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# PLENARY

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## Returning to the Archive

Re-imagining The Tower of Babel and  
Pentecost

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[Pentecost] encapsulates the notion that no finite or conditioned reality can claim to have reached its destiny. The movement of every existent to its destiny (full realization of its potentialities) remains forever incomplete because it remains “rooted” in the abyss of divine freedom. Every end has only one option: to be a new beginning.

—Nimi Wariboko, *The Pentecostal Principle* (2012, 1)

### THE ARCHIVE AS SANCTUARY

I am incurably religious — not superstitious and self-righteous — but religiously curious and compulsively committed to understanding what “truths” might be discovered in the study of religious traditions and experiences. Therefore, it is no accident that most of my scholarship has been devoted in some form or the other to Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr. and the noble traditions that formed and inspired them. The fact is that while my scholarship has sought to maintain the highest standards of rational and analytic integrity and protocol, there is an element of awe and a sense of calling to these figures and movements of people in African American religious and moral traditions that have brought me again and again to the Archive.

It is precisely because I am religious that I need also to begin with a confession. I am compelled to share a secret that I have kept close until now, that is, in my vocation of learning, editing, transcribing, publishing, and recording for posterity, the Archive is my sanctuary. It is the space where I return again and again in search of the *arkhé*, “the beginning.” It was Jacques Derrida who called this force of habit, “archive fever.” He describes it in this manner, “It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for return to the most archaic place of absolute *commencement*” (Derrida 2017, 1; italics added). In other words, as we return to the Archive (the beginning), I am also commencing, beginning again. We are all involved in and indicted by what James Baldwin called, *this endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity* (1993, 98).

As a graduate student at Boston University, and even now, when I enter the Gotlieb Archival Research Center, this sense of *religiousness* — homesickness, nostalgia, irrepressible desire — visits me in memories of librarians, information providers, scholars, activists, colleagues and so many others who have been my guides into this sacred space of knowing, believing and contemplation. I remember well sitting for nearly eight years (1980–1988) in the major research area of the Center, a long rectangular room with tables, white gloves and original manuscripts, photographs and other artifacts from the King and Thurman collections. It is a site of memory; and “memory,” writes William Faulkner, “believes before knowing remembers. Believes longer than recollects, longer than knowing even wonders” (1990, 119).

Even today when I enter the room, I am immediately drawn to the huge portrait on the back wall of the archangel Uriel, depicted as a battle-ready sentry guarding heaven’s gates. The piece is entitled, “Uriel Standing in the Sun” by the early nineteenth-century American history painter Washington Allston (1779–1843), a friend of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and Benjamin Haydon. Allston’s painting is a chromatically brilliant vision of the archangel guarding heaven against Satanic revolt. Inspired by Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, it seems almost real. Uriel is the most mysterious of the archangels; unlike Michael, Raphael, and Gabriel, he eludes clear definition. Over the centuries, he is depicted in various ways as protector and guardian. One tradition speaks of him as the archangel who illuminates our minds with information, ideas, epiphanies, and insights. Other traditions associate him with Metatron, an arch-

angel known in Hebrew religious traditions as the Recording Angel or the Scribe of Heaven. I often identify him as “the Angel with the Flaming Sword” set outside Eden to insure that imposters do not unscrupulously return to the garden (the *arkhé*, the beginning); rather, entry is only permitted for the true in heart who are willing to be cut asunder and dismembered by his burning sword, the price exacted for knowledge, in sum, for return to the beginning, the *Archive*.<sup>1</sup> *We are ways commencing, beginning again.*

This latter description of Uriel best describes my relationship with this powerful symbol that sits guard over the Archive and my longing to return to what is closest to the beginning and perhaps to get a glimpse of treasures lost, forgotten, and mis-remembered. If Derrida is correct, it is in this sense that *archeology trumps the archive* by recovering the original artifact; it is when “the *arkhē* appears in the nude, without the archive” (2017, 91). Primary documents don’t lie, although they may contain lies, or sometimes they don’t tell the whole truth, or they illumine “truths” in different ways; they can be elusive and open to different perspectives. In these documents you see varnished “truths” that puzzle, befuddle, and send us back again into unknown territory with incomplete maps of histories, empires, civilizations, and everyday peoples lost to memory. There are spins, turns, biases, subjective interpretations that are illumined in our quests for knowledge, meaning and hopefully, patterns of human enterprise that help us better understand who we are and what we are called to be and do in the present. One cannot be a historian, a decent religious scholar or theologian without immersing oneself in primary documents, spending unhurried hours in archives. I think all of us who serve at the behest of the law and authority of the Library and Archive are really, at heart, *archeologists of knowledge; and curators of materials that are given for reinterpretation of meaning, signs, symbols, memories, and values.*

It is within this context of Atla’s mission “to promote worldwide scholarly communication in religion and theology by advancing the work of libraries and related information providers” that I am honored to share in this year’s annual meeting. I applaud your important work with networks of institutions and individuals committed to returning to the Archive for generations past and those yet to be born. This is not only important work, but it is also absolutely essential for our missions as we enter the third decade of this century. We are guardians, protectors, archeologists, and curators of the Archive.

