590s to the 1620s. I have used them, repeatedly and deliberately, for purposes that the Inquisitors never intended. I have read them “against the grain,” deliberately seeking information about the accused and the denounced brought before the Tribunal—about the lives of those folk whose ideas, and words are usually unavailable to the historian. Let me present three examples of my discoveries there.

In my first study in the Inquisition documents, I followed their format and simply began cataloguing the different sins that women and men came to confess to the Inquisition in 1591. I learned more, however, during my reading of their own accounts of their transgressions, for each confession details not only their birthplace, age, parentage, and work, but also the circumstances of their alleged sins. Dropping my accession to the Inquisitor's structure, to read "against the grain," I saw links across the confession statements and patterns of religious activity counter to the Church. That contrariety was the very reason for the statements to the Inquisitor, but regrouping the statements reveals what the Inquisitor sought to obscure (or in fact eradicate). The women and men confessing to that Tribunal understood their actions quite differently than did the Inquisitors: they offered reasons and extenuating circumstances that made sense of their apparent faults. One might view these as mere excuses offered before a judge, but they in fact reveal a different understanding of religion than that of the doctrinaire institution under whose auspices the Inquisition functioned.

In those texts, I found Breatiz de Sampaio. In January 1592, Sampaio confessed to her sacrilegious reactions during an argument with her husband. Sampaio had been showing her husband the gold reliquaries she had had made for her daughters, to honor and house small religious statues; when her husband "disputed with her over the money she had spent," Sampaio "in a fury hurled the reliquaries down into the street" where one of them broke. Sampaio admitted, on further questioning, that she knew full well that the sacred symbols deserved more respect and that anger--rather than blasphemy or doubt--inspired her sacrilege.¹ Through Sampaio's confession and others like it, I learned that women, more often than men, added religious practices and devotions, and were guilty--if of anything--of being **over** religious, of going beyond the ordinary religious parameters set by the Catholic Church. From those texts, then, I have learned more about the conditions in which the men and women struggled in the late 1500s: I found the entry into real lives. I began to glimpse there the evocative record women and other marginalized groups of colonial Brazil had left of their own religious traditions created and maintained in resistance to the Inquisitors' aims.

I have focused most of my recent research on the lives and words of women. For this research, reading “against the grain” through Inquisition documents provides irreplaceable information. Because most women in colonial Brazil were illiterate, they did not write diaries about their prayers, letters to their priests, reports on their convent lives. I cannot read their own writings, so these records have provided more than I could have imagined, perhaps even more than deliberately designed letters or diaries might reveal. In numerous statements, women discussed their actions, motives, fears, hopes, everyday lives, friends, lovers, husbands, and even their religious beliefs and rituals.

In the Inquisition documents, then, I found Branca Dias. In 1593, six women came before the Brazilian Inquisition to denounce Branca Dias. By their testimony, Dias was guilty of the covert practice of Judaism: they denounced her for working on Sundays and treating Saturdays as holy days. But as each woman offered her account, I read beyond the requisite accusatory statements to the context of their experiences. I read across the multiple accounts, and drew out what the Inquisitor’s Notary had unintentionally preserved: another pattern within the records. I learned that all of the women who came to accuse Branca Dias (for whatever official transgression) had known her in the mid-1550s, when she taught girls between the ages of 5 and 15 in her home. I found then six personal accounts of the first school for girls in colonial Brazil. In that home school, Dias had instructed them in how to wash, to starch and iron linen, to cook, and to spin cotton—all skills suitable for illiterate girls of the poor and working classes. Among her students then and denunciant later were Joanna Fernandes, an African-born girl who married a plantation worker, Maria d’Almeida, who married a part-Brazilian-Indian supervisor, Briolanja Fernandes, a servant in the house who later married a carpenter, and three women—Anna Lins, Isabel de Lamas, and Maria Alvares—who identified themselves as daughters of an immigrant man and his Brazilian Indian slave.² Their statements, their descriptions of their lives, are available in no other source; reading “against the grain” in the Inquisition documents thus brought forth another contour of colonial Brazilian life.

When I turned in a third study to examine women's religious activities within Brazilian Catholicism, I learned that women were so excluded from the important activities in that church that little of the religion beyond personal devotions mattered to them. Reading "against the grain" in the sermons, reports, and Inquisition records of the era, I uncovered an **alternative religious world**, built of European magical practices and Jewish and Christian folk beliefs and domestic rituals. I drew from those accounts the practices of magic; in them, women did not worship devils or conjure spirits, but instead perpetuated ancient practices of spells, fortunes, and love magic. In its most popular form, magic involved simple rituals through which they hoped to find a new love, locate a suitable husband, or—perhaps most poignantly—secure the love of their own husbands. Among the accounts of love magic, I found the case of Guiomar d'Oliveira and recovered enough of her life—reading "against the grain" again there—to envision a few moments of her world. On August 21, 1591, in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, Guiomar d'Oliveira confessed to the visiting Portuguese Inquisitor that she had learned an "enchantment" to improve her "bad marriage." She had, in the morning and evening, faced her husband and spoken the words calling upon the power of "the wood of the true cross, and the angel philosophers" to secure her husband's affections. From another woman, she had learned to put a variety of substances into her husband's food and drink: hazelnuts or pinenuts could be stuffed with her own hair and nails, ground into a powder, and put in a pot of chicken soup; ground bones or other substances could put into wine. Typical of the women confessing to magic, Guiomar was young and fairly well-off—except in her marriage. The Roman Catholic church had no rituals to fix the marriage, and prayers—as other women reported—simply didn't work as well. In fact, when questioned, d'Oliveira assured the Lord Inquisitor that following her use of magic, she had found her husband "improved."³

