

# Eversley studies racial and sexual identities

## Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

Sexuality and race are topics that many don't feel comfortable talking about. Yet they form part of our daily lives, and trying to ignore them will not help us in dealing with these touchy and sometimes divisive issues in our society. For that very reason, we need more scholarship on them, so we can understand them better and try to untangle their complexities.

One scholar who has spent her professional career researching the issues of sexuality and race is Dr. Shelly Eversley. "Sexuality and race inform perspective," explains Eversley.

This Chicago native became interested in these issues early on as a college student. When asked how her own students feel when talking about them, she responds, "Probably all of my students are relieved and excited to explore the idea that identity can be fluid, that they can be more than one thing at one time, that they can be an Asian American student who likes hip hop, or that they can be a white student who likes classical music and jazz, or that somehow their taste don't really inform everything about a singular identity. That they can be many, many things at one time, and I think that's true about the writers and artists that I teach," says Eversley.

She also thinks that, although these issues can be divisive, it doesn't mean they can't help students understand what they have in common. "I hope that they discover we are all connected. That our identities are shared, especially because we are in the classroom together reading the same texts so that our common knowledge informs who we are as much as our race, as much as our sexuality, as much as our genders."

Eversley obtained her bachelor's degree from Columbia University and her master's and doctoral degrees in English from John Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. Today she is an Associate Professor in the Department of English in the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the City University of New York.

When confronted with the fear people have of talking about race, she has an explanation. "A lot of



Dr. Eversley in her office.

times people are afraid to talk about race because they're afraid to lose an identity that they think is so fundamental to who they are. I think that if we could actually imagine the new, imagine a humanity in which all of us counted equally, we would be excited about that new identity," she says.

She further thinks that we should emphasize what we have in common. "Being able to know that with our differences, our particulars, we still share something that's incredibly universal, and that universality, I think, is love, which is a very, very powerful action. It's an action that requires a lot of bravery, a lot of courage in the face of fear and uncertainty."

Eversley finds this courage in African American literature. "African American literature is not in any way separate from the progress and the shifts and the

transitions in any other kind of literature. They're all engaging each other. For instance, Ralph Ellison, the African American novelist, is in the same room with Jack Kerouac, the white American novelist, and they're in the same room with Charlie Parker, the jazz musician, and they're all informed by jazz music, and their art shows that."

She also sees that ambivalence has its place in how we perceive art. "The idea that you can feel more than one way at the same time gets back to that question of authenticity that somehow an African American book is in a "black" section of a bookstore, and that does suggest a kind of segregation that's problematic. On the other hand, people going into the bookstore might not be able to discover a book by an African American author unless they see it. And that is a deeper problem in the education

system and in the systems of advertising and politics as we know them," says Eversley.

Feminism has also been an area that she has studied, and she does not see that movement as a black and white one. "I do not think feminism is exclusive to women or people of color, and I'm proud to claim that label, feminism. Especially since the rise of the third wave of feminism in the 70's and 80's into the 90's, there have been a lot of tensions between men and women in the African American community about the importance of feminism," she explains.

Eversley considers that to understand the issues of one race you can't dismiss the issues of others. "I think race applies to everyone, and I think that there's a lot of anxiety about racial identity in the U.S., and it's easy to look at African Americans as the object of study, to think about their own racial identity. For instance, you can't really imagine your whiteness or white privilege without contrasting it to blackness or African American identity, so it doesn't surprise me at all that an author would focus on, say, African American identity as a way to either avoid talking about the constructions of whiteness or to find a way to explore those very constructions of whiteness."

When teaching her courses, Eversley looks at the books that changed her life. "I had to find my way into books because I needed to find an alternate world, I needed to find joy somewhere, I needed to find safety somewhere, I needed to find answers about why people acted the way they did. At the same time, it also taught me about the strength of my own people, my African American legacy, my Caribbean legacy, my American legacy, my female legacy. I learned that in books, and it became real because I could recognize it in people around me."

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