## **WHO, NOW, WILL SHAPE THE MEANING OF AMERICA?**

Your work is so important because in each epoch of human constructions of civilization, we must pay close attention to context where change is constant and calls forth new meanings and configurations of history and memory. It is a vocation that demands more than technical skills and competencies, but the most authentic sense of who we are and how we respond to new moments in our individual and collective lives to social historical narratives that meet us at the intersections of worlds colliding.

We are all aware of the circling processes of social change that are sweeping across the globe like whirlwinds of fire.<sup>2</sup> (The fire is burning, and the wind is blowing). Something is happening in our world that we are not quite able to name. Whether it is manifested in Ukraine, the Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Paris, Palestine, Israel, Russia, India, Pakistan, North Korea, South Korea, India, China, Guatemala, El Salvador, Venezuela, or the United States of America—we know that there is something on the horizon that is larger than our own particular histories and memories: indeed, the ground has shifted! The ways we have thought about power, sovereignty, geopolitical territorialism, business, communication, the environment, values, culture, religion, and theology are changing as well.

Here within the United States of America, there are some ominous signs on the horizon: rapid vigilantism, gun violence, increased incidences of mental illness, a resurgence and re-visitation of an old and ugly ghost that haunts the American House that race built. This old ghost shows up everywhere in the banning of books, authoritarian campaigns of anti-trans, anti-choice, anti-immigration, disinformation — reconstructing and reconfiguring the Archive! We have become a veritable American Tower of Babel.

As we deal with the anxiety, anguish, and turmoil associated with our national reckoning with the authority and power of the Archive, I would like to ask the question differently, as it was raised by the late neoconservative clergyman Richard John Neuhaus nearly forty years ago, “Who, now, will shape the meaning of America?”<sup>3</sup> Neuhaus is an odd choice for raising this question, because his interrogative had more to do with his own fear that the religious public square was being overtaken by secular liberalism which imperiled democratic freedoms. He thought it was necessary and possible to hold classical liberal political ideals in tension with religious faith—that discussion is still alive and relevant. Neuhaus suggested that Catholics, Lutherans,

and evangelicals were viable candidates for “re-articulating a deeper tradition of American political thought” (Rose 2016). Underlying his public rhetoric was a strong indictment of what he saw as a *scattering* of basic American values that were being hijacked by Jerry Falwell and others of the Righteous Right — a drama that continues to this day.

A decade after Neuhaus’s declaration, the late historian, Arthur Schlesinger, arguably one of the most devout liberals of his era, wrote a stunning short essay, *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (1998). He likewise suggested that there was an unsettling public conversation in the land of the free and the home of the brave. He described the situation as the “disuniting of America.” His reflections on a multi-cultural society warned of what he perceived as a threat to national identity and cherished customs. He wrote:

The national ideal had once been *e pluribus unum*. Are we now to belittle *unum* and glorify *pluribus*? Will the center hold? or will the melting pot yield to the Tower of Babel? (Schlesinger 1998, 22)

*Will the center hold*, or should we or can we have more than one center or should we do away with centers altogether? Are we now an American Tower of Babel? Thirty years later, there is a revival of conservative Christian nationalist resistance movements that are pushing back on the gains of earlier progressive movements that will continue to be a part of the debate on religious and theological education in this nation and throughout the world. These movements are calling for a return to a glorious American past of family values and sexual purity that never really existed. Camouflaged in the language of religious freedom, fears of socialism, and second amendment rights, some are calling for a “Benedict option” and the reconstitution of an old story of individual rights based on white supremacist logic and the dismantling of the fragile gains of diversity, inclusion, and equity (Dreher 2018). Thus, I am asking Neuhaus’s question again today as we stand at intersections where worlds are colliding, “Who, now, will shape the meaning, not only of America, but of the world?” As a way of reflecting on this question, I think that more than ever we need to return to the story of the Tower of Babel.

