

# On Entanglement, Eradication, Obstruction, Discomfort, and Vigilance

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## Entanglement

Several years ago, before I came into my position as a professor of preaching and worship, I served as the pastor of a congregation in the northeast suburbs of Atlanta. On one side of the house where my family and I lived, there was a patch of English ivy that grew...and grew...and grew. It would not be stopped. The ivy spanned the entire side yard from the front of the house to the back. Only slightly more tame than the kudzu that runs amok all over the southeastern United States, this patch of English ivy was expansive, invasive, stubborn, and parasitic. Rooted deep. If you tried to walk through it, inevitably your feet would get tripped up. It found its way into the neighbor's yard and its greedy dark green leaves often began to climb up the side of my house. Ever-spreading. I had no idea how long ago it had been planted, or if it had been planted at all, only that it held what it must have thought was its rightful place. If it had been planted, I suspect that one little sprig did the trick. In any case, the house was then about twenty-five years old and now the ivy was everywhere, set in motion on a determined course to swallow everything in its path.

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In a one-on-one sermon feedback session, one of my students painfully relayed the hesitancy apparent in her sermon and why she seemed to have wilted in delivery. "What held you back?" I asked. She responded: "I have a hard time being me. I feel like I have to preach like the white students." Despite my well-meaning white professorial intentions to offer a syllabus representative of authors from many social and theological locations, despite the presence of diverse example sermons throughout the semester, despite my efforts to provide a wide lane for many expressions of preaching style, and despite the special section of the syllabus that articulated anti-racist aspirations, she voiced a critical truth: her emerging preaching identity was caught in the snares of a deep, wide, and deathly system. I was and am still complicit in harm: the classroom was a space in which my own identity and those of her classmates made her work more complex, and our school's two hundred-plus year history and culture tripped her up on the way to and in the pulpit.

All these entanglements of white supremacist pedagogy.  
Rooted deep.  
Ever-spreading.  
Wrapped tightly around us.

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Because the system encourages white people to deny the material, psychic, social, and political benefits of whiteness and works only when oppressive patterns are made difficult to name, even the practices of well-intended white people can result in making whites feel comfortable and "good" while simultaneously harming people of color.

## Eradication

I wanted the ivy gone. Surely, something else would be better there. But I was a busy pastor and a parent of a young child, with attention spread wide and time for the labor of eradicating a pesky plant thin. So, the best I could do was to occasionally go outside, put on work gloves, and dig up some of the thick, tangled networks of cables that rooted the ivy to the ground. I would pull them up until I could pull no further, unable to discern their source and where they terminated. I would cut off the pieces I could, as far back as I could cut them, as well as the tiny tips that were starting to make their way up the foundation of the house. Being averse to pesticides and recognizing the sheer volume of poison it would take to eliminate this ivy, I once tried mixing up a bio-safe, home-brewed concoction a YouTube video told me would kill weeds: dish soap and vinegar and salt, or something to that effect. I sprayed it on the leaves and waited. A few days later, I returned. I am certain I heard the leaves laugh at me. All of this was to no avail (perhaps I should have heeded Jesus's advice in Mark 9:29). I am told that one of the most effective ways to get rid of ivy is to hire a landscaping crew to come and carefully dig out every single root, as far down as it goes. Bring in the brown bodies; pay them to root out what they did not plant. That option didn't sound much better. So, I was limited to occasionally and hopelessly trimming it back with a weed eater. Keep it contained as best I could, lest it become too unsightly for my own tastes or those of my neighbors. Disheartened by the imperfect solutions in front of me, overwhelmed by the enormity of it all, the least I could do was to feebly keep it at bay for a season, to beat it back every now and then when it got too far out of line.



Outside the Early Center, formerly the Spence Library, on the campus of Union Presbyterian Seminary, Richmond, VA. Photo by the author.



Outside Westminster Hall, on the campus of Union Presbyterian Seminary, Richmond, VA. Photo by the author.

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After my first few years of teaching, I finally had the confidence to proclaim to my Introduction to Preaching class, "There is no textbook for this course. That might drive some of you mad. But we're going to gather around as many voices as we possibly can this semester." Surely, I thought, there was a different, more comprehensive way to combat my complicity. So, true to my word, the course texts came from every perspective I could manage to squeeze in. My job, as I saw it, was to convene and sustain a conversation around these many voices. And yet, given my previous experiences, I was keenly aware that even this progress was a simultaneous failure. While there might be a few successes, some students still would inevitably see themselves at the margins, even when I had tried to eradicate the very notion of a center. Some would not be able to imagine themselves as preachers in what they read or watched, or to see the richness of their tradition or culture or identity represented as worthy of study. The attempt to eliminate a center by one who comes with power and privilege is fraught with all kinds of unavoidable complexities.

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I have been thinking recently about how my whiteness is a site of power and privilege. I have been thinking about how, despite the fact that I define myself as a white anti-racist, I continue to incur white privilege, I continue to carry the weight of white racist training in my body. I notice how when I fight against white racism, it remains in place. I want you to pray for me so that I can become more aware of the complex and subtle ways that I am unfairly privileged because I am white in a society that privileges whiteness.

