



THE WABASH CENTER

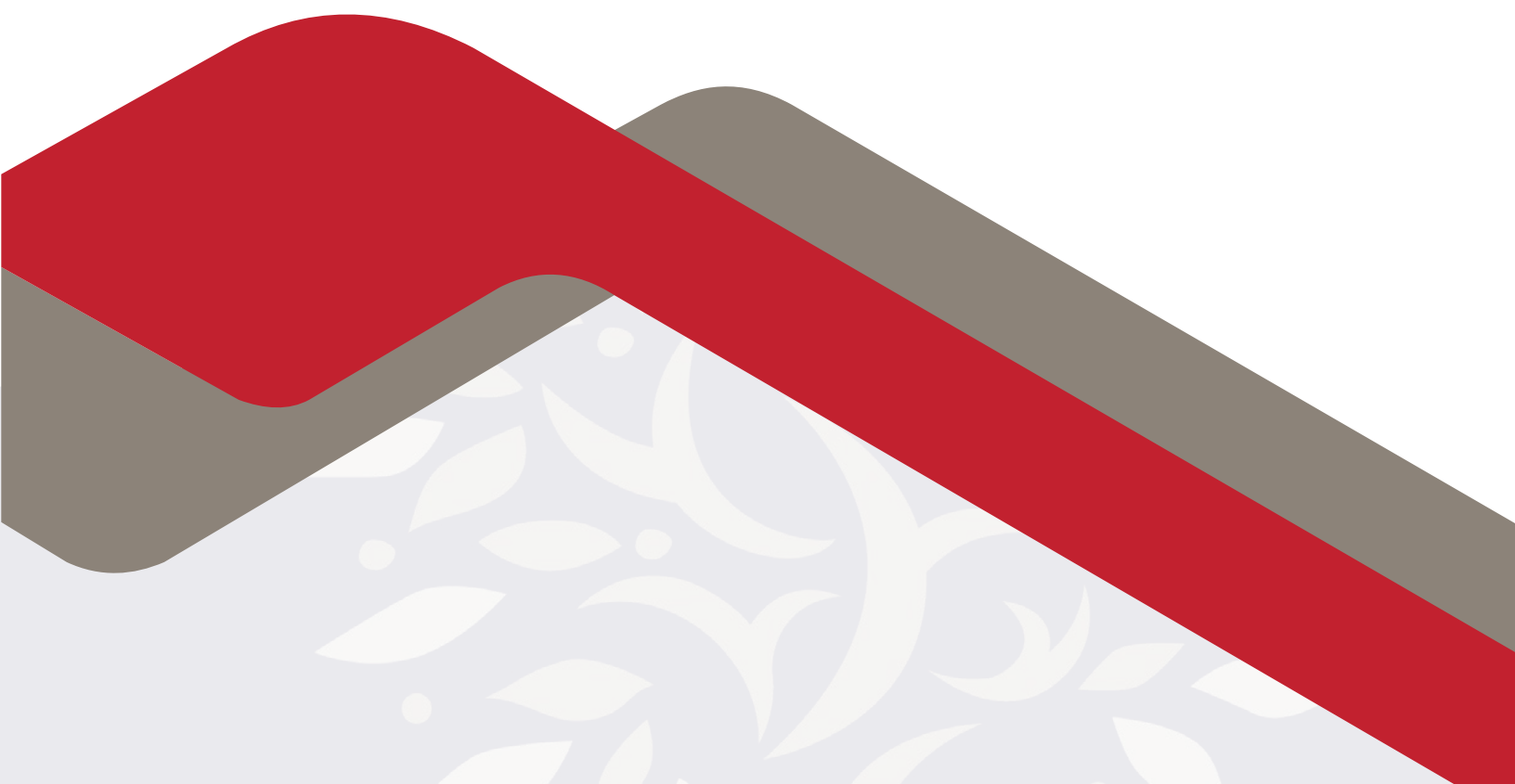
**JOURNAL** ON  
**TEACHING**

# Teaching Identity

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## THE WABASH CENTER JOURNAL ON TEACHING

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### JOURNAL DESCRIPTION

The Wabash Center Journal on Teaching (JoT) is a multimodal publication focused on the scholarship of teaching in the fields of religious and theological studies, in both undergraduate and graduate educational contexts. Each issue is theme-driven and includes various forms of media—such as articles, poetry, visual art, videos of performing art, and music—in service to critical reflection on teaching.

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## Teaching Identity

Volume 5 ISSUE 1 FEBRUARY 2024

**Publisher’s Note**.....4  
Nancy Lynne Westfield, PhD.,

**Editor’s Note**.....5  
Donald E. Quist, PhD.

**The Wound: Bible and the Pedagogical Violence of Methodological Objectivity** .....6  
Eric C. Smith, Iliff School of Theology

**Teaching From My Wounds: Letting Vulnerability Lead the Way** .....16  
Beth Ritter-Conn, Belmont University

**“You Blows Who You Is”: The Bible Professor Turned Jazz Artist**.....22  
Shively T. J. Smith, Boston University School of Theology

**“Be You. Full.” : A Moon Manifesto**.....30  
Chelsea Brooke Yarborough, Phillips Theological Seminary

**On Pedagogies of Acolhimento** .....40  
Yohana Junker, Claremont School of Theology

**Tell the Truth and Shame the Devil: Testimony and Justice from Ferguson to the Classroom**.....44  
Seth Emmanuel Gaiters, University of North Carolina-Wilmington

**Walking Down the Mountain Together: My Father’s Legacy**.....52  
Maria Liu Wong, City Seminary of New York

**Teaching Theory without Theory Talk in an Introductory Islam Course**.....60  
SherAli Tareen, Franklin and Marshall College

**Translanguaging Pedagogy: Strategies for Our Multilingual Classrooms**.....68  
Jeffrey D. Meyers, DePaul University

**Emmaus Encounters: Building Community on the Road, Hawaii, 2022, A Case Study on Teaching Future Ministers How to Build Community**.....76  
Sarah Drummond & JaQuan Beachem, Yale Divinity School

**Good Morning, Grandma**.....86  
Gina Robinson, Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion

# PUBLISHER'S NOTE



■ **Nancy Lynne Westfield**  
The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning  
in Theology and Religion

The notion of identity and the many ways identity permeates our teaching and classroom environments is not new to pedagogical circles. But it is a topic that has not been wrung-out or plumbed to its depth. Identity is a critically important theme which needs to be brought to the fore in teaching religion and theology.

The authors of this volume allow access into their own creative lives, revealing their multi-faceted identities, and those aspects of their identities which influence their teaching. These scholars, these artists, ask and answer provocative questions about identity as the sight of invention, innovation, and the beauty of teaching. It is a powerful conversation rife with intriguing ideas of teaching. The writers brought together in this collection, have dared to do this work from a first-person perspective. Self-reflection, with the intent of assessment, imagination, creativity, good citizenship, and self-improvement requires fortitude and commitment to advancing the craft of teaching. Our authors have done this kind of work for our learning. To benefit the community, the authors grapple with the age-old adage, you teach who you are! It is likely that this is the most accurate, as well as the most daunting, of all the expressions about teaching. It certainly points to the kinds of exposures and vulnerabilities a teacher needs to contend with, prepare for, and be mindful of. In its frankness and elegance, you teach who you are, begs the question—who are you? In seeking a response to this question, the authors of this volume provide insights for your pondering, edification, and conversation.

What is rehearsed here is that identity is about relationships. The teacher/student relationship is a relationship of intimacy. Sharing

knowledge, creating knowledge—introducing students to mysteries previously unknown and creating ah-hah! moments—is the stuff of passion and love. Learning from and with students is the joy of teaching. These moments bond the learner and teacher in a way that few other relationships do. This volume describes and interrogates the upside, pitfalls, and mundane days of these critically important relationships. The student/teacher relationship, while intimidating, can bring deep satisfaction when students and teachers experience a deepening of meaning-making; a love for encounters which stretch and challenge, and find needed ways to problem-solve for their communities.

As a scholarly community of authors we ask, what if the possible futures of relevant education requires teachers who have clarity of person, clarity of community, clarity of role and responsibility? What if identity is the sight of opportunity, discovery, creativity, and compassion in teaching? I invite you, with this volume, into the conversation on the power of identity, personhood, self-understanding, humility, invention, and risk-taking toward better community, improved society, and a more just world.

This issue of the Wabash Center's Journal on Teaching is a product of our communal model and the ways we support and incentivize scholars to make use of varying genres of creative writing. We continue to re-tool, re-imagine, and refine our collaborative peer-review process. We are boldly moving academic prose into more dynamic expressions better-suited for scholarship in the digital age. With our journal, we are striving to create more accessible expressions of the scholarship of religion, theology, and pedagogy that are more representative of artistic ways of knowing. We are participating in the production of knowledge as a creative process with an eye toward shaping the hope-filled future.

# EDITOR'S NOTE



■ **Donald E. Quist**  
The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning  
in Theology and Religion

On the windowpane above the desk in my office, there's a lavender *post-it-note* with a reminder to myself: *You Blows Who You Is*. These words can be attributed to American trumpeter and vocalist Louis Armstrong; they came to me during the Wabash Center writing colloquy that convened artists/scholars who would contribute to this issue of the *Journal on Teaching (JoT)*. A participant, Shively Smith, shared this line from Armstrong during a discussion about the ways one's identity can show-up in the classroom. The idea feels both revelatory and somewhat obvious—who we are and what we believe is invariably tied to the way we approach and perform our craft. *You blows who you is*, became an underlying theme in the construction and preparation of this volume. It's become a personal mantra for me as I continue the work of feeling more embodied in my own teaching and writing.

Identity (the fact of being who and what a person is) has emerged as a critical area of inquiry in teaching discourses. Increasingly, we ask how the multifaceted dimensions that shape an educator's beliefs, values, experiences, and practices in the classroom

affects, and reflects, the experience of the learners. This volume of *JoT* seeks to delve into the complexities of teaching identity, offering a platform for scholars to engage in artful explorations of how identity intersects with teaching and learning. It is an invitation to deeper understanding. The contributors here share the ways in which they've learned to navigate their professional roles within diverse educational contexts (cultural background, educational experiences, institutional policies, personal values, societal expectations) and how they negotiate and construct their own identities in relation to their teaching philosophies, instructional approaches, and interactions with students.

The dynamics of teaching identity extend beyond individual reflections to encompass broader systemic implications. By providing space for educators to examine these layers and intersections, this volume of *JoT* aims to encourage further consideration for how we exist in our pedagogical practice(s), policymaking, and research. The interdisciplinary pieces which follow, together, aim to promote creative critical reflection, and inspire innovative practices that honor the complexity and diversity of our identities in contemporary education.

# The Wound: Bible and the Pedagogical Violence of Methodological Objectivity

Eric C. Smith  
*liff School of Theology*

## 1. Dissection

Sometimes I wonder what it's like to dissect a cadaver in your first year of medical school.<sup>1</sup> You carefully slice open the spleen, expose the spongy recesses of the lungs, learn the geometry of the foot, and then what? When you have known and understood the structure of the heart and catalogued all its powers and pathologies, where does your mind go? Once the body

knowledge and understanding? Do you become preoccupied with everything that can go wrong in a body, counting the ways a mutation or a blockage or an unnoticed infection can bring it all to ruin? Do you look to the face of your child and find yourself unable to see? Do you embrace your mother only as pretext to diagnose the density of her bones? Does knowledge of the body bring anything more than an understanding of contingency and peril? Will dissection cure you of your reliance on humanity, or will it remind you of your investments in living flesh?

I cannot imagine that dissection kills desire, affection, or care. I think dissection must teach you wonder, tie purpose to your hands, and inventory all that is riding on the body. I think it must teach you something, to cut so far, because then you know how deep the body goes.

## 2. Methodological Objectivity

In the first year of a theological degree, students usually find themselves in a bible class. It might be Hebrew Bible in the fall or New Testament in the spring, and most often it's both. It's a common and even essential moment of orientation

is splayed out there in front of you, pried open with each part labeled, what do you do next? Do you go home to your lover and find yourself incapable of love? Do you begin to trace the contour of his shoulder but lose the arc somewhere among your

within a theological curriculum, and it's a moment that hides a profound disorientation. In those classes, bible becomes one of the first objects of dissection—one of the earliest cadavers to be splayed open, sliced, and labeled. The cooling table is surround-



Figure 1: The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp, Rembrandt

ed by all the tools supplied by the field: introductory textbooks and framing essays, exegetical methods and grammatical observations, charts of possible solutions to the Synoptic Problem or the composition of the Torah arrayed like pedigrees or genealogical proofs.<sup>2</sup> The story about these classes—the jokes that float around and the knowing smiles thrown by second-years in the direction of first-years—is that they divest you from your

stance of value-free objectivism and scientific methodism.<sup>3</sup> Surveying various arguments made in favor of methodological objectivity for biblical studies, Schüssler Fiorenza characterized those arguments as valuing “radical detachment, emotional, intellectual, and political distanciation...a-political detachment, objective literalism, and scientific value-neutrality,” and she sought to decenter “this rhetoric of disinterested news and presupposition-free exegesis” in order to “recover the political context of biblical scholarship and its public responsibility.”<sup>4</sup> Reading her address nearly four decades later, I am struck both by the success of her call for scholars to locate themselves as embodied and political beings, and also by the persistence of the guild’s pretensions to objectivity. In one sense, we have moved well beyond the airs to detachment in biblical interpretation that Schüssler Fiorenza was noticing then, multiplying interpretive methods that are grounded in lived experiences and diverse kinds of knowledge. Womanist, postcolonial, Minjung, islander, queer, Latina/o/e, ecological, and feminist methodologies (to name but a few) all constitute robust and enduring communities of interpretation and meaning-making, each fostering conversations that flourish within networks of scholars and mutually inform one another.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, though, a substantial bloc within biblical studies retains the “rhetorical stance of value-free objectivism and scientific methodism” that Schüssler Fiorenza described. For some members of the guild, this stance presents itself as open scorn for people who bring theological (or even ethical) categories and convictions to the work of biblical studies, and for other members it shows up as a persistent belittling of emergent or identity-centered methodologies as trendy, fashionable, or unserious. But the posture described in Schüssler Fiorenza’s 1987 address also persists as trends and patterns in the way scholarship is organized, with some work going methodologically unmarked while other work is labeled as perspectival or situated. Denise Kimber Buell makes this argument about New Testament and early Christian

studies, noting both the methodological whiteness (and maleness) that dominates the intellectual norms of those fields, and the ways the guild itself is structured so that some program units of the SBL “have a ‘visible’ interpretive approach (ideological criticism, LGBTQ hermeneutics, Paul and Politics, ecological hermeneutics, feminist hermeneutics of the Bible) where others do not (Pauline Epistles, Book of Acts, Gospel of Luke, etc.).”<sup>6</sup> It is still possible, and indeed easy, to earn a PhD in biblical studies, have a career in the field, travel within the Society of Biblical Literature, and never engage with the “political context of biblical scholarship and its public responsibility” called for by Schüssler Fiorenza.<sup>7</sup> And it is still common within the guild to encounter scholars who openly disdain any acknowledgement or presence of an interpreter’s perspective, whether it be an ethical or theological perspective or one characterized by social location and lived experience, or both. It often seems as if the field’s idealized interpreter is one who can hardly be bothered to care very much about the things they are interpreting.