## THE AMERICAN TOWER OF BABEL

The Story of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11) is well known. Biblical commentators have tended to treat it as “a mythical or legendary

account of the breaking up of the [premodern] unity of humankind into separate communities, distinguished and isolated by differences of language ... The story reflects ... the impression made on Semitic nomads by the imposing monuments of Babylonian civilization” (Skinner 1910, 223).<sup>4</sup> The story of Babel also serves as a prologue, an introduction to the story of Abraham and Sarah who represent the new faithfulness required by God in the extension of the human family — a family through which God will correct the damage of Babel and bless the nations of the earth. The Story of Babel ends with the scattering of the builders of the Tower; and immediately we are taken to the story of Abraham and Sarah who are also part of God’s scattering of the seed (Gen. 12:1–3; Gen. 13:14–17).

Why does God scatter the builders? Howard Thurman offers some insight into this enigma:

The judgment of God appears again and again in the process of history, dramatized by the rise and fall of peoples who have neglected to build their civilizations towards the higher ends of ethical responsibility ... the diabolical character of the enterprise itself destroys the vehicle so that finally the energies are scattered and dissipated. (Thurman 1948, 230)

The editors of the story play on the Hebrew word, *balal*, which means to “mix” or “confuse.” In this respect, this ancient Hebrew story of the building of the city and the tower is an act of *signifyin’* against Babylon, their oppressor. The legend explains for them why Babylon fell; it is an explanation of the destruction of this oppressive civilization whose arrogance (superbia) was interrupted by God’s righteousness. *The oppressed always find a way to signify on their oppressors.*

## THE TOWER AND BABEL AS NATIONAL IMAGINARY

The Tower of Babel has a long and uneven reception history of “imagined communities” that involve the constitution of national identities through the promotion of certain meanings and the subordination of other meanings and social groups within the nation-state.<sup>5</sup> Scholars like Anthony Smith and Tristan Major argue that the core of the Babel Story is “ethnicity” which resides in “myths, memories, values and symbols” (Major 2021, 10).

The Tower of Babel narrative is preceded by The Table of Nations, a tripartite division of the origins of nations of the world after the Flood (Gen. 10). Noah’s three sons, Japheth, Shem, and Ham, repre-

sent the new beginning after the Flood. Over the centuries, Shem's lineage came to correspond with Asia; Ham's with Libya or Africa; and Japheth's with Europe. Roman ethnocentrism from the fourth century CE encouraged and continued this discrimination against non-European peoples. This tripartite configuration of nations was cemented by the fifth century as well as the moral and theological perceptions of each grouping. In other words, "ethnocentricity of European, and later Christian, superiority, inherited from classical ethnography, were appropriated, and re-enforced by the interpretations of Genesis 10–11" (Major 2021, 19).<sup>6</sup>

I would like to suggest The Tower of Babel is an inherited set of symbols, signs and metaphors that operates as a part of a "national imaginary" that communicates to its adherents an assault on their meaning, essence, and identity. An imaginary is a socially constructed reality that serves as the basis for social and cultural cohesion and identity. Thus, the imaginary of The American Tower of Babel has insinuated itself into the very fiber of American consciousness, signifying who is in and who is out—the sons and daughters of Shem and Ham are perennial outsiders, never quite allowed to participate in the rewards and blessings of the empire, unless they can become "white."

### **BECOMING AND ACTING "WHITE"**

In *The Ground Has Shifted* (2016), I tell the story of how I learned to "act White." My academic performance in high school was very poor. In fact, I am sure I was in the last quadrant of the 1969 graduating class of Dunbar Vocational High School in Chicago. Yet, I enjoyed writing and during the end of my senior year, my homeroom teacher found an internship for me in a downtown advertising agency. Everyone in the agency except me, of course, was White and suburban. It was my introduction to the professional and socially constructed White world in which I experienced the latent characteristics of what Thandeka (1999) describes as "learning to be white." It took a major adjustment (and some more adjustment), but after several months, I learned "to be White." What an incredible power it conferred upon me as I learned what to say to the secretaries to make them and me feel comfortable as I entered the office; or how to speak to the white men about baseball at the coffee station and so on. I wore the mask, better, over time the mask wore me. But as I learned the power and danger of the mask, I learned to adjust it to various situations! So much was

involved in my performance—affections, speech, mannerisms, and dress—that I learned to consciously change my habits and practices to accommodate this new environment where everyone was watching. I mention this year-long episode to suggest that there was never a moment when I forgot that I was Black (nor did they), but as long as I was acting and talking “White” there was little or no tension. Indeed, there was a lot of paternalism and unmistakable racism, but in my shape-shifting Rodney King fantasia, we all got along. I identified as “White” in my shamed-racialized-underclass-Black-male-body, but I was never White, and neither were they. We were playing parts imputed to us from a larger socio-political, historical dramatic imaginary.