## Obstructions

While the ivy made for excellent ground cover – and perhaps that was its original purpose there, because this section of the yard was under a dense canopy of trees that made it difficult for other plant life to thrive – my desire for it to be gone was not just because it was unsightly. It began when I discovered that some of the drainage from the house's gutters ran just slightly underground away from the house and into the patch of ivy. But the ivy had become a menace. Oftentimes new ivy growth would snake into the drain pipe that carried water away from the house. If the ivy got too much in the way, crawling up into the drainpipe and obstructing it, there were bigger problems. Heavy rain meant that water would back up into the gutters and overflow, spilling out along the foundation of the house. If I let it go untended, eventually the water would seep into the crawlspace underneath the house. Whoever planted it thought they were doing something good; perhaps they thought it not only pragmatic but beautiful. But it was insidious all along, right from its very beginning. The will to take over lies in the plant's DNA. And it lived into its purpose, threatening everything in its path, right down to the foundation of the house.

Not only that, but the ivy's expansive cover meant that little, if anything else, could grow in the same territory. Monoculture, they call it. If, say, I had wanted to plant roses or tulips or daffodils or azaleas or wildflowers or to let it meadow or reintroduce native plants, even if those things had a chance to grow and bloom, the pervasive ivy would have quickly climbed, overtaken, and choked them.

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Every year, early in the semester, I ask my class, "How many of you have heard of Jarena Lee?" Every year, silence follows. I know this is going to happen. She wasn't part of the canon in the predominantly white seminary from which I received my MDiv, nor the Christian tradition in which I was brought up, educated,

and that I eventually left behind. There were other heroes that populated that monocultural canon, winding their way toward the theological house we occupied. I wonder what difference knowing about her would have made for the few women and few people of color who were my peers as a seminary student, many of whom were struggling to find their place in that school and fighting to find ways to live out their various calls. Lee's words were a revelation white surprise to me when I first read them as a doctoral student, exposing my ignorance and privilege, opening my vision in new ways to what she and others experience in the work of claiming their voice. I hope they are a revelation for my students, or even more, an opportunity to stand arm-in-arm with a foremother and ally in their own struggles. "We're talking about our sense of authority and voice for preaching today. Listen for how she justifies her call to preach," I say. "Think about how she talks back to those who would silence her."

I wonder what she might say to my student who faded....

I wonder what she might say to me.

Always lurking is the possibility that the constructions of my own teaching and scholarship become (or remain) obstructions to the flourishing of others' voices, threatening to envelop the house I am charged to help keep.

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Whiteness is the object of the white critic's inquiry but also the subject and the obstacle to his or her project, especially when it obstructs the difficult task of being skeptical of the need to have "arrived somewhere."

## Discomforts

I suppose that many homeowners have an experience at some point in which they ask themselves: "What was the previous owner thinking when they...?" I was no different. I did not plant this ivy. I would have never chosen for this to be here.

Or would I?

I comfort myself by telling myself I wouldn't have.

And yet it was still my responsibility.

I bought the house; I put in my investment. The people I love needed to be safe inside it. And not just my family, but whoever might live in the house after me. Upon reflection, I realize that I must have been satisfied with my maintenance approach; otherwise I would have done more. I wonder if I would do something different, if I had to do it all over again. If there is such a thing as "seller's remorse," this is the discomfort that follows me. I did not opt for a different approach. I did not seek wisdom elsewhere. I settled for the appearance of having the ivy carefully managed. I did not do enough to get rid of the ivy, to make way for something different, and to ensure the house was not threatened for whoever would own the house next.

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This year, I assigned a new essay for the first time, for the very first day of class. In it, Donyelle McCray describes her course "Is It a Sermon?" In doing so, McCray highlights historical voices who have engaged in types of proclamation that wouldn't fit traditional categories of what constitutes a sermon in Black (or white) churches. When students preach, she says, "[They] preach genre-bending sermons...Wonder and a sense of



Outside Watts Hall, on the campus of Union Presbyterian Seminary, Richmond, VA. Photo by the author.

possibility result from hearing a sermon in which the preacher speaks through her own voice and through the cello or dances part of his message or invites us to gaze at a painting that illumines some aspect of the sermon's argument." My students are already anxious about preaching, especially on day one. As we began our first day's work of attempting to define "preaching" and "sermons," surfacing the values we bring to this work and interrogating our assumptions, one student raised her hand and asked of McCray's essay, "How do we bend a genre when we haven't learned the genre yet?" It's one of those questions that, in the moment, fires off every protective (mal)formation I have had as a teacher-scholar. I was tempted to retreat with a simple response: "You're right! Learn the [white] rules first! Then break them!" And I confess that some version of this was what I said in years past to students yearning for something new to emerge, wrapped up in meeting my own responsibility to prepare students for certain formations of church, confident that those parameters were well within my grasp as the expert. Instead, this time I opted for a different and uncertain path. I told the student, "I don't know. Let's figure it out together." Even if it's uncomfortable, I hope this gives students the space to risk something new and transformative for all of us, in more ways than one.