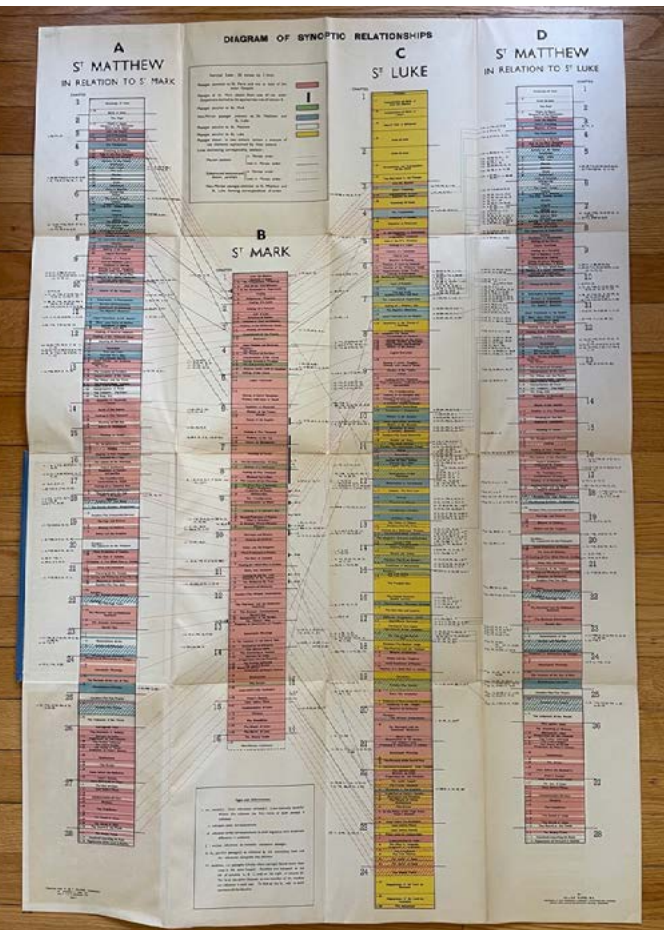


Figure 2: A Diagram of Synoptic Relationships, Allan Barr. T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1938. 27x40 inches.

interests, your commitments, your naïve certainties, and your unexamined easy truths. The story goes that in bible classes, you trade whatever desires brought you to theological education for a disinterested kind of detachment. You learn to read like a scholar reads; you learn to wield the scalpel skillfully. You cut away your attachments and learn to diagnose. Your prize—both the goal and the most essential tool—is objectivity.

The discipline of biblical studies likes to insist on disciplinary objectivity as its starting point. Perhaps because of its historical and present entanglements with confessional institutions and unseemly associations with apologetics and evangelism, biblical studies often prefers to cosplay as a science. In many of its forms and expressions, the discipline imagines itself as unmoored from the vagaries of faith, and unconcerned with the unreliable whims of experience and personal piety.

In her 1987 presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza called this a “rhetorical

### 3. Christ's Wounds

Alone among the four canonical gospels, the Gospel of John insists that we pay attention to Jesus' wounds.<sup>8</sup> Beginning with the crucifixion and an explanation of why Jesus' side was pierced but his legs were not broken, and continuing through his resurrection encounters with followers, the gospel keeps Jesus'



Figure 3: The Man of Sorrows, Michele Giambono, ca. 1430. Tempera and gold on wood. The Rogers Fund, 1906.

wounds in the front of the reader's mind.<sup>9</sup> Other gospels seem to ignore the wounds, preferring to pretend that the raised Jesus is whole, but John keeps our eyes on Jesus' body. John's gospel draws our attention again and again to the scars.

In John's story of Jesus' death and resurrection, Jesus' wounds are his objective correlative.<sup>10</sup> They are the "set of objects" and "chain of events" that travel with him on an extraordinary journey, as T.S. Eliot put it. Jesus received his wounds at the end of his life, by being fastened to and hung by a cross, and by being pierced as he was suspended there in death. His legs were not broken, but he got the tip of a Roman spear between his ribs. Both blood and water came from the wound—John wants us to notice that. In the text, this detail is presented as evidence that Jesus was dead, but also as evidence that Jesus was special, marked for mourning. John paraphrases the prophet Zechariah to drive home the point: "When they look on the one whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a first-born."<sup>11</sup> We are supposed to understand that Jesus was well and

truly dead, and we are supposed to understand that the wound is the witness both to the death and to the depth of grief that follows after.

The Gospel of John does not tell us where Jesus traveled during his death or what happened to him there, but when we first meet him again after his resurrection, Jesus is cagey about his body. When he finds Mary Magdalene by the tomb, early in the morning, he asks her why she is weeping. There is a pedagogical edge to the question. Does Jesus ask Mary why she is weeping because he doesn't understand her sorrow, or does he ask because he wants her to interrogate her own tears? Either way it's an obvious question to ask, why are you weeping, and also a little bit rude. Jesus speaks her name, and then the next thing he says is, "Do not hold on to me."<sup>12</sup> Why does he say that? There is an understandable guardedness, even if his inaccessibility might have hurt Mary. Perhaps he was sore, or reeling, or feeling some change that only the resurrected can know. The text won't tell us; it only tells us that for Mary, Jesus was unapproachable. *Do not hold on to me.*



Figure 5: The Deposition of Christ, Loftie Hours, Walters Ms. W.165, Loftie Hours fol. 26v

In his second appearance after his death, Jesus showed the disciples his wounds.<sup>13</sup> He showed up unannounced, popping up all spooky-like inside a house that had been locked in fear. "Peace be with you" is all John tells us that Jesus said—though all the "peace" in the world was probably not enough to soft-



Figure 5: The Incredulity of Saint Thomas, Caravaggio, 1602.

en the vision of the bloodied and resurrected form of a friend. But that's why Jesus was there—to produce his wounded body as a kind of evidence. John is sure to note that Jesus showed the disciples both his hands and his side. Jesus showed his wounds like stamps on a passport or a new tattoo, as evidence of travels undertaken. When he had shown them, he breathed on his friends—perhaps a way of testing the limits of his no-longer-dead body.<sup>14</sup> But Thomas wasn't there to see the wounds or to feel the breath.

A week later, the disciples had gathered again, and this time Thomas was there. Just like the first time, Jesus showed off his wounds, and he invited Thomas especially to touch them: "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."<sup>15</sup> This story is usually read that way—as a tale of doubt and belief, a kind of epistemological trial, in which the disbelief of Thomas was countered by evidence that could not be denied. But it can also be read as a story about the persistence of woundedness—how injury can follow us from one time to another, through one state to the next, its mark tenacious and obvious, holding on despite our insistence that it not. In both ways of reading it, this is a story about what a wound can teach. Even a resurrected body carries scars, the text is telling us. Embodiment and all its brokenness persist from life to death to resurrection. There is no magical repair in the offing, and even a power as fearsome as the power over life and death, the power to rise from the dead, remains subordinate to the power the body possesses to remember what it has endured.

Across the twentieth chapter of John, while the gospel writer insists that we pay attention, Jesus' body transforms from a site of violence to a site of knowledge. What at the beginning was a sign of death and mourning has by the end become an epistemology. By the time Jesus catches up with Thomas, the same Jesus who had told Mary *do not hold on to me* was asking Thomas to touch him. Maybe the swelling had gone down, or he had made peace with his altered body, but Jesus was finally in a tactile mood. "Reach out your hand and put it in my side," Jesus said, and see what you can learn from it.

### 4. But

When introducing themselves, my students often stress discontinuity. "I grew up evangelical, *but*," they will begin. "I was raised Catholic, *but*." "My undergrad degree is from a conservative school, *but*," and they often go on to explain that their beginnings don't necessarily have much to do with who they are in the present. There's an element of *do not hold on to me* to it. This might be a performance commanded by the experience of showing up to a graduate theological school with what feels like the wrong kind of theological baggage; negating the past might feel like the most direct path to being understood as the person you feel like you are in the present.

The *but* in those introductions is doing a lot of heavy lifting. The *but* elides years of struggle, alienation, and guilt. *But* hides the trauma of being disowned, reconverted, ignored, and sent away. It fast forwards through the scary parts. But I have noticed that *but* doesn't reliably deliver students to the places they hope it will. *But* explains both the past and the future in a certain way, and then we end up spending a lot of time in the middle, in various forms of the present. Many students devote their years in theological education to rummaging around in the now, inside the thing the *but* leaves out, working to understand how they came to be here now, how it happens that they live in their particular body, how the kid who grew up evangelical or was raised Catholic or went to a conservative undergraduate school came to find themselves *here*—or, perhaps more to the point, how they came to find themselves *now*.

Like Jesus, most of my students have a wound. Some have many more than one, but most of them have at least one. They carry the marks in their flesh from life to death to resurrection, their own objective correlatives, each with a version of Eliot's "chain of events" that is unique to them. Sometimes these are psychic wounds and sometimes they are physical injuries. They can be the bruises of theological combat, the cuts and scrapes of narrow escapes, or the spiritual trauma of a long captivity. Sometimes they are top surgery scars, like the split in a cocoon. (More on this later). At first these wounds are mostly hidden, under clothing or some other form of concealment, carefully secreted away at a distance, like Jesus and his *do not hold on to me* to Mary Magdalene by the tomb. Early on, it feels shrewd to hide the wounds or deny them, or at the very least explain them away. But almost universally there comes a moment when a student decides that it might be safe, and they begin to test what it might be like to talk about their wounds, to show them off, or even to ask someone to touch them. By the end, after some years, some students have come to think of their wounds like Jesus thought of his: as evidence, as an epistemological opening, or as a relational key for making themselves known.

## 5. More Wounds

Here is what one wound looks like. River grew up a Black Pentecostal.<sup>16</sup> That's the thing that hurt them, and also the thing that helps them know. They were in my seminar on the Acts of the



Figure 6: Pentecostals Praising, April 1 1941, Library of Congress.

Apostles, and on the day we read the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, River showed up ready to talk. In a previous life, going by a different name and passing under the guise of a different gender, they spent years at a flagship seminary of the evangelical movement, learning Greek and Hebrew and the finer points of exegesis. So they knew what they were doing. They stayed at that seminary until they got kicked out. (Perhaps you can guess which policies they were supposed to have violated). River could talk about anything from scripture, and do it well; they could probably recite most of the New Testament from memory. But that day River showed up wanting to talk about the Spirit.

The Spirit of the Lord is a bully in Acts.<sup>17</sup> It imposes itself on everyone, blocking here and sending there. It forbids and it instructs, it appoints and captures, it directs and sends. In Acts 8:39, the Spirit *snatches* the apostle Philip. That's the word, in Greek—*harpazō*. The Spirit of the Lord abducts Philip, *kidnaps* him, and takes him somewhere he was not planning to be. River had things to say about this Spirit—the same Spirit their Church of God in Christ congregation had danced to and praised, the Spirit that could be a bully when it wanted to. All that dancing, all that charisma, all the tongues and movement, helped River know something about the text of Acts and the Spirit found there that the evangelical seminary courses hadn't helped them know, and River felt betrayed by the bully Spirit they encountered in Acts 8. The Spirit that could pull bodies through such exquisite movement and show them something ethereal was also willing to impose itself, seize control, force its will, seize a body. How dare the Spirit grasp a person and move them like that without warning or consent?

Here is what another wound looks like. Brady sat up in his chair near the front of the class, slid forward almost to the edge of his seat, and smiled. "The way Paul talks about Onesimus," Brady said, "I know that way of talking." I asked him what he meant. Some of the other students nodded, and some of them shifted uncomfortably in their seats. "Paul is saying something between the lines that he's not saying all the way out loud. Paul and Onesimus, there's more there. 'I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you.'<sup>18</sup> Paul has other reasons for wanting Onesimus to stay." Brady told me during a break that his bishop told him that he couldn't be living with someone unmarried while serving a pastorate. Brady was from Nebraska, where the politics, especially the church politics, run conservative. "I told the bishop," Brady said, "that I would gladly marry Luis, if he would officiate the ceremony. The bishop walked away."

Here is what another wound looks like. Jennifer was a preacher's kid. Her father had been a minister and she was too—one of the first women ordained in her mainline Protestant denomination. Everywhere she went, she was the first woman minister that anyone had ever met. Jennifer worked hard to win them over, church by church, holdout by holdout, showing them by sheer force of competency and perfection and measured smiles and just the right height of heel that she had been called by God. A thousand times she parried 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy; a thousand times she endured *let a woman learn in silence with full submission*. She never slipped up and she never mailed it in; she was superb. And a lot of them never trusted her.

## 6. White Male Biblical Scholarship

Especially in his recent work, Willie James Jennings has been interrogating the figure of the white male biblical scholar, the "white self-sufficient man," the "rich ruler" of the humanities, a ruler who "lack(s) nothing."<sup>19</sup> He tells the story of "the white male candidate" who "showed more" in a job interview than other, less-white, less-male candidates, glittering like a jewel set in a crown of white completeness, dazzling the eyes of his future white colleagues.<sup>20</sup> Jennings lifts up the white male biblical scholar as a paradigmatic example of how whiteness functions in the academy, as a paragon of self-sufficiency, unbrokenly embodied as an exemplar of competency, confidence, and unimpeachable expertise. The white male biblical scholar has no wounds, no traumas, no fears, and indeed no past at all. He is an "epistemic emperor."<sup>21</sup> He is untouchable, not for the reasons Jesus is untouchable by the tomb, but because no one is permitted to approach him.

I am a white male biblical scholar—I should make that clear. I am a white male biblical scholar, but—there's my *but*—I don't feel the way I think it ought to feel to be one of the people Jennings de-

scribes. I don't feel like I "lack nothing," like I "have everything the modern academy requires," or like I "reign in the world of religious studies as our epistemic emperors" as I should be expected to do.<sup>22</sup> I can see some of my colleagues in the person Jennings describes, but it's harder to see myself. At Society of Biblical Literature meetings, I move in fear of being discovered a fraud. When I publish a book, I wince every time a new batch of books is reviewed, worried that mine will be among them and that someone will reveal my ignorance. (It has happened before). I am still surprised any time someone cites me. I know that only people presumed to be complete can go around "renouncing completeness," as the title of Jennings' short *Journal of Biblical Literature* article puts it, and that status and perceived expertise are only easy to give away when you already have them.

I know that Jennings is right about white male biblical scholars, not because of how it feels to be among other biblical scholars, but because of how it feels to teach biblical studies. The only time I feel like I am performing the script that Jennings describes is when I am teaching my students, and I sense the wholly unearned deference and awe with which they regard me and the material. The whole cadre of what Schüssler Fiorenza calls "the scientist ethos of value-free detached inquiry" seems to come alongside me in the classroom, invited or not.<sup>23</sup> Even the students who don't care anything about the New Testament and who have never read it seem to show up to my classes with a sense that they are entering some kind of special domain, some sacred precinct where you have to remove your shoes or walk in backwards. In there, it can be easy to feel like the high priest, anointed for this purpose. In that reaction, it's hard for me to separate the subject matter from my own embodiment—it's hard to know whether they're reacting to the New Testament, or to their white male professor—but that is precisely Jennings' point. Students show up to my New Testament classes eager to be taught orthodoxies, offered revelations, and disabused of misconceptions, in a way that they don't seem to show up for my history classes, first year seminars, or thesis proposal courses. New Testament seems to cast a spell, capture and stifle people's rebelliousness, and quell dissent. It's unsettling but more than a little bit intoxicating.