It was not until I was drafted into the US Army and became a born-again evangelical through the Navigators Ministries that I was able to overcome this inherited script of being “White in Black skin.” Sadly, even this conversion did not wipe away my s(k)in and my inner torment; nor did it get my name written in the book of life. I always felt strange, disoriented, and not-at-home in my body. It was not until I returned to the old hood from the army and tried to “save” one of my buddies that I realized that I had not escaped the lake of fire. He resisted and stated, “Damn, man, you don’ turned white!” Yes, that’s right, I had turned into someone else and was looking self-assured and talking like the Fuller Cosmetics man—I had become a witness! I often remark that I was a “White evangelical” until I got saved—after I figured out that the second death, where the beast and the false prophets are, is the domain that James Baldwin called “being white and other lies” (Baldwin, 1984).

In our context, we clearly see the ways in which national identity as imaginary refers to our personal identities and fidelity to the unfulfilled promise of equality that Benedict Anderson calls “ghostly national imaginings” (quoted in Holland 2000, 22). These are imaginings enshrouded in death and anonymity like the quasi-religious response that we offer at the tombs of unknown soldiers — a universal transcendental, like “the melting pot,” that everyone can believe in without attending to the complex historical and social realities of religious, ethnic, and racial centrism, death, social misery and displacement.

### ***THEOLOGICAL DISPLACEMENT OF THE BODY***

This theological displacement, being alienated from one’s body, land, and history, according to Willie James Jennings, began as a “theo-



logical error” in the Christian imagination as early as the fifteenth century during the European colonization of “nonwhite peoples.” Salvation, therefore, for Black and other nonwhite people, was schematized on a grand scale of election in which whiteness represents “high salvific possibility, rooted in the signs of movement towards God (for example, cleanliness, intelligence, obedience, social hierarchy, and advancement in civilization).” But Black bodies, along with Jews and Moors, were relegated to the lowest region of salvific possibility, because “Black indicates doubt, uncertainty and opacity of saving effects” (Jennings 2011, 35–36).

Before the sophisticated, analytic probing of contemporary Black theologians like Jennings, Howard Thurman in his classic work, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1996), demonstrated how theological presuppositions were linked to ocular metaphors that served as cultural resources in the segregation of African Americans. At the heart of the following quote is Thurman’s critical observation that relates cultural aesthetics to religion, morality, and law:

Given segregation as a factor determining relations, the resources of the environment are made into instruments to enforce the artificial position. Most of the accepted social behavior-patterns assume segregation to be normal — if normal then, correct; if correct, then moral; if moral, then religious. Religion is thus made a defender and guarantor of the presumptions. God, for all practical purposes, is imaged as an elderly, benign white man, seated on a white throne, with bright, white light emanating from his countenance. Angels are blonds and brunets suspended in the air around his throne to be his messengers and execute his purposes. Satan is viewed as being red with the glow of fire. But the imps, the messengers of the devil, are black. The phrase “black as an imp” is a stereotype. The implications of such a view are simply fantastic in the intensity of their tragedy. Doomed on earth to a fixed and unremitting status of inferiority, of which segregation is symbolic, and at the same time cut off from the hope that the Creator intended it otherwise, those who are thus victimized are stripped of all social protection. It is vicious and thoroughly despicable to rationalize this position, the product of a fear that is as sordid as it is unscrupulous, into acceptance. Under such circumstances there is but a step from being despised to despising oneself. (Thurman 1996, 43–44)

## EUROPE AND THE IMAGINARY TOWER OF BABEL

There is another step. We cannot begin the process of undoing the damage of the American Tower of Babel until we demystify the transnational imaginary of Europe. England, America’s mother country

that sits at the heart of many cultures, many languages, many faces of otherness, all extracted from a world empire that nervously negotiates its place in this geographical and imaginary space called Europe, has much to teach us about Babel.

Outside the south door of York Minster Cathedral, in Yorkshire, there is a statue of a seated man. He looks pensively at the sword he holds, point down, in his left hand. The tip has broken off. The sword has become a cross. The man represented is Flavius Valerius Aurelius Constantinus, who on July 25, 306 CE, was declared Emperor of Rome within a few yards of his modern statue. He symbolizes the conversion of Rome to Christianity, the man who would be declared both a saint and a god after his death. On the base of the statue are the words “Constantine. By this sign conquer”.<sup>7</sup> This is one of the defining moments in the history of Western civilization: the vision that led Constantine to victory at the battle of Saxa Rubra, when his forces defeated those of one of his rival emperors, Maxentius. This in turn led to Constantine’s acceptance of Christianity and his imposition of it on the whole Roman Empire (Vinzent 2023).