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The [pedagogical] focus is not on white moral innocence or on allaying white guilt. Instead, critical hope offers a sort of assurance that discomfort will be an opportunity for profound learning about not only the other but also about oneself. Moreover, in emphasizing uncertainty and ambiguity, critical hope advances support in the embrace of vulnerability, which may lead to a willingness to stay in discomfort because discomfort can broaden the limits of one's frame of intelligibility... [C]ritical hope entails an ethical and political responsibility requiring constant vigilance in the process of change and becoming resulting in the potential for relations in solidarity with others.

## Vigilance

My homeowning experience and my early years in theological education have taught me the wisdom Applebaum shares. I will never "arrive" and it would be disingenuous to think that is possible. So amidst the enormity of the obstructions, amidst the imperfect and fleetingly successful attempts to stop the spread, and amidst the perpetually unfinished work to disentangle my teaching and scholarship from white supremacy, this is the commitment to which I aspire:

- Constant vigilance
- In the process of change and becoming
- Resulting in the potential for relations in solidarity
- With others

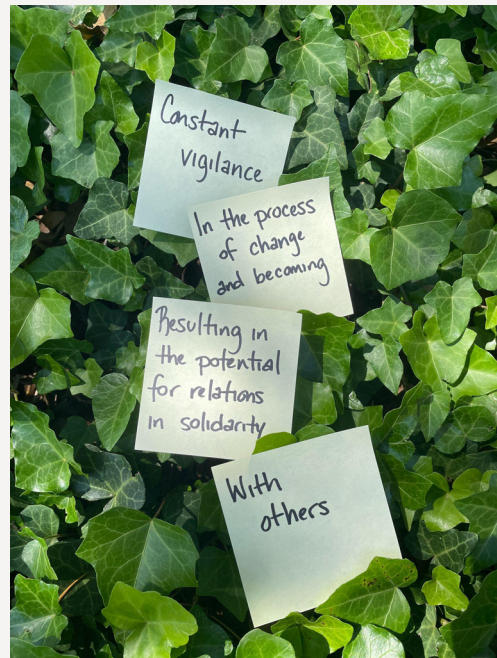


Photo by the author.

## Notes & Bibliography

<sup>1</sup>Barbara Applebaum, "Comforting Discomfort as Complicity: White Fragility and the Pursuit of Invulnerability," *Hypatia* 32, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 873.

<sup>2</sup>George Yancy, *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?* (London, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 3–4.

<sup>3</sup>Wabash Teaches, "Wabash Webinar: White Surprise – White People Don't Know About Racism?" October 15, 2020, YouTube video, 59:50, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QEhsF2PKP4Q>.

<sup>4</sup>Barbara Applebaum, "White Privilege/White Complicity: Connecting 'Benefiting From' to 'Contributing To,'" *Philosophy of Education Archive* (2008), 295.

<sup>5</sup>Donyelle McCray, "Playing in Church: Insights from the Boundaries of the Sermon Genre," *Liturgy* 36, no. 2 (April 2021): 11–17.

<sup>6</sup>Applebaum, "Comforting Discomfort as Complicity: White Fragility and the Pursuit of Invulnerability," 872. Applebaum describes "critical hope" this way, quoting Megan Boler (*Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* [New York: Routledge, 1999]):

Critical hope is distinguished from naïve hope, which is defined as "those platitudes that directly serve the hegemonic interest of maintaining the status quo" (128). Critical hope, first and foremost, acknowledges that systemic oppression exists, and such hope entails a responsibility to challenge what Boler refers to as "inscribed habits of emotional inattention" and involves "a willingness to exist within ambiguity and uncertainty" (129). Critical hope does not obstruct purposive and critical reflection around one's complicity in systems of oppression but instead encourages a "willingness to be fully alive in the process of constant change and becoming" (126). Critical hope aims to encourage openness toward continued struggle and forefronts discomfort as a signal to be alert for what one does not know about others but also about oneself. Critical hope is an illustration of support that can avoid comforting white discomfort. Like strategic empathy, critical hope encourages and does not terminate uncomfortable critical discussion around complicity. But unlike strategic empathy, critical hope does not risk offering absolution or redemption. "Comforting Discomfort as Complicity: White Fragility and the Pursuit of Invulnerability," 872.



### About the Author

**Richard W. Voelz** is an Associate Professor of Preaching and Worship and Director of the Doctor of Ministry program at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, VA. Voelz is a graduate of Vanderbilt University's Graduate Department of Religion with a doctorate in homiletics and liturgics. His interests are in contemporary homiletic theory, particularly how preaching relates to the areas of critical pedagogy, adolescent youth, reproductive loss and adoption, and public proclamation. He has authored four books, including *Youthful Sermons* (Working Preacher, 2022). He also serves as Associate Editor for the "Between Text and Sermon" section of *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*.

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