Because the New Testament classroom is where I can sometimes feel like Jennings' self-sufficient white male biblical scholar, it's also where I can sense that way of thinking move, and feel the power it has. Its power is something pharmacological, able to alter pathways and rewire thoughts. It blocks the nerves, it numbs the woundedness. The scars no longer ache. Everything has been settled already, in the New Testament classroom, and all there is to do is to be taught about it. It's easy to parry any question a student might have, because the deep well of self-sufficient white male biblical scholarship has already thought of everything. Why does Acts tell the story of the Ethiopian eunuch? Because of Luke's geographical agenda. Why does Paul write to Philemon about Onesimus? Because of *amicus domini*. Why does the Johannine Jesus share his wounds? So that Thomas could believe, because of high Christology. Everything has been decided; every wound has already been numbed, and there is nothing left to feel.

The internalized competency and self-sufficiency of biblical studies arrives in the New Testament classroom as pedagogical violence. It does not surface or engender knowledge or understanding; it forecloses the possibility of knowledge. It is an epistemological painkiller. Your wounds can tell you nothing, because the matter is already settled. What the preacher said can't hurt you, because he was ignorant and unlearned, so stop feeling the pain. He should have read his Dibelius and his Wellhausen.

The students often welcome the anesthetic. It's an appreciated relief, to take cover under the shelter of other people's impervious certainties. It's comforting to hear that the spear between your ribs should not have hurt you, because you were dead by then anyway. The performed self-sufficiency and "dispassionate industry" of biblical studies arrives in the New Testament classroom as a norming force, as a normative regimen of knowledge that erases experience, effaces the wounded body, and overwrites internal forms of knowledge.<sup>24</sup> It renders unnecessary the carefully-crafted counter-narratives that students have nurtured for themselves. Biblical studies shows up as knowledge, but behind that it stops the many ways of knowing, arrests their creation, and constrains all the important ways of learning. It tells River that they need not worry about the Spirit, because it's likely that trying to squeeze justice from the text will do more harm than good anyway, so it's best not to reckon with the Spirit, wrestle with how their Blackness is bound up with their religious trauma, or put your finger into too many wounds. Be suspicious of putting too much of yourself into it. It will compromise your objectivity. Sacred texts have no place in politics anyway, and politics no place in the reading of the texts, the self-sufficient ones insist. Renounce your body to free your mind.

## 7. Parallel Openness

If the Gospel of John insists that the reader pay attention to Jesus' wounds, then few have heeded the call more faithfully than late medieval artists and the people for whom they produced devotional art and objects.<sup>25</sup> The wounds of Christ proliferated in medieval art, appearing in both public settings like altarpieces and private settings like prayer books. Sometimes these images of wounds seem to have functioned like technologies for reckoning with one's own ailing and failing body on divine terms, understanding trials of the flesh through Jesus' own mortification and suffering.<sup>26</sup> Other times, abstracted from the body, the wounds became like "wells, plentifully flowing with blood as a source of the spiritual benefits of mercy, grace, life, pity, and comfort."<sup>27</sup> In the late medieval period, the abstracted wounds of Christ began to take on a decidedly genital form, resembling depictions of vulvas from elsewhere in visual culture.<sup>28</sup> For all readers but especially women, the "vulva-wound implored a variety of tactile responses from devotees," who (judging by wear patterns on the manuscripts) seem to have interacted with the images.<sup>29</sup> Sophie Sexon sees evidence in the manuscripts and their patterns of use that these devotional materials "demonstrate an ex-

pressly haptic response to the image of Christ's body, showing where patrons have kissed or rubbed away the image of Christ's wounds" through repeated tactile engagement with the images.<sup>30</sup> All of this together points to an important and seemingly widespread medieval practice of using Christ's wounds as an aperture through which to see one's own embodied vulnerability and particularity. Devotees insisted on seeing themselves in Christ's body, across barriers of gender, sexuality, and even anatomy.



Figure 7: Christ's Side Wound, Psalter and Prayer Book of Bonne of Luxembourg, The Cloisters MS. 69.86, fol. 331r

In a lengthy response to Leo Steinberg's book *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion*,<sup>31</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum takes issue with Steinberg's reading of the Renaissance iconography of Jesus' penis as evidence of painters' particular theological perspectives, but she also follows his invitation to think more broadly about how gender and sexuality work—sometimes counterintuitively—in visual depictions of holy bodies. In Renaissance portrayals, Bynum sees a fluidity of gender and sexuality that might feel foreign to our modern contexts, in which “not only the penis but also the eyes and breasts, even the toes, of Christ engendered extravagant emotional response.”<sup>32</sup> Bynum especially notes the way the iconography of Christ's wounded side parallels and eventually assimilates that of Mary's lactating breast, diversifying the kinds of haptic connections that were already present in late medieval depictions of wounds as vulvas.<sup>33</sup> (A particularly forthright depiction of this parallel can be seen in Figure 8, in which Christ points to his wound and Mary holds her breast as if to breastfeed, both with eyes fixed on God [“the Father”] in supplication, to emphasize the unique and special warrant for making intercessions that



Figure 8: In Bynum, Man of Sorrows and Mary Intercede with God the Father, style of Konrad Witz, about 1450, Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel

each of them possesses). The parallel productivity (or leakiness) of Jesus' and Mary's bodies would seem to be connected to the “wells” described by Pollick; the wound and the breast (and the vulva) collaborate to signify the multiply-gendered body of Christ as a source of both nourishment and self-understanding. Throughout the medieval and Renaissance periods, we see an ongoing and developing practice of using Christ's wounds to understand Jesus himself, but also as a way for the viewer to understand their own embodied existence and place in the world. The wound becomes a potent way to see through biblical narratives (and theological motifs), and to place oneself and one's body within the fecund porosity of holiness and holy bodies.

### 8. Embodied Epistemologies

I have noticed something similar in my own classrooms—a twenty-first century version of this same embodied epistemology that flourished among medieval and Renaissance people.<sup>34</sup> I have noticed that if I teach the self-sufficient white male biblical scholar version of New Testament, the one in which every question has a tidy answer and all the wounds have been anaesthetized, then students tend to give themselves over to that perspective and put on the methodological objectivity (and whiteness, and maleness) that is the field's default setting. They hold the text at a distance, treat it like an object, parrot back the things I teach them about being a self-sufficient white male biblical scholar, and stand in awe of the whole enterprise. They speak and write

in the methodologically unmarked ways identified by Schüssler Fiorenza and Buell, unconsciously mimicking the pretensions of positionless objectivity that dominate New Testament and early Christian studies. When students do this, they shut away the things that brought them to theological education in the first place. They hide their wounds under loose clothing, mentioning them to no one. They become more likely to conclude that the most important figures in their formation—parents, friends, pastors, mentors—were either superstitious rubes or willfully hurtful; my students take the medicine that makes things stop hurting. They leave caring less about the body that bears the scars, and learning to work harder to hide their wounds.

But when their bodies are invited into the classroom, wounds and all, my students *notice that their bodies are there*. It sounds obvious, but it's true. When the wounded bodies of their friends and loved ones are visible through the windows in the classroom walls and in the texts on the tables and screens, my students pay attention to them. When the fullness of bodies in the fullness of woundedness are invited in—raced, gendered, located, traumatized, loved, sexualized, queered, transformed, multiply abled, visible and invisible, wounded bodies—my students treat the dissection table differently. There is a care and a respect in the room. Even where there is anger, hurt, disappointment, and fear, students sense that there is something at stake, something worth knowing and learning, and the classroom transforms into a space where we can do that work. The wounds—students' own wounds, and the wounds of others—become a way of knowing and an opening. When objectivity isn't crowding them out, the wounds are an epistemology.

### 9. Scars

Zeke had more wounds than he could count. We had grown up a few hours' travel from each other, in the same part of the South (though twenty years apart), so I knew something of what he had been through—but not all of it. We met during first-year orientation. I saw his hometown on the list, and sought him out to talk, to make connections. He was called by a different name then, and was known by another gender—an assigned name and gender that Zeke worked hard to peel away from himself during his time in school. By the time of his final quarter, we had spent a fair amount of time together, in a handful of classes across several years. Now he was enrolled in my favorite class to teach, one where we learn to read the New Testament alongside Queer Theory. One of the things I love about that class is that in it, we abandon all pretense to self-sufficient white male biblical scholarship, ignoring the posturing of most mainstream commentary. When we read the story of Lazarus, we are not interested in the Signs Source or the redactional layers of the Johannine text; we are interested in Jesus' tears and the queer family that Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and Jesus seem to have chosen.<sup>35</sup> When we see the woman of Revelation 17, we are not asking about the bad Greek of John of Patmos or anything much to do with Nero; we are asking about whose gaze has made this woman what she is in the text.<sup>36</sup> When, in that class, we read about Paul's eschatology, we find ourselves asking whether Paul might have preferred the work of Edelman or Muñoz.<sup>37</sup> (It's a

tossup).

For his final paper in that class, Zeke wrote about wounds. He wrote about Jesus' wounds, pausing to consider the vaginal way that medieval artists painted them and then the Renaissance style that was parallel to Mary's lactating breast. But then Zeke wrote about Jesus' wounds in his own way: as the scars from top surgery. Zeke saw in the twentieth chapter of John a familiar story, one about transformation, transfiguration, and trans-ness at large, in its multiple and diverse forms. He read the gathering in the locked room in John 20 as a “gender reveal party,” Jesus' unveiling of a changed body, on the other side of trauma, scarring, and a new kind of knowledge.

It's not an interpretation of that text that would be easy to find in most of those methodologically unmarked SBL program units. It's not a reading that could be arrived at easily by using the “rhetorical stance of value-free objectivism and scientific methodism” described by Schüssler Fiorenza four decades ago.<sup>38</sup> It's not even a way that I could have thought to understand the text,

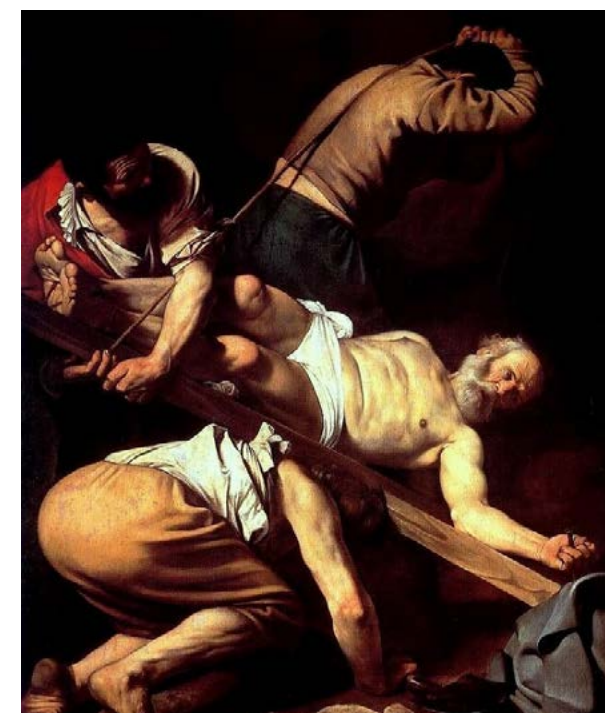


Figure 9: The Crucifixion of Saint Peter, Caravaggio, 1601.

limited to my own embodied knowledge, through the apertures of my own wounds. But it was a truth that Zeke found by reading the Gospel of John alongside his own wounded and transformed body. It was found by hands in wounds. It's a testament to how deep the body goes, and to the pedagogies of bodies and wounds—the bodies and wounds that students bring with them, that they learn to learn with, if they are allowed. “*Reach out your hand and put it in your own side,*” Jesus might have said, and see what you can learn from it.

## 10. Vulnerability

The last we see of Jesus in John's gospel, just a few paragraphs after he met Mary in the garden and showed Thomas his wounds, he's grilling fish on a beach and backing Peter into a corner. They are on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias, about a half dozen of them, and Jesus is talking about love. As they talk, Peter can't quite say the word love the way Jesus wants him to, and Jesus is getting frustrated. There is a *do not hold on to me* under the surface of things, attached somehow to the thread of bodily ambivalence that ran through Jesus' conversation with Mary, but now it's Peter who isn't sure. They go around and around. Perhaps Peter has already traded his wounds for certainty; perhaps Peter has already settled on masculine self-sufficiency as the safest path. Maybe he has opted for completeness, or for "radical detachment, emotional, intellectual, and political distancing."<sup>39</sup> Peter might have seen the way the wounds were sunk into Jesus' body, the way they were laced across him, and he might have begun to choke on the word "love."

"When you grow old," Jesus told him, "someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go."<sup>40</sup> It will happen to you too, Jesus tells him; don't sit there pretending that you can't be hurt. An editorial remark follows in 21:19, put in parentheses in some modern translations: "He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God." Even as Peter sat there in his self-sufficiency, talking with Jesus, the text wants the reader to trace the shape of Peter's wound, to put a hand into it, to remember it before it has happened. This comment is one of the final words from the author of the gospel of John, a benedictory remark on the high stakes of embodiment. And these words to Peter are some of the last ones from John's wounded Jesus—words reminding him of vulnerability, and its inevitability, and the wounded body's way of helping you know.



### About the Author

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## Notes & Bibliography

1 I am grateful to Jesse Mann, Maia Kotrosits, Amy Erickson, Beth Ritter-Conn, and the leaders of and participants in the 2023 Wabash Center Journal on Teaching Writing Colloquy for reading drafts of this piece and providing critical feedback.

2 Yii-Jan Lin, *The Erotic Life of Manuscripts: New Testament Textual Criticism and the Biological Sciences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Ekaputra Tupamahu, "The Stubborn Invisibility of Whiteness in Biblical Scholarship," *Political Theology*, November 12 (2020), [https://politicaltheology.com/the-stubborn-invisibility-of-whiteness-in-biblical-scholarship/?fbclid=IwAR3tmNuR37\\_8zNG07-QHIP0r-xc4tLLxj8xG3\\_b6vmmTmgXqOaWmydrSEI](https://politicaltheology.com/the-stubborn-invisibility-of-whiteness-in-biblical-scholarship/?fbclid=IwAR3tmNuR37_8zNG07-QHIP0r-xc4tLLxj8xG3_b6vmmTmgXqOaWmydrSEI).

3 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107, no. 1 (1988): 4.

4 Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation," 10–11.

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6 Denise Kimber Buell, "Anachronistic Whiteness and the Ethics of Interpretation," in *Ethnicity, Race, Religion: Identities and Ideologies in Early Jewish and Christian Texts, and in Modern Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Katherine M. Hockey and David G. Horrell (London: T & T Clark, 2018), 153–55.

7 Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation," 11.

8 Luke 24:40 reads, "And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet," but there is nothing explicit about Jesus' wounds, and many ancient manuscripts lack the verse, suggesting that it is a gloss of John's account, added later by a scribe.

9 John 19:31–37. This and all other citations are from the NRSV.

10 T.S. Eliot went looking for a name for the thing that haunts stories—for the presence that hounds our heels and the vessel that carries the way it feels to move through the world. He went seeking a term of art and came back with an unpoetic term of science, an "objective correlative," an ungainly phrase that simply means the thing that will not let us go.

"The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art," Eliot wrote, "is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of

events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. The objective correlative is an entry wound, a bit of shrapnel picked out of the flesh, and the scar tissue covering over the place where we have felt the most injury. The objective correlative is a reminder against the forgetfulness brought on by either neglect or trauma, "the formula of that particular emotion" that's entangled with our skin. T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood and Major Early Essays* (New York: Dover, 1998), 58.