It appears that the Church has been the harbinger of empire since, and Europe, of course, has been its center. Eurocentrism is about more than the rise of the Enlightenment as age of rationalism and its conjunct twin, necessity. Rather, Europe is also a religious idea, a mythology, an imaginary place founded on the conquest of other civilizations. My friend Cornel West is correct when calls for the “demystification of the idea of Europe” as a first step in critical multicultural discourse. He says, “... the only way to get beyond a paralyzing either/or perspective is to take a look at this idea of Europe, the very idea of Europe as an ideological construct” (West and Brown 1993, S148).<sup>8</sup>

Willie Jennings has identified the re-narrating of the Christian doctrine of creation as an urgent and critical work of contemporary scholars who are concerned with the insidious ways racial ontology both confers and wheedles itself into nationalistic and cultural imaginaries. He suggests that in the hegemonic project of colonialism, Europeans “performed a deeply theological act that mirrored the identity and action of God in creating” (Jennings 2011, 60). In assuming the role of a divine creative council, they not only defined and subjugated races, but also transitioned and reconfigured land and territory as part of the domain of the project of whiteness. He argues, “Theorists and theories of race will not touch the ground until

they reckon with the foundations of racial imaginings in the deployment of an altered theological vision of creation. We must narrate not only the alteration of bodies, but of space itself” (Jennings 2011, 63)

Like all declining civilizations, Europe built a great tower to the heavens. *Perhaps the Builders of Babel err not because they try to reach the heavens, but because they neglect the weightier role of ethical responsibility to many diverse peoples, animals, water, and plants that make up this breathing planet.* My point, however, is not to isolate Europe as a geographical territory, but as idea, as myth come-to-life and sanctioned by the power of religion, by Christianity. Historical analysis of the idea of Europe can demystify Europe and create a new starting point for the conversation on diversity, pluralism, and multiculturalism. By performing a critical analysis of multiculturalism that interrogates hegemonic elision of the idea of Europe, we expose Eurocentrism as a false idea.

This is the kind of critical curating that has the potential to shift the reformist paradigm that currently surrounds the debate on diversity more critical and expansive; one that honors diversity, plurality, and harmonic possibilities not just of race, class, gender and the usual candidates, but of religion itself. Again, as protectors, guardians, archeologists, and curators of the Archive, Atla’s mission reaches back into our past and calls us forward to a new moment—to begin again in the Archive. It is our task to secure its treasures, but as curators we must also *wake up the dead*, i.e., to wake up subjectivity and to examine its relation to an *imaginary national identity*. In respect to subjectivity, I am concerned with notions of identity, agency, otherness, and human flourishing. How do we understand our roles in celebrating creativity, diversity, inclusion, and equity? [We are actors on a stage with scripts and languages that have been given to us to perform]. So, how do we wake up and “undo the damage of Babel”?

## **UNDOING THE DAMAGE OF BABEL: PENTECOST RE-IMAGINED**

The story of Babel is a story about the concentration of power through the facility of language and speech—*communication*.<sup>9</sup> Scholars have also made a connection between the well-known stories of the Tower of Babel and Pentecost (the festival of the harvest). But even the typology of Babel and Pentecost has perpetuated the supremacy of Christian faith and the role of empire since Augustine (354–430 CE) and Pope Gregory the Great (540–604 CE). The idea of “unity in diver-

sity” is universalized under the theological principle of “one Lord, one faith and one baptism” (Major 2021, 71–72).

So, what might a reimagined Pentecostal symbol look like in the twenty-first century? How might it speak to the many languages, the many nations, the many religions, the many tongues spoken by those who have had to live under the colonizing power of the European hegemonic trope of “unity in diversity”? What are the implications for the redefinition of the distribution of certain shares or spaces among certain groups whom Jacques Rancière calls “that of the part of those who have no part” (Rancière 1999, 29–30; see also Jacobs 2015). Here the work of Nimi Wariboko, Keri Day, and others provide some clues (Day 2022; Wariboko 2012). Wariboko suggests that

[Pentecost] encapsulates the notion that no finite or conditioned reality can claim to have reached its destiny. The movement of every existent to its destiny (full realization of its potentialities) remains forever incompletable because it remains “rooted” in the abyss of divine freedom. Every end has only one option: to be a new beginning. (Wariboko 2012, 1).

