

Reading Over Rituals: An Exploration of Protestant Influence on the Sensory Environments of United States Secular Primary and Secondary Education

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Preliminary research led me to shift away from my original focus on Protestantism and touch towards Protestantism and the senses in school contexts. As the project began to take form in its initial stages, I set out to write a twenty-page paper relating to the topic of Protestant influence on the sensory environments of secular education in the United States at a primary and secondary level. Through exploring sources including religious studies professor Tracy Fessenden's *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* and religion professor Leigh Eric Schmidt's *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment*, I hypothesized that anti-ritual sentiment related to anti-Catholic bias along with prioritization of reading in early United States Protestantism contribute to quietness and stillness as defining features of United States secular educational environments. Through this research process, I found some validity in aspects of my hypothesis, though I also found multiple elements of it that are either too complicated to be untangled in a nine-week project or are simply not supported. In the resulting paper, I present my findings, including where I found my initial assumptions to be wrong or lacking nuance. My paper begins with a positionality statement articulating how my personal experiences and positions within the structures of power I discuss, including race and class, inevitably influence the perspectives I bring to the topics I explore. In summary, I am white, come from an upper-middle class family, and have had consistent access to quality educational resources. I next include a vignette in narrative form portraying some of my experiences in secondary school. This section illustrates my experiences with enforced stillness and quietness in primary and secondary school settings in the United States which I explore in relation to Protestantism. I then articulate how Fessenden's work portraying how Protestantism invisibly shapes United States secularism provides a basis of understanding for how Protestantism influences contexts generally understood to be secular, including United States public schools. I include a limited exploration of how the influence of Protestantism may even reach into contexts such as Catholic schools through state regulations. I found some merit in this assertion through this exploration, but I also found nuances in the topic that I had not considered and are beyond this scope of this project. I then explored a comparison between philosopher Michelle Foucault's analysis of a primary school description from Catholic Saint Jean Baptiste LaSalle in Foucault's 1975 work *Discipline and Punish* and elements of United States primary and secondary schools. I initially saw connections between this example and my understanding of anti-Catholic bias and corresponding anti-ritual sentiment in some forms of Protestantism, but a more thorough investigation revealed flaws in my logic. I concluded that future versions of this project would discard this section. I then consider how dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild's and educator and feminist writer bell hooks' articulations of how conceptualizations of the mind and body as separate, which Gottschild articulates as a characteristic of white Protestantism, may contribute to the sensory experiences in United States educational settings that I consider. I found support for the idea that Protestantism may contribute to the centrality of stillness and quietness to United States primary and secondary school experiences through this lens. I then considered how Schmidt's concepts relating to Christianity and the senses may apply to the topics I explore, but through this exploration I primarily discovered a lack of nuance in the understanding I carried with me into this project relating to the nature of 'ritual.' Throughout this project, I found elements of white Protestantism and anti-Blackness to be entangled in complex ways that sometimes supported but also frequently disproved or complicated my assumptions relating stillness, quietness, the senses, and United States primary and secondary schools. I conclude my paper with a consideration of how the explorations I engaged in connect to works in the field of critical pedagogy in education by Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire and bell hooks. I articulate connections between the concepts I consider in relation to enforced stillness and quietness in United States primary and secondary school settings and these scholars' articulations of how education can be designed to be liberating. I found some of the ideas I carried into this project to be promising, but I also found many that were not supported. Through this research process, I established a basis of understanding and knowledge which I could use to pursue the topics I considered to produce future work that would be meaningful and nuanced.

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