11 Zechariah 12:10.

12 John 20:17.

13 John 20:20–21.

14 John 20:22.

15 John 20:27.

16 In this and all other mentions of students in this essay, names and other identifying information have been changed, and stories have been used with permission.

17 I argue this point in a forthcoming book, and also in a paper delivered at the Society of Biblical Literature annual meeting in 2021. Eric C. Smith, "Characterizing Spirit: The Necropolitics of Divine Sovereignty in Acts" (Society of Biblical Literature, Book of Acts program unit, San Antonio, TX, 2021).

18 Philemon 12.

19 Willie James Jennings, "Renouncing Completeness: The Rich Ruler and the Possibilities of Biblical Scholarship without White Masculine Self-Sufficiency," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 140, no. 4 (2021): 842, 837.

20 Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 26.

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22 Jennings, "Renouncing Completeness," 837.

23 Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation," 10.

24 Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation," 10.

25 This section is broadly informed by a collaborative essay by Pollick, Poore, Sexon, and Stradal. Johanna Pollick et al., "Your Body Is Full of Wounds: References, Social Contexts, and Uses of the Wounds of Christ in Late Medieval Europe," *Science Museum Group Journal* 10, no. 15 (April 2021).

26 See especially the essay by Emily Poore in the citation above. One prominent example of this kind of identification with Christ's wounds can be found in Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*, made for a hospital staffed by the Antonine monastic tradition. The altarpiece makes numerous connections and cross-references between Jesus' suffering and the suffering of the hospital's patients, who were frequently there because of the effects of St. Anthony's Fire (a skin condition caused by a fungus) and pox. Sally Hickson, "Grünewald, Isenheim Altarpiece," in *Smarthistory* (April 27, 2023), <https://smarthistory.org/grunewald-isenheim-altarpiece/>.

27 This citation is from Pollick's essay, which especially considers the well-like attributes of Christ's abstracted wounds. Pollick et al., "Your Body Is Full of Wounds," 8.

28 Sexon's essay demonstrates this thoroughly. Pollick et al., "Your Body Is Full of Wounds," 33.

29 Pollick et al., "Your Body Is Full of Wounds," 33.

30 Pollick et al., "Your Body Is Full of Wounds," 33.

31 Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion* (New York: Pantheon, 1983).

32 Caroline Walker Bynum, "The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg," *Renaissance Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (Autumn 1986): 438.

33 Bynum, "The Body of Christ," 424.

34 When I speak about classrooms, I mean not only physical or residential classrooms, but also—mostly—hybrid and online classrooms. For most of my career, most of my teaching has been technologically mediated at a distance, asynchronously, and so that is what I am describing here, even as I use "classroom" as an encompassing metaphor for learning environments.

35 Jione Havea, "Lazarus Troubles," in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Teresa J. Hornsby and Ken Stone (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2011); Benjamin Perkins, "Coming Out, Lazarus's and Ours: Queer Reflections of a Psychospiritual, Political Journey," in *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible*, ed. Robert E. Goss and Mona West (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000).

36 Lynn R. Huber, "Gazing at the Whore: Reading Revelation Queerly," in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Teresa J. Hornsby and Ken Stone (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2011). Huber now prefers to refer to the woman in Revelation 17 differently than her chapter title, which is why I have simply called her "woman" in the text above.

37 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004); José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009). Students often see Paul in Edelman's eschewing of the structures and products of heteronormative reproductivity, and in Muñoz's insistence in locating flourishing both in an already and in a not-yet.

38 Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation," 10.

39 Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation," 10–11.

40 John 21:18.



# “Teaching From My Wounds: Letting Vulnerability Lead the Way”

Beth Ritter-Conn  
Belmont University

I woke up anxious. Again. It wasn't even the first day of the semester; we had been at this for a few weeks now. Hell, I had been at this for the better part of a decade. Yet here I was again, stomach in my throat, muscles tense, mind racing, thoughts chaotic and incoherent. I felt exposed and unmoored, jittery and sluggish at the same time.

My morning classes passed without incident, as did my first afternoon class. And then, as I walked into the last class of the day, a third-year theology seminar, the butterflies went into overdrive and the pit in my stomach seemed to grow three sizes, just as they had been doing for the previous two weeks. Were we sitting in a semicircle or in groups that day? I don't remember. I don't remember if we began with small group discussion or if I had planned to lecture a little bit first. I don't even remember what we were discussing that day—was it from *Intersectional Theology*<sup>1</sup> or *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*?<sup>2</sup> In the moment I definitely didn't remember that nineteen of the twenty students in the class always arrived brimming with enthusiasm, ready to courageously discuss systems of power and how these systems have affected our theology—ready to really mean the question, “Who is my neighbor?” and interrogate themselves about where their understanding of neighborliness had been limited by various categories of identity. I wasn't able to focus on the fact that, for the most part, we were learning and searching and growing together, just beyond the reach of our collective comfort zone, and totally eating it all up.

What I do remember is that in that moment I was showing up tense, braced for that one particular student's rejection of our conversation, his bucking against the message in these books that I and so many students in the class found life-giving, his unwillingness to consider the possibility that his perspective was conditional, provisional, and perhaps could use some revision. I was anticipating his defensiveness and finding myself withering in the face of the imagined specter of it. I was already rehearsing how I would adjust my lesson to be less inflammatory, less provocative—in other words, I was planning ways to contort and shrink myself, and by extension to contort, shrink, and do rhetorical violence to these theologians whose work I respected so much.

What was happening to me? I had taught difficult, defensive students plenty of times before. Over the years I have found ways to balance, I think at least *somewhat* gracefully, the need to push and challenge them, on the one hand, with the need not to shut the metaphorical door in their faces, on the other. Why was my heart pounding about a conversation that hadn't even happened yet?

It was time to nip this in the bud. I made an appointment with my therapist. “I love teaching!” I exclaimed to her, exasperated with myself. “Where is this anxiety coming from?”

...



I was born and raised in the American Deep South, in the Southern Baptist church. It took me a while to realize it, but the embedded theology<sup>3</sup> that formed me was a comfortable sweater that had been wrapped around me since birth. I had absorbed the belief that asking questions (at least, questions without predetermined, church-approved answers) about God or the Bible was tantamount to heresy, and I felt safe and cozy in the easy answers and the clear and simple categorization of both people and ideas that this theology afforded me. As I grew up, went off to college, and developed close relationships with people whose backgrounds differed drastically from my own, however, the questions began to pile up. Eventually I learned to welcome those questions, to be less afraid of the ways they made me change—even learned to long for those experiences of destabilization that disrupted my familiar view of the world. Once I started tugging on the fibers of that sweater it unraveled completely—and I realized it had never fit all that well in the first place. Now, I am naturally drawn to students who reflect that longing, that openness to the unraveling, that sense of needing something other than the itchy, ill-fitting garment that has been handed to them. I confess I have a harder time connecting with the ones who seem committed to their certainties.

...

There's a reason all those parables in the Gospels about wheat and tares and seeds falling into good or bad soil really work, rhetorically speaking. Jesus apparently knew something about the patience required to watch things grow, once you've done all you could to create the conditions for it—the letting

go, trusting the process, the fact that you are not the sun and have no control over photosynthesis. Sometimes the roots take hold, and sometimes they don't.

What I mean is that my job isn't really to talk anyone into anything, as much as the part of me that still has a hangover from my proselytizing Evangelical days might be inclined to do so. I am just the caretaker and steward of our shared space. I buzz around the room, trying to pollinate the curiosity of those who are open and ready and feeling brave in their inquisitiveness, but not forcing openness on anyone who isn't ready for it.

The English word “vulnerable” comes from the Latin *vulnerare*: to wound. We are most vulnerable in those places where we are or have been most susceptible to injury. It sounds like a weakness, but it can be a superpower. My wounds come with me into the classroom, though I think (I hope) for the most part they are healed-over scars by now. Some of my wounds match the ones my students bear, but my job is to tend to them all and not just the students who have been marked in ways familiar to me: I also must tend to—must cultivate the flourishing of—the ones who remind me powerfully of those who wounded me. And, at the same time, I'm sure that to some of my students I look and sound like someone who has wounded them—a Sunday school teacher, a mother. For some, maybe my whiteness understandably has their guard up. For others, my very *womanness* is cause for suspicion bordering on disrespect, dismissiveness.

At the root of all of this is fear. As Parker Palmer reminds us, “If I want to teach well in the face of my students' fears, I need to see clearly and steadily the fear that is in their hearts.”<sup>4</sup>



Just like Palmer and his “Student from Hell,” with my student described above, I initially “read that student not in the light of his condition but in the shadow of my own.”<sup>5</sup> Palmer exhorts us to remember that “we cannot see the fear in our students until we see the fear in ourselves.”<sup>6</sup> What was I afraid of? Of being wrong—no amount of education has ever been able to displace the self-doubt that plagues me like a low-grade fever. Of saying something that would make the student shut down—then I would truly be a failure of a teacher. Of pushing him away—or of being rejected and pushed away myself?

With Palmer, I can honestly say, “There I was, face to face with a forlorn young man in his early twenties who had no apparent power over me—and I was so afraid of him that I lost my bearings, my capacity to teach, my sense of self and self-worth.”<sup>7</sup> Palmer says that we will never actually shake this fearfulness; there will never come a day when we can “walk into any classroom without feeling afraid.”<sup>8</sup> Somehow, that feels like a relief to me. The goal here is not to eliminate the fear. This would be an impossible task. Instead, he reminds us, “I need not teach from a fearful place: I can teach from curiosity or hope or empathy or honesty, places that are as real within me as are my fears.”<sup>9</sup>

The student described above struck a nerve in me, I think, because I have finally begun to learn the power of being vulnerable

in the classroom, of being nakedly excited about sharing certain beloved texts and topics with my students. And just when I felt like I was starting to learn how to be brave in this way, the student’s pushback felt personal. It wasn’t. But it pressed on an old bruise and took me back to a time when I felt silenced and shamed.

...

I am twenty-two years old. The world of academic theology has found me in a moment when I am ready but ill-equipped to hold my upbringing under a microscope and dissect it. I am almost finished with my first year in a master’s program in theological studies. I have taken classes on feminist theology and philosophy, Eastern Orthodox theology, and hermeneutics, and my internal world has been flipped upside down. I am delighted and terrified. My favorite professors have been the ones who say aloud the things I only ever dare to think in the silence of my own heart. They are unafraid to ask, “What if?” They have begun to teach me not to be afraid of things I don’t understand, and to confront the fact that I don’t understand most things. High on the thrill of new knowledge, new questions to ask, new directions for my curiosity, I venture a few stream-of-consciousness thoughts in a note on Facebook and publish it. *Who is God, and how do we think we come to know this God? What if we’re wrong? What if*

*there is so much more to truth than the limited way we have been taught to imagine it?* The note is honest and vulnerable and guileless and brave in a way I will not allow myself to be for many years afterward.

Because.

A few days later, a former youth pastor and mentor, someone who at one time really made me feel like I belonged, writes a blog post of his own. He never names me explicitly, but he quotes my note at length and writes condescendingly, patronizingly, about how lamentable it is that our young people go off to school and become brainwashed, lose their way, get doubts planted in their heads, are led astray. The tone is very “bless your heart, little girl” and seems to diminish and dismiss all the things that have recently made me come alive.

I delete my note. I feel ashamed, exposed, betrayed, and, for some unnamable reason, guilty. I stop writing after that.

Oh, I still write my master’s thesis, and then my doctoral dissertation, and over the next few years I bang out a small smattering of short scholarly pieces. But I most certainly stop writing like *that*. I’ve learned my lesson. I bury my actual questions, my actual voice, under thick layers of scholar-speak, detached and invulnerable, so that even if someone critiques my writing they’re not actually piercing my academia-thickened skin.

...

I don’t know how she did it, but before I knew it my therapist had me mentally sitting across a table from that youth pastor, a man who had not been a part of my life for almost two decades. My anxiety was not about that lone, lost student, we discovered together. My anxiety was born of wounds inflicted years before, and of words I never got the chance (or the courage) to say. So I said them, to that ghost from the past sitting across an imagined table from me. “You made me doubt myself. You made me mistrust my own curiosity, my own questions. You made me feel guilty for not having blind faith. And now my life is dedicated to the exact opposite of that, and I am better for it. But I lost my voice for a long time, because of you.”

I realized that I had conflated my “student from hell” and others like him with those authority figures in my life who tried to discourage me from seeking new ways of thinking about things—the ones I allowed to make me feel guilty for asking questions. They are not the same. Students cling to certainty because certainty is comforting, reliable, secure. They are not shutting down my questions but protecting themselves from their own.

The next week I walked into that classroom, anxiety-free, and taught my ass off. But the experience has lingered, and I’m still trying to learn from it.

What do we do when we are supposed to be the adult in the classroom, yet a student interaction triggers something we experienced as our younger selves? The self-protective impulse takes over, defensiveness sets in, and then...how do we respond?

Classrooms have always been contested spaces. Today they are contested in new ways. State governments across the nation are placing limits on what kinds of topics can be pursued in school settings, from kindergartens all the way up through universities.<sup>10</sup> Those of us who teach in private institutions, unbound by many of these legal restrictions, may of course encounter resistance when we bring up subjects that are taboo in other settings, but those who are bound by those restrictions face much worse than mere pushback from students, parents, and boards of trustees: the threat of legal action or loss of livelihood. We live in a complicated and frightening time for asking deep and dangerous questions, which happen to be the heartbeat of higher education. It is only natural that a self-protective impulse would take over when dissent crops up in the classroom under such circumstances.

The religion classroom can seem especially contested, because everyone has skin in the game, even if they would like to pretend they do not. This includes the professor. No matter how detached and academic one tries to make it, these classes are still on some level about deeply held beliefs. To treat them with any degree of honesty necessarily entails entertaining some degree of tension. As Parker Palmer has always known, to teach with any semblance of honesty requires a great deal of courage, and this is especially true today.

...

A year and a half after that epiphany in therapy, I taught another, similar student. This one was even more resistant. He did not wish to learn from me and basically said as much in his first written assignment. He thought the conversation guidelines I laid out for our class—about disagreeing respectfully, about critiquing ideas rather than people, etc.—were ridiculous and that we should not have to be nice to each other, that the Bible is the Word of God and that I should just tell people The Truth™ whether they like it or not, and if I didn’t then he would. The disrespect was palpable, both in his writing and in his silent, sullen posture in the classroom.

But this time I felt no anxiety when I walked into the room. I know he was just scared. I know he had been told (probably by people like my former youth pastor) to have his defenses up, that I would try to brainwash him, that I would turn him into a Democrat or force him to become gender-fluid, or to hate America, or whatever the fearmongering adults in his life had warned him about.

And I know the power of being more myself instead of less. That youth pastor does not have any power over me anymore. So I tried all semester—not to win him over like an overeager evangelist, nor to avoid topics or methods that would surely feed his

anger and disrespect. I didn't contort myself or my material the way I had been tempted to do before. Instead, I tried to teach to the scared part of him, to gently encourage him when he ventured an answer that tentatively pushed the boundaries of his embedded theology, to challenge him in ways that acknowledged his intelligence and his faith but invited him to consider something new. In other words, I turned to compassion and curiosity, and I hope he felt the tacit invitation to try to do the same. I told stories in class about times when I had been challenged and had my theology shaken. I talked openly about changing my mind. I let him and his classmates see pieces of who I had once been and of who I was becoming. I didn't nail it every time, and there are certainly things I would do differently, things I *will* do differently when the opportunity inevitably presents itself again. But it felt wonderful to let vulnerability lead the way.