For Keri Day, Pentecost re-imagined is situated in a “democracy to come”, an “advent”, (“return” and “commencement”); not “the linear, evolutionary, progressive process in which democracy is destined to a more perfect way within history”, but rather by peoples “who through their practices and deliberations, are willing to become steadily democratized, that is, to become humanized by encountering others” (Day 2022, 152–153). In other words, Pentecost does not end with the apostles of the early church; rather it symbolizes a new beginning in every epoch and every time when those who have no part dare to speak. Can the subaltern speak? Yes! (Spivak 1988; Morris 2010) We know from recent movements like pro-choice, Black Lives Matter, Pan-Asian Movements, LatinX Movements, LGBTQ Movements and Say Her Name, that these bodies dare to speak, break, shift, and redefine the spaces they have been assigned in “the house that race built” (Lubiano, 1998). And it is precisely because they dare to speak that they reveal the process of equality because only a free human can speak (Rancière 1999, 29–30; see also Fluker, 2018).

Normally the “tongues of fire” symbolism is interpreted primarily as a blessing upon the people at Pentecost, but Blaine Charette argues that the symbol of “tongues of fire” is also “divine judgment upon the disobedient” (Charette 2005, 173).<sup>10</sup> Pentecost is harvest time, when all things come together for the next scattering, because the Lord of the harvest is always scattering seeds, collecting them, and making

ready for harvest where the wheat and chaff are separated and the latter is thrown into the fire.

A reimagined vision of Pentecost, from this perspective, is a symbol or a sign that points the liberating power of languages and free speech that promote the Divine's will for just and ennobling voices as diverse as creation. The erasure of history through the banning of books in our schools and libraries are blatant examples of this vicious assault to create one language. We hear the chants and screams of "Let's make America great again!" I am so afraid, my friends, that this campaign for a nostalgic American past that never truly existed is the language of the desperate and derelict builders of the American Tower of Babel! *Greatness is conditional*. On August 28, 1963, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. shared his Pentecostal vision of what it would mean for America to be a great nation. His dream, he declared, was "deeply rooted in the American dream. One day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men [sic] are created equal.'" Yet, he added the most important condition for the realization of this dream. He said, "When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men [sic] — yes, Black men [sic] as well as white men [sic] — would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." He added, "If America is to be a great nation," King emphasized, "this must be true."

## **NEW BEGINNINGS: CURATING THE ARCHIVE**

The Pentecost Story is not just a story of speaking in tongues—it is a story of diversity, inclusion, equity, belonging and the broadening vision of the *community*. It is an old story. It is a story of new beginnings, of return to the Archive. Pentecost and prophecy go hand in hand. Whenever the Spirit of Pentecost is among the people, the Wind blows, the Fire burns, and they prophesy! And whenever we prophesy, things change.

It is a dangerous story. It is a story that will make some people uneasy, especially those who are content to see "business as usual" in America, in the ravaged countries of Africa, in Latin America, in Southeast Asia, in the Middle East, in the core of our nation's inner

cities, and in our religious communities. But if we are to be true to this story, then it is important that we understand that Pentecost is not for sentimentalists and “pop patriots.” It is not an isolated episode in the chronicles of American history; rather it is the power to continue the struggle against racism, sexism, cis-genderism, economic injustice, and all forms of oppression that eat away at the heart of our body politic like an insidious cancer. It is a call for “new beginnings.” It is a call for a new vanguard of visionaries who are willing to go into the “no-trespassing zones” of this world system and to declare boldly and courageously that the future of our communities, our nation, and indeed the world, hinges on spiritual and moral foundations.

To accept the radical implications of a re-imagined Pentecost means that we can no longer feign ignorance and invisibility regarding the political and economic scenarios that determine our corporate destiny. A new world is being born. All around us there is evidence that a changing of the guard is taking place. In Africa, in Latin America, in the Middle East, in Southeast Asia, in Russia, Ukraine, and within the context of American society significant changes are taking place that are having far-reaching effects on the way we do business—the ways in which we “promote worldwide scholarly communication in religion and theology by advancing the work of libraries and related information providers.” Business cannot go on as usual. We must make new beginnings.

For organizations like Atla, I recommend returning to the Archive as a spiraling community of discourse and practice with emphasis on re-curating or re-imagining the curatorial processes of identifying “the gaps” in history and memory and initiating and sustaining democratic spaces along the lines that Keri Day suggests above. Such processes will need to take seriously issues of *authoritorial* practices that begin with listening, looking, and learning from others who have been erased, excluded, and penalized through the vicious and eviscerating conquests of The American Tower of Babel; and reimagining what a Pentecostal flourishing of other cultures, languages and worlds of meaning-making might look like in your midst. These communities will engage in re-membering, re-telling and re-living narratives of nationalistic and cultural imaginaries, as Jennings addresses above. While space does not allow for a thorough discussion of this re-imagining, I suggest a three-fold performance of *bricolage*, i.e., beginning with what is at hand, what history and memory pres-

ents to us in this ambiguous and contingent present. As *bricoleurs*, we must *create and cultivate democratic spaces in the Archive*.