In my reading "against the grain," in my research in the Inquisition texts from Brazil and other official records, I have cooperated in what Michel Foucault has called "the insurrection of

subjugated knowledges,”⁴ bringing to the fore the voices of the poor and marginalized from that early modern society. Rather than cooperating with the Inquisition and its aims, I have used its documents to undermine the power that it claimed, the power to perpetuate its truth of the world. I have instead recovered the other truths—the truth known to Branca Dias and Guiomar d’Oliveira and other women—about their world and lives. For me, this is a small moment of resistance on my part, witnessing to the greater resistance that the women of colonial Brazil enacted daily. And it has opened new vistas for me and my readers into the world as it might have been, had Sampaio, Dias, and d’Oliveira wrested the definitive discourse from the colonial governors, the priests, and the inquisitors.

This method—learning “against the grain”—need not be abandoned when I enter the classroom. I have tried to incorporate its lessons in teaching and pedagogy, for here too are official documents to be subverted and rigid boundaries to be transgressed. My teaching “against the grain” is inspired by my mentors in the study of religions, such as my own professor Jonathan Z. Smith, and by feminist writers such as bell hooks.

When I teach about religion, teaching “against the grain” means declining to follow the rules and observe the boundaries as the religions themselves have set or defined them. I decenter creeds and scriptures, in order to teach about those left **out** of the hierarchies of power in religions and how such ordinary people create and live everyday religious lives. I deliberately disentangle faith from folk, resisting the impulse to construct the study of religions according to anyone’s ordination. This path removes belief from the center of inquiry, so that I may discuss all religions as equally true—or, if you prefer, equally false. Teaching “against the grain” frees me to cut across religious structures, to discover ideas across cultures, to compare elements of religion too often left separate as if inviolate. I can draw out the sacred narratives of similar religions, comparing how the creation myths of early Navajo and early Christians inform the lives of the believers while offering paths to resisting the limits that those myths might also bear.

In my classes on religion, the voices of the participants can come to the fore, to recount a **different truth** about religion and its repercussions in the events of **their** lives.

Teaching “against the grain” is liberating in education: I have found that I can abandon the notions of following some fancies—here I intend only my own—of replicating classist or sexist ideals. I can decline to accept the historical or institutional hegemony that sometimes overshadows the creative play of the liberal arts. As a teacher about religious traditions, I can challenge what tradition might mean. And as I was engaged in teaching “against the grain,” I found my students.

In this case, I have found you whenever I took seriously the admonitions of bell hooks to recall the “passion for ideas, for critical thinking and dialogical exchange”⁵ that should be celebrated in the classroom and shared with students. And—in this honors day celebration—I would like to honor you students: I honor you who have actively participated in “the mutual interplay of thinking, writing, and sharing ideas”⁶ in the classroom. I celebrate you who have sought to learn “against the grain,” struggling through the intellectual thicket of a difficult text or an elusive argument. And I celebrate those of you who carved out an unexpected and unrequired path through your curriculum, trying a new class, a new methodology, a new language.

In the classroom, our transgressions do not require hurling reliquaries out the window, or learning either the art of ironing or the words of the angel philosophers, but they do include—for me at least—an opportunity to learn “against the grain,” to share in the excitement of engaged scholarship. And here is the bit of “enchantment” that may find our world “improved”:⁷ whenever we as learners decline to accept the structures of those who are or have been “privileged” in bell hook’s words, we experience the “radical openness” that is the heart of “critical thinking.”⁸

For you who are graduating and you who remain, it is my hope that the method I have described may be useful in your explorations beyond the boundaries and limits that institutions

too readily set. It seems to me that liberal arts education can be truly “liberatory” education when one accepts the challenge to learn and teach “against the grain.”⁹

DuPont Award Talk

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¹João Capistrano de Abreu, ed., Primeira visitação do Santo Officio às partes do Brasil: confissões da Bahia, 1591-92 (Rio de Janeiro: F. Briguiet & Ca., 1935), pp. 112-113. My translation in this and all following quoted passages.

²Denúncias de Pernambuco, 1593-1595, 30-32, 46-47, 54-55, 181-183, 200-203. Then deceased, Dias was denounced for working on Sundays and treating Saturdays as holy days, that is, for covert Judaism. She also taught her own step-grand-daughter and a girl whose later husband was “of the government” (44-47, 149-151).

³João Capistrano de Abreu, ed., Primeira visitação do Santo Officio às partes do Brasil: confissões da Bahia, 1591-92 (Rio de Janeiro: F. Briguiet & Ca., 1935), pp. 59-62.

⁴Michel Foucault, “Two Lectures,” in Power/Knowledge, Colin Gordon, ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 81.

⁵bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom (New York: Routledge, 1994), 204.

⁶Ibid, 205.

⁷Abreu, p. 62.

⁸hooks, 185, 202.

⁹Ibid., 44, 203.