What I think I've learned from the experience is this: My students can trigger old wounds in me, because in many ways they are

me, twenty years ago. They are mirrors of my own old uncertainties and defenses, scared and excited at the same time, both terrified and exhilarated by the prospect of upending everything they've ever known to be true. That younger me is still in me, and sometimes she comes out of my mouth when I feel cornered by a question or challenged in an uncomfortable way. In those moments I have to remind myself that I am older and more secure and more knowledgeable now, and we are just having a conversation, trying to figure some things out together.

I am both twenty-two-year-old little Beth Ritter, posing tentative but audacious theological questions on the newly minted Facebook and being publicly shamed by a former youth pastor for my lack of faith, and Dr. Beth Ritter-Conn, all grown up with a PhD, trying to tune out that scared, shaming voice, talking over it as loudly as I can to encourage each little individual "me" in the room not to be afraid of where their curiosity might lead them.



### About the Author

**Beth Ritter-Conn** is Assistant Professor of Religion at Belmont University. Her research addresses theological dimensions of hospitality, food, and embodiment. She enjoys running, yoga, knitting, and anything that gathers friends and strangers around a table. She lives in Nashville with her husband Jordan, their son Noah, and their cat Georgia.

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# “You Blows Who You Is”: The Bible Professor Turned Jazz Artist

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I never studied an instrument long enough to master it. Clarinet. Piano. Voice lessons. Saxophone. Drums. I tried it, but it didn't “take.” So, like most people, I am banished to the peasantry class of spectators, gazing up at the artistic monarchs of jazz like Miles Davis, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Shirley Horn, John Coltrane, and others. Their musical inflections and pivots drift from office speakers filling the air with my Spotify playlists. My college-bound daughter swears the improvisational acrobats of jazz sound richer wafting through the house from our old-school record player. Regardless of the platform from which it sounds, my household follows Ralph Ellison's lead and listens to a variety of “music worth living with.” But among the different genres we play, jazz is a constant “in the swift whirl of time” of our household routines and semester-by-semester calendar streams. We mark time with jazz. It reminds “us of what we were and of that toward which we aspire.” As Ellison reflects, “Music will not only calm, it will ennoble thee.”<sup>1</sup>

And then, I enter a biblical studies classroom where I teach Greek, a survey of the New Testament and early Christian history, global approaches to biblical studies, and advanced exegesis and hermeneutics courses. In each instance, I discover something: I have not left the monarchs behind in my office and home spaces. The music that orients my household and inspires our comings and goings with meaning and dignity follows me into my graduate seminars. Except I am not just listening to Nina Simone or Billie Holiday in those spaces. I am no hobbyist of jazz in the classroom. Rather, I transform into the artist I never became in the traditional sense of a master of strings, horns, or voice. As a teacher in today's institutions of theology and departments of religion, I often bend learning spaces with intellectual improvisations, and those spaces bend me right back. My teaching environments emulate the fluid style of jazz. Activities flow from one rhythmic tone into another, introducing new tempos, keys, and moods to melodic patterns of discussion

that are constantly on the move as the class transitions from one thought experiment to the next while eyeing biblical texts, contexts, and interpreters. In such classroom currents, I am not just a conductor, directing students to play their parts, listen to what I say, and take notes to prepare for the final exam. No, I am a player, and my students are players, too!

And what are our instruments, if not the tools of thought that we bring with us and the ideas that come upon us in the theater of the learning environment? Reflecting on the “jazzmen[women]” of the mid-twentieth century, Ellison says their discipline and technical mastery of instruments sprung from their “desire to express an affirmative way of life” in which each artist “must learn the best of the past and add to it his[her] personal vision.”<sup>2</sup> The blending of the past, the present, individual personality, and group interaction in the biblical classroom means no teaching session is the same as the one before it. And I do not want it to be! If the teaching life is efficacious and alive, then Louis Armstrong supplies us with clarifying insight when he instructs us:

**Never play anything the same way twice.  
-Louis Armstrong**

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Whenever I lose sight of what I mean by my self-identifying role as “The Bible Professor Turned Jazz Artist,” I watch Armstrong's [1951 performance on \*The Ed Sullivan Show\*](#). Armstrong's showmanship is a visible and audible reminder of what the best of the teaching life produces. The learning environment can be an enactment for both teachers and students to affirm that “[Now You Has Jazz!](#)”

Just watch Armstrong's interactive musical play! As soon as the camera turns to him, Armstrong quickly identifies others with

whom he shares the stage. This jazz artist is no lone player in the syndicated performance. Cue the laughter. He introduces his onstage company while addressing his audience. Those opening moments tune the band while calibrating viewers for the musical moment ahead.

Pitch.

Rhythm.

Cadence.

Mood.

Volume.

Movement.

Armstrong strikes the delicate balance between strong individual personality and group relations. Ellison calls such dynamics “a marvel of social organization.”<sup>3</sup> Others may miss the genius of Armstrong's tactics, convinced he is just engaging in entertainment for entertainment's sake. But he is doing more than entertaining in this performance. Armstrong leaves little to chance. He sets the guidelines for interactive play between him and the other players—be they the instrumentalists or the audience.

It puts me in mind of how I begin each semester course reviewing the Forum for Theological Education (FTE)'s Conversation Covenants, adapted from The Center for Courage and Renewal's Circles of Trust Retreat principles. The one-page document lists eight commitments to building healthy conversation in community, but my two favorite commitments are the following: #3: “Stay curious about each other”; and #7: “Embrace constructive conflict.” Implicit in both commitments is the expectation that diverse perspectives can coexist and collide into each other constructively, as opposed to destructively. They suggest that mutual investment in the gifts and soundings of one another can create unimagined resonances that embrace “what's at stake for all.” Such conversation covenants gesture toward the orientation of jazz artists, who listen to and accommodate each other in streams that flow in and out of other melodic forms and instrumental sounds. Armstrong's stage presence intentionally cultivates both curiosity and a symbiosis among performers and viewers that creates sounds that are expected and surprising, familiar and fresh.

More laughter ensues on *The Ed Sullivan* show performance. Jokes and lightness are sprinkled throughout Armstrong's presentation, building rapport with the viewers. It reminds me that even humor can be an effective instrument in the learning environment of biblical studies. It can set a tone that disrupts the unyielding frameworks that keep students and professors siloed in their respective epistemological patterns. Armstrong wields laughter as an unseen instrument, which he strums in tandem

with blowing his horn and singing his song. Humor can open us up to receive the gifts of charitable listening and cooperative play. As such, the performance transforms from mere entertainment to an invitation for full participation.

Armstrong also utilizes the fullness of the performance space. He strolls back and forth across the stage, addressing various players while viewers do more than merely spectate. They laugh, tap their feet, sing along, and even pretend to play the instruments from their living rooms. Though defined by sound, the musical journey Armstrong facilitates involves movement, touch, and feelings. A viewer's entire sensory board is activated while watching this performance. Without even noticing, it easy to find oneself, even in the next century, keeping time with the drums, trying to learn the names of the other players, instruments, and speakers on stage. You are caught!

Howard Washington Thurman, the twentieth-century mystic theologian, dean, and “pastor” of the Civil Rights Movement, described teaching as the art of “catching.” Reflecting on one of the first courses he taught at Boston University's Graduate



School of Theology in 1953, Thurman shifts the aim of the learning environment: “The fundamental aim of the course, as I saw it, was to help men and women who were going into the ministry to acquaint themselves with their own inner life. I felt that the idea could be caught, but I did not think it could be taught.”<sup>4</sup> Catching as the aim of teaching is not as concrete as the memorization of facts, or the execution of a lecture outline and its three major points.

Teaching as catching attends to the spirit of wonder and insight. It is a lyrical pattern of learning defined by courageous probing of thoughts in conversation with oneself and others. Instead of



the traditional trickle-down exchange of knowledge, Thurman casts the teaching of religion, theology, and spirituality as the work of cultivating an atmosphere for discovery. A classroom oriented to catch ideas and juggle multiple perspectives necessitates a more unscripted responsiveness to the teaching moment for which the jazz monarchs are instructive. Describing the disciplined skill of the jazzmen[women] of 1955, among whom Armstrong earns honorable mention, Ellison says, “Their driving motivation was neither money nor fame, but the will to achieve the most eloquent expression of idea-emotions through the technical mastery of their instruments (which, incidentally, some of them wore as a priest wears the cross) and the give and take, the subtle rhythmical shaping and blending of idea, tone, and imagination demanded of group improvisation.”<sup>5</sup>

The characteristics of jazz showmanship Ellison rehearses epitomize much of what I hope to realize as a biblical professor in the classroom. To create a timbre in class cadences and intellectual encounters that encourages students to articulate personal ideas and experiences in conversation with biblical history, to advance students’ mastery of critical biblical tools and discourses—this is the music of the biblical classroom I hope to play. Seeding students’ biblical imaginations with new ideas and alternative possibilities—the biblical classroom can quickly become an impressive jazz group improvisation show!

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What happens when the classroom is not defined by a podium and a lecturer’s performance but by the accoutrements of “thought instruments” performed by different “thought players”? I will tell you

what happens: the classroom changes from an intellectual exchange that is static and fixed to creating music that has uncharted possibilities. The goals of the biblical classroom shift from a set number of verses, topics, and learning objectives to education that arises from shared performance space. Choreographing academic study of the Bible as a musical experience that is more than a repeat of the top hits in introductory courses—be it Jesus, Mary, David and Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, Paul and Peter, the Catholic Letters, or theology—transforms traditional biblical studies classrooms. Everything sounds different in the class staged as a jazz improvisation session.

In that venue, I am not teaching my students but teaching *among* them. What happens when we see our preparation as biblical professors as not another sage on the stage, or other teacher-centered model, but as a jazz artist involved in a group performance? The expert is no longer the professor alone. Yes, the professor curates and facilitates the learning moment, but the entire class is resourced. Teaching biblical studies becomes an art form inspired by a contagion of wonder, encounter, and experimentation—all ingredients that can make the classroom a transformative space.

To this end, one of the first jazz-type activities I choreograph in biblical courses to cover a particular writing or concept is to present the class with a passage to serve as our discussion text. I often provide students a copy of the passage from Burton H. Throckmorton’s *Gospel Parallels* or Walter T. Wilson’s *Pauline Parallels*. Before they analyze the passage through a comparative highlighting exercise, the class reads the passage aloud, noting details that catch our attention. I ask question like, What surprised you in this passage? What appeared to be a normal response or event and what appeared unusual to you? What are some of the important people, places, events,

and terms in this passage and what do you think they mean? It is not I, but my students, who articulate the possibilities of the class’s interpretive play. Together, we build our potential playlist of details to account for and explore further.

Thurman is helpful here too. He talks about the significant failure of those of us dedicated to the life of the mind to account for the full range of human experience that informs all ways of knowing (epistemologies).

*It is a misreading of the role of feelings to separate them from the function of the mind at work! No matter how clear and penetrating and detached may be the vast reaches of creative thoughts at their best, they are but lifeless forms until they are energized by the continuum of emotion that is always present and antedates the emergence of mind. After all, it may be true that what is called “thought” is a function of feeling, reduced to slow motion.*<sup>6</sup>

We can ask our students what the text makes them feel or puts them in mind of as much as we ask them what they notice is present or absent in a passage. Resourcing the full range of knowledge and experiences our students have at their disposal while helping them to deconstruct and recontextualize that knowledge is part of the jazz experience in the classroom. Our preparation for the learning moment can shape a performance forged from the thoughts, questions, and concerns our students carry into the learning space. We, in turn, can enact a new version of Herbie Hancock’s “[Maiden Voyage](#)” with our students in a New Testament jazz key. Like Hancock, we can touch the instruments to listen for new sounds. We build up the students’ expectations only to take an unexpected turn in an otherwise familiar song. After all, this is jazz improvisation, not orchestra sheet music we are playing here. The songs we title the Synoptic Problem, Petrine tradition, Paul’s letters, canonical formation, and more can sound different this time. And perhaps they should. For we too, as intellectual teacher-artists, are ever changing even as we interact with music that we have spent a lifetime mastering and producing.

For example, conversations about pseudepigraphy and New Testament studies change when reframed by how nineteenth-century African American women writers attached alternative pen names to their literary Christian responses against America’s patterns of enslavement, segregation, unequal rights, and under-resourced educational opportunities. Pseudonymity for African American women biblical interpreters was not a tactic intended to deceive but a strategy to communicate the social imperatives of Christianity and its demands on those in society who claim to read the Bible and subscribe to its faith commitments. The blend of cultural-identity markers of *African American, woman, Christian, and citizen* meant they deployed names of other respected figures or invented new ones so they could be heard, and their perspectives considered valid, even helpful to their reading communities and the larger society. For example, the renowned journalist and sociologist Ida B. Wells invented her pseudonym “Iola,”<sup>7</sup> saying, “But I had observed and thought much about conditions as I had seen them in the country schools and churches....So in weekly letters to the *Living Way*, I wrote in a plain, common-sense way on the things which concerned our people....I signed these articles ‘Iola.’”

Keeping Ida B. Wells’ social strategy of fictive naming and persona-making in mind shifts questions about pseudonymity in New Testament studies from concerns about “what is it?” to “why is it?” The histories of interpretation we tell in the biblical classrooms are a slowing down of time that can spotlight some places while leaving others darkened by our lack of attentiveness. We do not have to consent to only making the great leap to antiquity with our exegetical flashlights beaming while rendering invisible other moments and places in the many lives of the biblical texts lived among people, communities, and global societies. We do not have to leap in the dark. Instead, the biblical professor turned jazz artist plucks the multiple strings of time, sounding the different dimensions of biblical texts, religious histories, and interpretive communities available to us as players of interpretation and history on “this side of history.”<sup>8</sup>

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“[I Got Rhythm](#)”<sup>9</sup> when I donned the mantle of New Testament professor. Guided by Sarah Vaughan’s 1964 Stockholm, Sweden performance, I unclasped the imposter’s straitjacket and ascended the performer’s stage. I brought with me my skills, knowledge, and comfort with the classroom stage. And I accented that knowledge with my style of presence, presentation, and passion. Before jazz taught me how to teach, I wrestled with my professorial identity. There were few models of what it means to play scholar-teacher or teacher-artist of the New Testament in my embodiment and with my set of research expertise and interests—Petrine studies, epistolary studies, diaspora studies, Howard Thurman, nineteenth-century African American women, and Second Temple Jewish texts like Philo’s *On the Embassy to Gaius* or the *Letter of Aristees*. The biblical classrooms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which dominated the theological academy’s imagination, did not imagine me (and, unfortunately, in some sectors, it still does not imagine me).

Yet, Paulo Freire wisely counsels us in moments of our emerging teaching identities when he says, “*looking at the past must only be a means of understanding more clearly what and who they are so that they can more wisely build the future.*”<sup>10</sup> Future building in the biblical classroom required me to articulate the question impeding the evolution of my scholar-teacher identity—namely, what does the biblical classroom expect from someone like me *now*?

Working with graduate students, especially doctoral students, I often hear versions of this same question: Who am I as a professor and scholar? The identity question plagues anyone trying to authentically live out a vocation of teaching, advising, and mentoring, and it can ripple through others’ lives and communities. Yet Freire instructs us that the answer to the question of who we are as a teacher is likely not found in the past among the old stereotypes of the professor. It probably does not even reside in our current models of teaching—be it our advisors or other teaching colleagues. The answer is in our heads, hearts, and hands, and the work of teaching (one hopes) to contribute to the current moment.