This three-fold movement involves *congregating*, *conjuring*, and *conspiring in common (s)* that I explored in *The Ground Has Shifted* (2016, 169–196). *Congregating (congregare)* — *gathering, binding, and coming together* — involves *repenting* by rethinking, regretting, running away *from the old ghosts*, and running to new imagined futures by acknowledging and receiving the voices and visions of the new movements of the Spirit in our midst. Secondly, re-curating is akin to *conjuring*, the imaginative art of taking the materials at hand, that which experience gives us, and imaginatively refashioning them into creative tools for curating the Archive. This is what it means to *conspire*—to engage in a type of “spiritual bricolage,” a process of inclusion, exclusion, and reconfiguration of experience and language through an institutional commitment to diversity, inclusion, equity and belonging which becomes incarnate in public speech and action.

Finally, this approach is closer to a third way between essentialism and postmodern critiques. This does not mean that we ignore the analytical procedures and problems associated with modernist protocols of identity and agency; rather, the suggestion offers an opportunity to search for *common(s)* or temporary, experimental strategies that allow spaces for consideration of the questions of tool-making and the revisability of subjugating discourses in an ongoing, unfinished communicative project. This perspective has its merits with respect to a “practical universality,” that is, a quest for “unity in diversity” that is appreciative of the materiality of race, ethnicity and other forms of “othering” but does not inscribe ontological status to them; rather, it is in part a project fueled by communicative reason that points to, but is always under the scrutiny of, democratic eyes. The emphasis in such a democratic, communicative process is on continuing the conversation, not necessarily on finding the “right” answer(s) but engaging in pragmatic approaches that seek common understandings and solutions to questions of identity, otherness, and human and nonhuman flourishing that are not fixed, monocausal, and monolithic. In this respect, honoring, testing, listening to, arguing for, and producing multiple identifications created in a rhizomatic third space are the result of a long, arduous struggle to be and become — *devenir* (Deleuz and Guatarri 2004, 21; see also Barthes 1990; Butler 1999, 2009). This is both possible and necessary because we share *complex semiological languages* (signs that are open for sig-

nification and different readings because they cannot produce verbal utterances yet are ready to speak) that we produce and perform as actors in public spaces.

In many respects, being and becoming aware of the other as a fluid, unfixed reality is to encounter the deeper search for meaning and possibility that Toni Morrison calls *home*. Home, for Morrison, refers neither to the national imaginary that is the site of binary fixations of gendered, raced, and sexualized identities nor to the onto-eschatology of a new world order; rather, it is more like an unfixed *line of flight*, a spiraling, liberated circle, the embodied yearnings or the yearning embodiments for a sense of wholeness that is a journey toward a destination that is always beyond us, elusive and eliding. In this sense, it deterritorializes and seeks “social space that is psychically and physically safe,” where one is no longer “prey” (Morrison 1998, 10–11).

### **CHILDREN OF WIND AND FIRE**

We are the children of Pentecost — of Wind and Fire! Pentecost is the dream that continues, and no one can claim it as their own until they are willing “to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly before their God and the other.” The vision of the Pentecost is not a dream for cravens and cowards who hide behind false justifications for nonaction. It is not for spectators who stand on the sidelines and watch injustice and exploitation at a distance. It is not for those vain religionists who bury their heads in the sand like the proverbial ostrich and pretend that everything will be all right anyway. For when we bury our heads in the sand, we always leave more exposed than is hidden. It is not for greedy and insane puppeteers who hide behind the curtains of social fiction and manipulate the mindscape. It is not for sentimentalists and vain practitioners of an American Civil Religion who wave the flag higher than they wave the cross. It is a dream for those who are willing to join the ranks of men and women who are so inspired by the moral order of the universe and the sacredness of human personality that they are willing to make a track to the water’s edge and to lay their bodies down as a bridge for future generations to travel over into the land of freedom. It is a dream for those who are willing to stand alone when the crowds disperse, who will keep on moving against all odds, who will refuse to cling to falsehoods and lies that contradict reality, who believe



that truth has the final word in this universe, and that justice and love will endure forever.

This is the vision of Pentecost. A dream born out of a zeal for justice, nurtured in the praxis of struggle, refined in the fires of persecution, strengthened by the arms of faith, propelled by the vision of hope, enriched by the power of love, and set free by the truth that no lie can endure forever. We are heirs of the Promise that those went before us suffered and died for. We are the ones to whom they have passed the torch. We are the dreamers who must make this world a better place. We are the ones who must continue the story of Wind and Fire!