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Who am I as a professor and scholar? I answer that question when I enter the classroom by transforming into my version of the famed piano jazz player Thelonious Monk. I strike the chords of biblical in-

terpretation in my unique and eclectic way while tuning this mantra:

***I say, play your own way. Don't play what the public wants. You play what you want and let the public pick up on what you're doing—even if it does take them fifteen, twenty years.***  
— **Thelonious Monk**

So, I play “[Brilliant Corners](#)” every time I shift topics from the Pauline letters to the Catholic letters, with the Hebrews homily as my inflection point in my canonical turn. I become a performer of “[Round Midnight](#)” when I take on the matter of the apocalyptic expectation threaded through the New Testament in places like [Matthew 25:6](#) and [Mark 13:35](#), or even the midnight songs sounding forth from Paul and Silas as prisoners of an empire that would displace, rather than liberate them in [Acts 16:25](#).

Finding our genuine sound as teachers is an identity-defining act. Such actions take courage, curiosity, and community. We are formed as academics to probe our study subjects in our proverbial library carrels alone. We need to remember how to think as co-learners among other thinking bodies. We quickly get out of practice cultivating curiosity and inviting others to perform. Naming ourselves as teachers and scholars and identifying the metaphors that remind us what we are up to in the classroom supplies the venue for us to enact our rendition of the “Hymn to Freedom” performed by Oscar Peterson and Oliver Jones in 2004. There is something liberating about naming the markers of one’s teaching identity alongside others. Our shared understanding can be based on what we do as teachers in our current contexts and not what we were taught to do in the past. Freedom—it warrants a hymnodic exhale....

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What do I love about teaching? What inspires me in the classroom? The First Lady of Jazz, Ella Fitzgerald, lays these questions at my feet whenever I play her classic song, “[I Can't Give You Anything but Love](#).” While designing my course syllabi for the upcoming semester, Fitzgerald’s eurhythmic reflections remind me that love for the art of teaching is as important as insight into the subject matter. Her honey-sweet, silver tones also guide my content selections. I cannot expect students to be excited about topics that do not animate me. What are the questions I enjoy asking of the material? What notes and in what keys do I masterfully strike that awaken inquisitiveness and alert students to other options in interpretation?

***Just don't give up trying to do what you really want to do. Where there is love and inspiration, I don't think you can go wrong.***  
— **Ella Fitzgerald**

A teaching identity that leverages the art of jazz in its approach, practice, and preparation for the learning environment makes room for the students we encounter in our classrooms today—some whom we imagined but many whom we could not. The latter—the students my teachers did not expect—require me to reach for other models to shape my identity and pedagogical style as a professor

in today’s classroom. Those old models do not easily overlay my stories and experiences, but they also seldom connect well with the students enrolled in our institutions today.

To see the trend, one need only look at the “[Annual Data Tables](#)” published on the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) website. More and more students enroll in one- and two-year master’s programs instead of the traditional three-year master of divinity degree. Many graduate school or college students take biblical classes while enrolled in a second professional degree program like social work, education, or even law. The sound of the classroom is new because different questions and communities inform students’ theological imaginations and reasons for critical studies in Bible, theology, ethics, spirituality, and so on.

Consequently, I have left the banking system of teaching behind and embraced the theater. The classroom becomes a shared ownership space and not one defined by an individual personality and preference. It is a learning environment characterized by the give-and-take of co-learners sharing center stage. We can impress upon our students that biblical interpretation is a collaborative enterprise involving multiple actors and various actions. Such endeavors can be our acts of joining John Coltrane’s quartet performance with Eric Dolphy as they play “Impressions.” What impression of biblical studies do you want to leave with your students? What areas of significance do you love that you want to impart to them? Inviting students into our centers of passion is a pedagogical strategy because what we want them to hear and carry forward about our field and its relevance matters.

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In a 1949 Downbeat interview, the alto saxophonist Charlie Parker talked about jazz performance as a blend between musical art, lived experience, and technique:

***Music is your own experience, your own thoughts, your wisdom. If you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn. They teach you there's a boundary line to music. But, man, there's no boundary line to art.***  
— **Charlie Parker**<sup>12</sup>

What kind of music do you want to make in your classroom today? That is a different question to ask in preparation for the teaching moment than what is your lecture’s topical outline. What instruments will lead? What will be the mood exchange and the journey of experimentation you try to instigate? At what point will you slow down and step aside so your students can try out a new thought, like a melodic line that all other instruments soften to hear played by a solo instrument? You cannot predict what students will play and what it will finally sound like, but you step aside and decrease your volume, so others take the lead on what is played, heard, and seen.

One of the ways I step aside in the biblical classroom is by heightening students’ awareness that they are already involved in interpretive processes. They are already on the proverbial jazz stage of interpretation, but they don’t realize it yet. The Harlem Renaissance

silhouette artist Aaron Douglas offers some beautiful pieces that can generate good classroom insights into the interpretive cycle and its aims. My favorite is his 1934 mural titled [Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery to Reconstruction](#). I post the image on the classroom screen. However, I do not show the original, but a photo of an [enlarged recreation](#) located on an outside park wall in Topeka, Kansas (by Dave Loewenstein, dedicated 2005). “What do you see?” My opening question is intended for the students to resource their perspective and initial encounter with the image. I give them no details but ask more questions like, “What are we looking at? What do you notice? What is happening in the painting? How does the image feel?” I critique nothing in this process. All their perceptions are possibilities, and once the energy begins to plateau, I compel students to make an experimental interpretation using my formula, “This picture is about x because of y.” The y-variable must be at least two concrete details they can demonstrate from the image. The experience is eye opening to students because they generate the interpretation from the visual text, not me. Moreover, they hear alternative possibilities articulated by other members of our community of interpreters—again, not me, but their classmates.

Also, as Parker states, they realize there is “no boundary line” to the art of interpretation. And that’s what I want them to catch—namely, that the interpretive life is boundless and interactive. Critical biblical interpretation has approaches, reference tools, sources of information, and concerns. Still, we cannot escape our first resource in the practice of interpretation, which is our own experiences, thoughts, and viewpoints. We use ourselves to begin the process even if our original insight changes by the end because we have acquired more information about context, content, modes of presentation, authorial aim, or the history of reception. Such turns typically occur after I provide the “great reveal” and tell students the origin story of Douglas’s mural. Once students hear Douglas painted the mural decades before the Civil Rights Movement and that it is a hindsight artistic rendering of African American history in the changing moments from the Civil War and Reconstruction, they often want to adjudicate the different interpretive possibilities we conjured and abandon those perspectives that seem far from the original intention and context of Douglas’s creation.

I can pull out the metaphor of jazz at this point in the activity to divest students of the notions that the interpretive process is static and unchanging. Students grapple with literary or visual texts not being autonomous and fixed, regardless of the author’s intention. As Paul Ricoeur puts it, “The ‘world’ of the text may explode the world of the author,” and I want that explosion to be loud in my class. It should [clang, jolt, screech, and surprise like the most remarkable jazz improvisers](#) sometimes do. And the text may transcend its own origination and thereby open “itself to an unlimited series of readings, themselves situated in different socio-cultural conditions.” By catching the spirit of jazz’s flowing improvisations and movements, student interpreters can move across various histories of a text, considering its origination while not being entirely accountable to it. We can flow from ancient contextual readings into analyzing how later communities of interpretation have received and understood the text. Generative interpretive engagement is a form of jazz art.

Jazz is not predictable—at least not the improvisation jazz that makes room for sound experiments. To master strings, horns, and voice in the jazz art form means embracing the possible differentiation from one artist to another. Parker’s quote signals that teaching can be an art form of being, not just knowing. Who you are in the classroom today is as important as what you will teach. Exploring “[All the Things You Are](#)” and all the possible meanings a text can generate has a Charlie Parker sound and purpose. What parts of your experience, thinking, and discernment do you resource as an epistemological framework alongside the assigned readings, the essay papers, the annotated bibliographies, the quizzes, and so on? The model of the jazz artist involves a different way of being a biblical professor, and it creates spaces to play differently in the classroom than those who preceded me. It may even mean the media used in the classroom conversation is different. Rather than a biblical passage, I use an image from the dean of African American painters, Aaron Douglass. Rather than flipping the pages of the Bible, my students post large sheets of butcher paper on the classroom walls to map the rhetorical structure and thematic shifts in a particular passage.

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In the classroom, I become the Dr. Shively Smith version (substitute your name here to catch my meaning) of the jazz bassist and vocalist Esperanza Spalding in her 2009 Austin City Limits concerts. Spalding takes the stage and begins her show by setting the audience’s expectations about what her masterful performance produces instead of what they may expect. She demonstrates her knowledge—even mastery of the old jazz models one may expect—while supplying quick samples of her reinventions and innovations into something wholly her own because “Jazz Ain’t Nothin but Soul.” One of Spalding’s more famous quotes states,

***Jazz music just resonates with the frequency of me.***  
— **Esperanza Spalding**

What is my frequency? As an African American woman New Testament scholar, I am a different kind of biblical jazz player. The rising tides of biblical studies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did not envision me playing jazz in its classrooms. Still, I am playing on the classroom stage to the unexpected, hopeful, and fearful students populating our institutions today. There is no boundary line for who can teach in the biblical classroom and how to play the instruments of our craft within it. Life experiences and encounters as biblical readers, writers, and historians should sound from our horns and lull our students into fresh wonders and connections that forge new meanings and significance for them and our shared communities.

I play the biblical bass in my classroom and discover something else about myself. I increasingly become less and less like my *doktorvaters* and *doktormutters*, whom I appreciate but never was. Like Spalding, I can pay homage to what preceded me in the biblical classroom while not being imprisoned by it. The jazz swirls around me in performance with my students, and we increasingly produce our unique and pronounced melodic mix of biblical discovery. In

those moments, I see myself more clearly than before, as if I am watching myself pass by in a centering moment.<sup>13</sup> My jazzy biblical studies approach becomes an anchor and not a liability in the classroom.

What does taking up your own distinct space in the classroom mean? One wonders if many teachers, young and old, are playing the instrument of preference or formation. Are our reading selections the ones we want to play in style, or are these readings, scholars, and conversations the ones our teachers designated “proper” and “necessary” for rigorous engagement in the field because they took up their distinct space in the classroom? Armstrong says, “*You blows who you is.*” When I blow, whose “is-ness” is sounding from me? I find jazz a liberating metaphor for thinking about my identity in the classroom because it invites me to experiment without penalty. It asks me to search for my “is-ness” while I blow, and it permits me to name long-standing trends while inventing new ones for the current audiences I stand among.

As a jazz artist, the biblical professor recognizes no dominant model in content or performance exists. We can listen for the sound and the directions the learning moments take us, and there is no predetermined learning trajectory. Yes, I am teaching the same twenty-seven writings of the New Testament my other colleagues are teaching worldwide that year, but we are teaching it in different ways. I do not even have to teach it the way I presented it last semester or yesterday. As a jazz artist, the Bible professor can always be a “becoming” teacher even if we imitate Spalding by naming what preceded us to open the space for what might occur after us.

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In the classroom, I become the Duke Ellington of biblical history, replaying the chord that says,

***I merely took the energy it takes to pout and wrote some blues.***  
- Duke Ellington

What does it sound like to use the “poutings” from previous class experiences to create new forms in the current experience? While Ellington reminds me that I can repurpose frustrations about the erasures that remain in the historical record of biblical studies, Nina Simone teaches me how to do it. From her 1968 tribute to Martin Luther King Jr in the song “[Why the King of Love Is Dead](#)” to the voicing of the oppressed and segregated of the South in her 1960s declaration, “[Mississippi Goddamn](#).” Simone’s jazz form exudes the beauty of combining various genres like jazz, blues, and classical music with her interpretive commentary on “the texts” of her communities. She teaches us that jazz performance can correct the social record and express the perspectives of those unseen and unheard. But her jazz model symbolizes the power of being an artist who inspires. One cannot ignore the inspirational nature that rings from Simone’s song, “[To Be Young, Gifted and Black](#).” Like Spalding, Simone identifies herself as a participant in a stream of artistic creation and declaration that predates her and will continue beyond her. Simone tells the story of how she came to create the song “[To Be Young, Gifted, and Black](#),” crediting Lorraine Hansberry as her point of inspiration and predecessor in celebrating the resilience and beauty of African American genius and identity. Yet Simone participates in that current of historic artistry by bringing her set of jazz skills, style, and education to the task of retelling. Highlighting the stories of disinheritance, misrecognition, and omission, Simone teaches the “Biblical Professor Turned Jazz

Artist” that classroom pedagogy is not just performance and tasks. Pedagogy can be an identity-forming act that updates the historical record with stories and affirmations of those communities overlooked and silenced.

***Jazz is not just music, it’s a way of life, it’s a way of being, a way of thinking.***  
- Nina Simone

Rehearsing the histories of those who inspired and inform our interpretive questions and approaches in the classroom is an important strategy in the biblical classroom. Highlighting formal scholars of the Bible who have produced commentaries, topical books, and essays, and spotlighting the interpretive giants from my respective faith and cultural traditions like Jar-ena Lee or Henry McNeil Turner (both expository biblical interpreters and forebearers in my ecclesial tradition of African Methodism) broadens the biblical record for me and makes room for the histories of global Christianity and other faiths. In so doing, “The Bible Professor Turned Jazz Artist” amplifies the interpretive reverberations already sounding in the classroom space unbeknownst to students.

Sometimes, I post three scholarly perspectives on the same passage on a visual-audio screen. The three academic perspectives differ in terms of approach, social location, cultural and faith communities, and even the questions they are asking of the same passage. Again, students read those sample passages aloud (yes, we do a lot of reading aloud in my classes—it’s jazz, remember?!). We parse what we hear and read, noting what each scholar highlights as crucial in the passage, the respective scholar’s distinct configuration of biblical methods, and the sources of information emphasized. I typically take time to stage this engagement well, giving each scholar their slide with a photo and picture of one of their books alongside the sample paragraph of their perspective.

The point is to help students see that we are not dictating the meaning of biblical texts in a vacuum. A chorus of perspectives and meaning potential exists for any passage. Showcasing various scholars encourages students to invite other voices into their interpretive process. It normalizes the experience of actively seeking to hear the same songs played by other jazz artists in biblical studies. Students, in turn, are invited to drop the facade that they must hide the fingerprints of other interpreters or, worst of all, avoid engaging anyone that reads the text differently from them. Taking the time to name where you, as a teacher-interpreter, derive insight is an essential step in empowering students to do the same. It is a component of the journey through jazz in the biblical classroom and builds students’ familiarity with other conversation partners and potential players in their future interpretive acts. As a result, we can fill the biblical interpretation and history stage with diverse instrumentalists, and we help our students envision that as a necessity of critical biblical interpretation.

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Teaching is not an act. It is a way of life, which means one is constantly growing from one point of knowing to another point of unknowing. The teaching life is involved in a constant cycle of comfort and discomfort. Miles Davis teaches,

***You should never be comfortable, man. Being comfortable fouled up a lot of musicians.***  
Miles Davis



Comfort has been the enemy of the life of the mind played in the biblical academy. Many scholars have forgotten the Bible does not merely belong to them—be it their scholarly circles or religious communities. Comfort can obscure the teacher’s vision and conceal the tracks of the journey. Jazz playing in the classroom reminds us we are yet learners, not teachers. And learning means leaving the lovely nests created by those who mentored, formed, and guided us. We do not have to leave the nest for good. We can always come back. But we must, at least, have the courage to explore another chord in an unusual way.

I cannot help but appreciate the courage it required for Billie Holiday to sing “[Strange Fruit](#)” in 1939 at the height of unchecked American lynching culture with the opening lyrics: “Southern trees bear strange fruit / Blood on the leaves and blood at the root / Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze / Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.” Holiday’s act of performance is also a teaching model. It reminds us of the need for teaching performance to address the question, “So what? Why does this matter?” And the question of “[So What?](#)” has a sound played through the jazz horn of Miles Davis.

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**Wynton Marsalis characterizes jazz music as the power of now. There is no script. It’s conversation. The emotion is given to you by musicians as they make split-second decisions to fulfill what they feel the moment requires.**  
- Wynton Marsalis

Marsalis supplies a formula for the reclamation of the teaching life. His statement can be “played” with an exchange of variables. Instead of “jazz music,” I substitute it with phrases like “the biblical classroom.” Instead of “musicians,” I use the words “teachers and students.” And ta-dah! The statement becomes my own:

**The biblical classroom is the power of now. There is no script. It’s conversation. The emotion is given to you by teachers and students as they make split-second decisions to fulfill what they feel the moment requires.**

**Shively Smith  
(adapted from quotation of Wynton Marsalis)**



I am a jazz artist in biblical studies, history, translations, and hermeneutics. I play many instruments—from the pages of Christian Bibles, Jewish Bibles, and the Qur’an to the accounts of African American women like Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, and Maria Stewart. My friends join me on stage sometimes. Rarely does a performance pass in which Howard Washington Thurman doesn’t make a cameo appearance, and the interpretive antics of Paul Ricoeur and Hans Gadamer do not take form. The silhouette murals of Aaron Douglass and the poetic creations of James Weldon Johnson blend into the soundings of my beloved [Fisk Jubilee Singers](#) when I play as a New Testament biblical scholar-teacher. And with the smiling joy of Shirley Horn, I invite my students to “[Come Dance with Me](#)” in the classroom as we spin our learning sets together. “The Bible Professor Turned Jazz Artist” instigates encounters, guides exploratory excursions into other worlds, and makes interpretive music. In so doing, I ascend the jazz ranks, stepping up and out of the beholder class to she who plays....



#### About the Author

**Shively T. J. Smith**, Assistant Professor of New Testament at Boston University School of Theology, focuses on early Christian letter forms and histories, Howard Thurman, and nineteenth-century African American women’s literature. A summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Fisk University, she earned a master’s degree from Emory University’s Candler School of Theology and Columbia Theological Seminary and her Ph.D. in New Testament studies from Emory University. Smith has authored numerous essays and two books, *Strangers to Family: Diaspora and 1 Peter’s Invention of God’s Household* and *Interpreting 2 Peter through African American Women’s Moral Writings*. Smith is a sought after teacher in the study of the Bible, Howard Thurman, practices in Africana biblical interpretation and histories, and online teaching pedagogies in research and writing.

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# “Be You. Full.”: A Moon Manifesto

Chelsea Brooke Yarborough

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It was a crisp fall evening, and I was bundled up in a chair on my porch, enjoying the vibrancy of the evening's full moon. I am often struck by the moon and the ways that we react to her when we notice that she is full. Her brightness is often blamed for offhanded behavior and extreme circumstances. Yet I have always been in awe of how beautiful she is lighting up the night sky. This night I paused longer than other nights to take in her brilliance with gratitude for this moment of stillness and perspective. I whispered aloud, "I wish you were this bright every night," thinking how great it would be if the moon was always full for me so that I might bask in her presence. It was then I heard a response.

*"I am always full," whispered the moon. "You see me in pieces.  
That doesn't mean that I am in pieces."*

...

Negotiating the parts of myself that show up in the classroom and in this academic life feels like a constant journey. I love to learn, and I love to teach. I love experiencing consciousness expand and perspectives shift. I love delving deeply into new concepts and stories and sharing them across mediums. I love facilitating the courageous work of learning and getting to grow even as I lead. I love exchanging information with colleagues that not only enhances our own projects, but our schools, disciplines, neighborhoods, and the world around us. I love the collaborative possibilities of education and what can happen when our ideas become practice towards a more just world. I love to learn, and I love to teach. However, my love for these things does not supersede my love for my whole, well, and full self.

I am a Black Queer Woman from Baltimore, Maryland, who loves short walks on hot beaches and long walks in the cool woods by a lake or the busy streets of a city. These are important things about me and yet are still only a sliver, a snapshot, amidst the myriad of other identities and experiences that are me in my fullness. I am often frustrated by the ways that institutions, colleagues, students, policies, disciplines, ideologies, societies, and other stakeholders in this journey consistently ask me to show up as only parts of me for their comfort or what they deem useful. It seems like too many places want the markers of diversity without the work of systemic disruption that moves us towards practicing equity and demanding justice. Lately, I have been curious about what it means for me to survive as who I am amidst all of the aggressions (macro and micro) that articulate that I am too much when I show up full. I know it's important to curate how I show up through healthy boundaries, but I won't be contorted by external forces into something that I am not.

I have decided to take my cue from the moon. The moon reminds me that I don't stop being full regardless of the phases that others perceive nor the phasing I must offer for my own protection and flourishing. From this sacred ground of myself I can grow and evolve. I can teach and learn and remain attentive to my fullness.

I wrote this to offer my musings on my mantra from the moon: *Be You. Full.* Whether you read each phase, or stop at a few, I hope you find your own invitation to remember your fullness through this series of fragments.

## New Moon

*The Invisible, Dreaming Phase*

*Like a seed being planted in the earth, such is the new moon.*

As a child, Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech was always so interesting to me because of how frequently people would quote it and find meaning from it years later. As I have gotten older, I wonder how we talk about the dream so easily but ignore the uncomfortable reality that his dream and actions towards that dream got him executed. Dreaming is dangerous when your dream subverts normative ideas that aim to dismantle structures built upon the foundation of supremacy. Dreaming requires the risk of rest in a

world performing wokeness. It demands wonder that won't be constrained by limiting calendar slots and the openness to ideate such that your mind might discern and glimpse at the unexpected. It's hard to be a dreamer who sees the possibilities of a world where all can be well, while living in a world where most people's basic survival is under attack.

The great Black women rhetors and writers that I study remind me that to teach and to proclaim also means to dream and see new possibilities beyond the confines of today's world. Women like Fannie Lou Hamer, Sojourner Truth, Nannie Helen Burroughs, Octavia Butler, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Prathia Hall (to name just a few) push me to delve into my dream space. Their legacies remind me to have the courage to see something otherwise and risk naming what I see in some way. I believe they knew that word could be made flesh and they dreamt, spoke, and wrote to show us glimpses of what they saw such that we might know more and do better.

For me, dreaming requires a time to step away into myself and, sometimes, with other courageous dreamers, letting our visions move beyond what reason would deem possible. In

this phase, that looks like stillness and absence to the unaware eye, I dream. I dream about the world at large. I dream about the communities I am accountable to and the families I come from. I dream of classrooms that equip proclaimers across platforms to change the world through practice partnered with their proclamation. I dream of amplifying voices that have been silenced. I dream of rituals that root us so that we might feel grounded enough to heal and keep going forward. I dream of a world where pain is not the automatic, oppression is not the norm, and injustice is not the epidemic. I dream that the Holy, the sacred, the God-likeness is not intangible but is seen in the very real practices that we might call love. I dream of an earth not under attack by human negligence and a world not stuck in the violence of supremacy. I dream of spaces where the layers of my identity are seen as a rich lens and not a series of liabilities to be managed. I dream of a world where all Black people get to flourish in their fullness. I dream to tend to the rich soil so that seeds of hope have a place to grow.

I don't stress myself or try to dream it all in one sitting for I trust, as sure as the phases change, I will dream again. I will risk and dream and, as much as I can, I will share it. I dream. And because I dream, I teach.

...



## Waxing Crescent Moon

*"...waxing means increasing."*

*Greetings and Salutations Class,<sup>6</sup>*

*[I am the child of]\*\*\* Cassandra and David, two greats that created well together even if it couldn't be for forever.*

*[I am] Daniel's sister, my prototype for innovation whose life raised the bar.*

*I am the auntie of many littles animating the prophetic simply by being who they are.*

*I am granddaughter, great grand, sister, friend, partner, Christian, innovator, daughter, disruptor, enneagram coach, mystic, leadership lover.*

*And many other things I have yet to discover.*

*[I come from] crab cakes, high stakes, Ravens games, half and half, poor representations of who we are, and never too much old Bay.*

*Some call it Baltimore, I just call it home.*

*[I am suspicious of] rhetoric that sounds robust but feels empty.*

*Suspicious of sweeping calls for freedom without the work to dismantle the systems that make freedom feel impossible.*

*[I am hopeful] that painters, poets, writers, musicians, sculptors, and other artists continue to inbreak new futures with their work.*

*[My hope for] Black flourishing [keeps me up at night].*

*[I fight hard for] all Black stories to be told robustly, repeatedly, and right.*

*[I refuse to] be a dream deferred.*

*[Today, God is] love that always looks like justice.*

*[I love being] a Black woman.*

*[I am always] becoming. [How] amazing. How terrifying.*

*[Preaching is] risky when done well.*

*[In this class I hope to learn] more about how to help you preach across platforms and contexts.*

*[A question I bring] is what evidence do we have that preaching aids in positive societal transformation?*

*[I am] The Rev. Dr. Chelsea Brooke Yarborough. She/her.*

*[In this space please call me] Dr. Yarborough or Dr. C. I am. I am. I am.*

I begin each class the same way. I introduce myself with something like the aforementioned piece. It is my way of starting at authenticity and remembering this self who is teaching.<sup>7</sup> Then, after committing to our community agreement, everyone introduces themselves in this format. I feared it would be redundant to do it at each class but the more I teach and have repeat students, I see that as we evolve, so does how we introduce ourselves. In a world set on "you are," I invite students to call in their "I am." Sometimes the prompts change and the length changes, but the intention to offer the class a glimpse of ourselves is there. This is their first proclamation in each class. Some see it as poem and others engage it as prose. Regardless, we learn about who they are. We can't know all of each person, but I believe we give each other a rich beginning that we hope increases. This seed gives us a starting place to approach each other as more than projections of our own fears and insecurities and get into actual engagement. It is also here that we remember that we don't proclaim from an objective lens, but from a deeply integrated lens of all our experiences. From this beginning, the possibility of remembering our own fullness increases even in the limitations of the classroom.<sup>8</sup>

\*\*\*[ ] brackets signify the prompt students can choose from.

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Play



## First Quarter Moon

How are you moving towards the dream?

How are you attending to the seeds you planted in the New moon?<sup>10</sup>

Retreats are the way I keep the rhythms of my life together. The everyday is so important but the everyday for me is best organized and grounded in concentrated times away. I quickly learned that attending to my fullness meant a winter retreat and a summer retreat with myself or one other person to set up the calendar thinking about my wellness, teaching, writing, community, and other responsibilities together. I am learning everything can't be done at the same time, so I find it best to work on four to six months at a time. This

practice allows for me stay grounded and present to the many practices that keep me well and attentive to my fullness.

### Sample Retreat Structure:

Ideally Monday to Thursday (three-night, four-day retreat). This is work so it's in the work week. It can be time away in another city, a retreat down the street, or a time you set up in your home. Different times call for different things. Take lots of breaks and offer yourself some reward each night, regardless of how much you finish.

### Day 1: Arrival

Set the space in a way that will enhance creativity and open up clarity. For me, that means comfortable seating, notepads, markers, candles, and large calendars. I first ask, "What is the dream right now for me, my relationships, my work, and the world around me?" Lately my dreams have been rooted in rest as a foundational commitment even in the work,<sup>11</sup> justice centered pedagogy and practice,<sup>12</sup> and rhythms that acknowledge I am life and love, not labor and liability.

### Day 2: Inventory

**AM:** This is time to organize and prioritize what's on our plate. What are the categories? Then, what are the eggs (things that will break when dropped), the bouncy balls (things that won't break but may bounce away for me to catch), and the rocks (the things that will be fine and be what they are regardless)?<sup>13</sup> *Tip Towards Fullness:* Wellness and the things that are critical to it are always eggs on this list because I find that if I don't prioritize them, I will act like they are a rock until they break.

**PM:** With each goal/task on your plate, break it down into smaller parts. Then try to give the smaller parts actual time slots. Things change week by week, but I find it helpful to place things into the calendar as much as possible.<sup>14</sup>

### Day 3: Syllabus Day

**AM:** (1) What are the goals of the course and the values undergirding the course? How do they support your dream? (2) What assignments will support those goals and are shaped by those values? (3) What collaborators are needed? (4) What readings, videos, podcasts, art, and other resources will support student learning?

**PM:** Finish the morning's work and if there's more time, I start week-by-week sketches creating a shape for the class. *Tip for Fullness:* I look at my personal calendar while prepping my syllabus. It helps me honor my capacity and rhythms happening outside when assigning deadlines for the course.

### Day 4: Celebration

**Begin:** Review – Create a list of what still needs to be done to feel most energized and prepared. Put time to do that in the calendar.

**End:** Offer gratitude for what you were able to get done and a delicious meal to celebrate taking actions towards that which you envision for yourself, your work, and the many ecosystems you exist in.

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## Waxing Gibbous Moon

Increasing Each Moment to Full

Reflect. Remember.  
People. Places. Practices.  
That Love You To Full.

To my friends who have seen me through many evolutions and cycles and still call me beloved

To my family who love me for who I am and far beyond what I do

To my mentors who said, "be more of you, not a replica of me."

To my colleagues that consider collaboration more interesting than competition

To my partner who sees all my flaws and still doesn't consider me in fragments

To my church mothers that stuffed money in my hand and whispered affirmations in my ear

To my sisters in this work, birthed from zoom writing sessions into forever co-conspirators

To my ancestors, who move mountains with your wisdom or give me strategy for the climb

To my littles, I work so you have a better world to breathe and be beloved in

To my folks who I have yet to meet but will teach me more about love and myself

To my God, who always remains with me as intimate as my breath and still extends far beyond the expansiveness of the cosmos.

To all of you, I love you.

Thank you for consistently reminding me of my fullness in all phases.

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## Full Moon

"Sometimes it's not the right answers that we need, but the right questions to catch hold and stir you." "What if I am the one I've been waiting for all these years?"<sup>17</sup>

### Mirror Work: You are a Solution

What if I told you that you were the joy you were looking for?

You were the pleasure you seek and wonder if it's

possible?

What if I told you that your flesh says just ask and it shall be given

That your spirit has never missed a beat

And even on your worst days you're still dust and divinity

You are a solution

Not an obstruction

Not a manmade gaze, haze, or maze

You are no one's problem unless they choose to make you one

You are the daughter of fertile earth

And the raging sun

You are not a problem, but a solution

Only an optical illusion to those who have committed to the lies that try to catalyze your demise

All the while they surmise that

You are the problem? Nah

You are the best that was yet to come

You are the hope of the collective and also the breath of the one



You are creativity.