Dream on, dreamers! Dream in season and out of season. Dream in the valley and climb to the mountain and see God's Holy Vision for a just world! See new and greater visions of the New Reality that is coming into the world! See a new heaven and a new earth! See a new kind of people rising out the dungeons of hopelessness and powerlessness who dare to name their worlds in their own languages! See the rejected and dejected who sit in the shadows of darkness come forth as bearers of light and hope! See the humiliated and emaciated rise on wings like eagles, see them run and not get weary, see them walk and not faint! See the land of freedom and harmony for the peoples of the earth! See what the prophets saw! See what the Pentecost crowd saw!

If your vision is rooted in justice and truth, there is no power on earth that can nullify its mandate. Politics can't legislate it, poverty can't define it, racism can't destroy it, sexism can't vanquish it, water can't drown it, fire can't consume it, death can't kill it, hell can't hold it, greedy and insane men can't prevent it — for it lives in the mind of God who has said, "Yes!" And when God says, "Yes!" no power in the universe can say "No." Begin again! Hope again! Struggle again! There is a great camp meeting in the Archive!

## ENDNOTES

- 1 The allusion to the Angel with the Flaming Sword is a symbol used by Quaker George Fox, who describes his enlightening experience of union in this manner:
 

Now I was come up in the spirit through the Flaming Sword, into the Paradise of God. All things were new; and all the creation gave unto me another smell than before, beyond what words can utter. I knew nothing but pureness, and innocency, and righteousness; being renewed into the image of God by Christ Jesus, to the state of Adam, which he was in before he fell. The creation was opened to me, and it was showed me how all things had their names given them according to their nature and virtue (Fox 2006, 97).
- 2 A fire whirl or fire devil (sometimes referred to as a fire tornado) is a whirlwind induced by a fire and often (at least partially) composed of flame or ash.
- 3 See Richard John Neuhaus, “Who, Now, Will Shape the Meaning of America?”, Folder 107, Box: 36, Office of the President Records (J. Richard Chase), RG-02-006. Wheaton College Archives. See also Matthew Rose, “The Liberalism of Richard John Neuhaus” (2016).
- 4 Early twentieth-century commentators, like John Skinner, held that these were “primitive” peoples. I substituted this language to read “premodern.”
- 5 In many ways, these imaginaries are more dramaturgical than philosophical or analytical. See Bulhan (1985); Foucault (1977); Gramsci (1971); Rodriguez (2014); Townes (2007); Walsh (1996). Further, see my discussion in *The Ground has Shifted* (Fluker 2016).
- 6 Major writes, “The Table of Nations and the Tower of Babel, or rather the literary traditions that developed out these texts, aided in the demonization of non-European ethnic groups, as well as non-Christian and heterodox religious groups. The biblical texts provided a useful tool for separating out and discriminating against certain ethnic groups thought to have participated in the wickedness of Babel, but also identifying with an all-embracing Church that transcends diversity” (2021, 19).
- 7 See Eusebius’s *History of the Church* (1990) and *Life of Constantine* (1999). “By this sign, conquer” is a translation of the Latin *in hoc signo vinces*, a reference to a passage from

Eusebius's *Life of Constantine* (1999) which recounts how Constantine, leading his army, looked to the sun and saw a cross of light above it, along with the phrase “(ἐν) τούτῳ νίκα” (“In this, conquer”).

- 8 West references Denis Hay, *Europe: The Emergence of an Idea* (1957); and Henri Perenne, Mohammed and Charlemagne (1957) contending that Charlemagne is inconceivable without Mohammed, and “that Europe as a noun is called forth by the caliphs, the Arab caliphs. For what? Imposed unity. The first time ‘Europe’ was used denotatively occurs in 1458, by Pius II, five years after the Turkish takeover of Constantinople. As a long story, this can begin to demystify ‘Europe’” (West and Brown 1993, S148).
- 9 Walter Brueggemann suggests that “The narrative poses important issues about the practice and function of language. It suggests that all human language has become a language of disobedience.” (Brueggemann 1982, 97). Donald Gowan argues, “The more power they are able to concentrate the more harm they will be able to do to themselves and the world. So we ought to understand God’s decision (11.7-8) as not so much the punishment of sin as a preventive act to overt great potential evil” (Gowan 1988, 119).
- 10 Charette (2005) thinks that it is not a matter of small significance that Pentecost is celebrated along with the festival of the harvest, when all the seeds that were scattered in the early spring were collected and ready for harvest; he interprets this event as an allusion to Luke’s narrative structure and his use of the Parable of the Sower.

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