Your flesh a journal reminiscent of the imagination that  
allows blank pages to become poems from the heart  
Empty canvases to breathe as works of art  
Silence to become sweet harmony  
A dream deferred to become one that's free

You are summer's sun and her warm embrace,  
You are adornment of fall trees and the truth they reveal as show their branches bare face.  
You are the peace in their pause of their external show to focus on their winter rooting  
And the opulence of their emergence in their spring fashion of fruiting

You are the best day you can imagine  
The best meal you can fathom  
The most stunning image your eyes can conceive  
The lushest moment of life  
And all the joys that it can bring.

You are both an ancestor and a descendent  
Even as you are right here and present  
You are power and you are peace  
The gift of the beauty and the beast  
Not perfect, but enough  
Stunningly sensitive, and yet still tough  
You are your best lesson  
So please hear this question...

A simple invitation. One that I hope you will consider.  
What if you simply believed what I said was true?  
And that I described was still only a fragment of the fullness that is you.

What if I told you that you were the joy you were looking for?  
You were the pleasures you seek and wonder if they are possible?  
What if I told you that your flesh says just ask and it shall be given  
That your spirit has never missed a beat  
And even on your worst days you're the best of dust and divinity

...

### Waning Gibbous Moon

*"The Waning Gibbous phase is when the lit-up part of the Moon shrinks from 99.9% to 50.1%."*<sup>19</sup>

I remember the first time I felt myself shrink in class. It was not the first time I felt like I wanted to shrink in general, but this felt so intense. It was like all the insecurities I was trying to work through as a teacher were thrown in my face in a single sentence. I was a teaching assistant at the time and during class an older Black male pastor disagreed with something I said. He smirked, "I have been preaching longer than you've been alive." I was already nervous; it was one of the first classes I was teaching by myself. I wanted to disappear because some part of me heard truth in what he said. Instead of hearing the fact that yes, it may be true, I believed his disqualification of my presence for a moment. Later, angry at myself for mostly ignoring him, I spoke to a mentor, also a Black woman, about what happened. She honored the difficulty of responding professionally in the moment and helped me claw my way out of the shame of my silence. She also told me I would have other opportunities to choose a different response, telling me her own tales of these all-too-frequent backhanded comments. She was right. The very next semester I had a white male student who spent the majority of the class trying to prove to me he knew more than I could ever teach him. As he disagreed with me



about the need to do exegetical work for each sermon, he almost yelled, "I have been a pastor and preached far more than you." My response, "And yet, I am still the professor." He had no reply and I kept moving. I still don't know if that was the "perfect" response, but I do know that I felt peace on the other side.

Moments of shrinking can happen. When you are constantly under the attack of aggressions that manifest themselves as backhanded comments, dismissals of your role, tears marked with the DNA of fragility, and an overarching confusion by your presence, it can be hard to remain clear on the mirror work and the person you know to be full everywhere you are. Thanks to my mentor, I am reminded to take these moments as lessons about how I might respond and not as invitations to evaluate my quality or qualifications.

There have been more moments when I found myself shrinking or trying to contort myself into something otherwise to fit in. I hate it. And I am also proud of the times I recognize the phase and keep moving, knowing that I don't have to stay there. I study women who were asked to be small, but who chose to be big. They were asked to be disgusted by their existence, and they chose to be disgusted with the state of the world and worked to create more beauty in it. Their flesh was pointed towards as a liability, and instead they saw their flesh as life. In their legacy, even as I phase, I do my best to remember to return to fullness and learn from the experience.

...

### Last Quarter Moon

Inventory

*"It can be difficult to release something you hoped would grow. But this release makes room for something new and perhaps better."*<sup>21</sup>

My late mentor Dale P. Andrews ended every class the same way: "I have more questions than I have answers, more problems than solutions. It is from these gifts I freely share." I keep this close to my heart. It is in the questions, the wonderings, that I find the deepest gifts. Who am I today? What parts of who I am feel amplified? How is that "I am" impacting my pedagogy, my writing, and my work? Sometimes it's asking, "Why didn't that work?" about something I thought would be amazing in class, that helps me more than a completely smooth class. Often, it's being honest about the ways I am always recovering from this world rooted in white supremacy and apologizing when I act out of scarcity and enact harm, even if I don't mean to. It is in asking "How can I honor the fullness of others?" that I also stand in my fullness. As I move through these phases, honoring my questions, my wonderings, and my concerns, I also ask, "What does the dream look like now?"



## Waning Crescent Moon

*"Find inner peace and reconnect with yourself, surrendering all that has happened that is out of our control, before the lunar cycle begins again."<sup>23</sup>*

Every shut eye ain't sleep. This phrase often heard amongst elders made me laugh as I was growing up, and I get it now more than ever. Things are not always what they seem and that's often strategic. Every shut eye ain't sleep. Every silence isn't without opinion. Every aggression ignored isn't because there's no fight. Every moment disengaged isn't because there isn't something to put energy into. Sometimes, and perhaps often, these choices are strategies for survival. They are for regeneration. They help me create boundaries that protect my energy and allow me to use it where it is most fruitful. They help me find pockets of rest even in the work. For folks who only engage the sliver, my most powerful tool is not to attend to their small pieces, but to regenerate and find my fullness. I choose when I engage and also when I must regenerate so I have the energy to dream again.

...

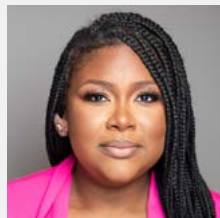
*"I am always full," said the moon.  
"Thank you for the reminder," I replied as I gazed at  
her brilliance.*



The moon is always full to herself and sometimes she offers us the wonder of her fullness too. However, even when we only see the tiniest sliver of her presence and even when she sits behind the sun for an evening in new moon, her existence still offers a gift to the night sky.

The moon gave me an invitation that night on my porch. She invited me to full. She reminded me that fullness is about how I see me, not how others determine who I am. I am committed to believing in my fullness even in the phases of this teaching life. The teaching life is a beautiful life and one I am grateful to be in. The teaching life can also be hard because there are a myriad of systemic realities that make it hard to remember how full, how enough, how brilliant, how evolving, how necessarily flawed, and how beautiful we truly are. My identity cannot be determined by my institutions, classrooms, or my work. Those are phases, a part of me, but I am full regardless.

For all of my Black folks, Women folks, LGBTQIA+ folks, POC folks, Disabled folks, Neurodivergent folks, Fat folks, nontraditional story folks, Immigrant folks, Poor folks, and all other folks asked to be fragments, I hope you will join with me. Remember your fullness and hold to it, relentlessly.



### About the Author

**Chelsea Brooke Yarborough** was born and raised in Baltimore, Maryland. She received her PhD from Vanderbilt University in Homiletics and Liturgics and is the Assistant Professor African American Preaching, Sacred Rhetoric, and Black Practical Theology at Phillips Theological Seminary in Tulsa, OK. Her current research reimagines the nature and purpose of preaching and worship through the rhetorical and ritual practices of Black women throughout history. Most importantly she is a daughter, a friend, a sister, an auntie, and a partner. Her work aims to decenter normative systems of power and paradigms of proclamation by considering platforms beyond the pulpit for the voices of preachers. Dr. Yarborough is also an Enneagram coach, a poet, and group facilitator for team building. Most importantly she is a daughter, a friend, a sister, an auntie, and a partner. Her motto is "live to love and love to live each day" and she is excited to continue her journey of cultivating curiosity and helping people find and use their voice.

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# On Pedagogies of *Acolhimento*

Yohana Junker

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The following passages are patches of life-torn-to-pieces during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Each asterisk marks a snapshot that brought into being the various pedagogies of *acolhimento* shared in this piece.

\*

**The last two weeks of March felt disorienting.** Though streets, parks, businesses, schools, clinics, and markets felt the haunting weight of absence, hospitals were filling up in accelerated ways. COVID-19 had come to stay and wreak havoc in our lives. Most of us spent the following months of 2020 attempting to mitigate the effects of the pandemic while trying to understand how to continue to move despite orders to shelter in place. Nothing about this experience was predictable or uncomplicated. The spaces, relations, and habitats that had kept us grounded in our bodies, communities, and land were suspended for an undetermined time.

\*

Just as the sun was setting across the Bay that afternoon in May, Daniela showed up at my door with a bouquet of lilies, a bottle of champagne, and a CD autographed by Fabiana Cozza. She had arrived by surprise with an enormous bag of kindness—a care package she had intuited I needed. We had just spent a good hour on the phone commiserating: we missed our circles of love, friendship, and intimacy. Dani understood—on a visceral level—how the pandemic had impacted me, us. Before I could open the door, she gestured for me to get close to the window and held a note against the window glass: “I wish I could hug you right now. I wish we could pop this bottle and dance to Fabiana’s music. I am so proud of you, Doctor Yô!! You did it!! I love you. And, also: fuck COVID.” We both cried. As a neurodiverse person, being utterly alone, isolated, and physically distant from family, friends, the classroom, places of *convivência*, and communities of *acolhimento* was terrifying. How were we to create life out of the impossibility of one as we once knew it? How could we walk over the abysses of isolation, grief, and loss? How were we to show up fully to these experiences, aware of their traumatic and compounding effects?

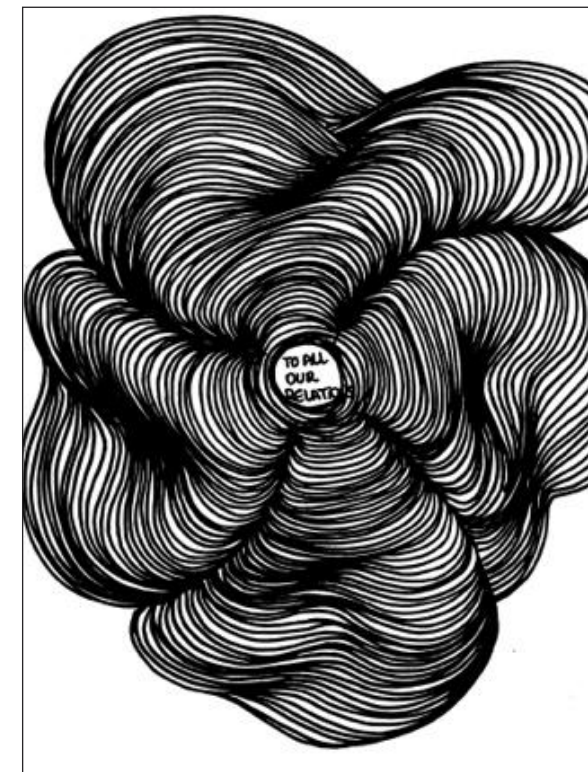
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The more I tried to journal to process thoughts, emotions, and trauma responses, the more distressed I became. My attempts at quieting the mind through breathing and contemplative practices were yielding a reverse effect. Mania. Psychosis. As I shuffled through my art supplies one morning, I came across a gift from my brother: two almost brand-new sketchbooks. I opened one of them and found the written phrase right in the middle of the page: *To All Our Relations*. I smiled. I touched the textured mixed-media paper and remembered Winona LaDuke’s book. Gosh, where is it? I look for it incessantly. I can’t find it. Never mind, it must be somewhere. On the shelf is Linda Hogan’s *Dwellings*. I remember crying when I read her writing on the eagle’s feather. Is Rubem Alves still here? Where is that children’s book, my home away from home for over thirty-seven years? What’s the title again? *How Happiness Was Born*? Oh, good, Anzaldúa is here. Where have all those tiny, majestic books from Krenak gone? Is the *Falling Sky* gone, too? I run my hands through the string of books until I find that silver hardcover I hadn’t opened in months. Ufa, Adélia Prado hasn’t vanished. Neither have Hilda, Gumbs, Lorde, Butler, hooks, and Alexander. Did I lend *Mud Woman*? To whom? Why do I always do this? I need a system. The thought of not locating these books asphyxiated me. They were both my root system and oxygen. They had been helping me weave webs of *acolhimento* and grounded-ness over unknowns for many years.

Gosh, what am I to do with this pile of research on Bathsheba? Did I submit the chapter already? Did I miss the deadline? I can’t remember. I need to remember to check my email soon. Did I take my meds yesterday? Why do I feel so dizzy? Am I nauseous again? Damn, did I take the meds twice? My body is dealing with so much inflammation. Nothing I feed it seems to be doing any good. I need to do groceries. I am scared. Am I at a greater risk of Covid? Yes, I am. Why do I have diabetes at this age? That article definitely kept me up last night. Was it all fabricated? Is this what bio-chemical wars look like? Whatever. There is a wave of evictions in the Bay. Are students safe enough? I will start an income redistribution page. Let’s get people donating. Folks have got to eat and sleep. I am so furious at all of this. Should we all just collectively scream? Are our animal siblings ok? I will put out water for the deer. Will they find water and shelter from all this smoke? Is my brain spinning out of control? I need to go for a walk. But. We can’t breathe outside the house. And my soul can’t seem to move like this, from trauma to trauma. Did I take my meds last night? I can’t remember. I feel so strange. I don’t even know what will become of the online classes, tbh. Classes start in what? A week? I wish I could talk to someone. Can’t remember the last time I was able to go to therapy. This is hellish. I need to get my act together.

\*

As my mind spun out of control, I remembered why I was holding the sketchbook in my hands. Yes, that’s right, I was supposed to be drawing. Oh, my goodness, the shakiness again. I really need to breathe. Let me find a quiet place for this. I sat down with the drawing pad and opened to the page that read: *To All Our Relations*. I reached for a sharpie and drew a tiny circle around the phrase I must have written when a surge of creative electricity had run through my body, only to be distracted by another racing thought and those brain freezes and dizziness I get from time to time. Before I knew it, I was drawing waves and more waves. I was breathing deeply. With each line, a breath in and another breath out. After seeing a couple of lines on the page, the cadence of my thoughts had changed, and the contours on that sheet of paper gave rise to gratification. I kept coming back to this notebook. Each day, a different phrase, new lines, invocations, sensations, and declarations. The gifts, bags of kindness, the Sharpies, the phone conversations, the impromptu visits divided by wall, glass, windows, the books, meals shared through great distances, and the care packages all revealed aspects of our community’s capacity to conjure life, however fragmentarily. The act of drawing, breathing, journaling, and reinventing community became the very sites and sights for world-making, dreaming, rehearsing, and choreographing new possibilities of being and intervening in a world that COVID-19 had just undone at the seams.



This particular drawing gave rise to an intentional and daily art practice at the peak of the lockdown. It allowed me to metabolize grief, mitigate fatigue, and regulate my neurodiversity. I could sense how, day by day, I was counteracting the helplessness that so quickly shapeshifted into hopelessness. As the practice took root, I began to think of the lives and loves of those entering the classroom. What was sustaining them? What gave teacher-learners a sense of rootedness during those first weeks of lockdown? I wondered whether they were eating, sleeping, or finding a quiet enough spot to study, read, and be comforted. To those near and far, I wondered about their geopolitical contexts and whether they had access to technology as learning tools. Would they have access to healthcare should they need it? Taking my cue from the many decolonial, somatic, trauma-informed, experiential praxes, mentors, and teachers who had attempted to interrupt dominant and oppressive ways of learning and teaching, I began to incorporate creative practices into the classroom. The first gesture toward this shift was a series of Love-Lectures I wrote students during a course I co-taught with Jeff Chang entitled “Living Democracy: Image and Culture.” I closed each session with the epistolary practice, hoping each letter I had written longhand could provide a kind of connective tissue, a bleeding, a pouring from my heart to theirs.

From centering and closing moments to building sacred altars to engaging with artworks, teacher-learners were also invited to imaginatively co-create devotionals, rituals, meditations, art, embodied work, creative projects, spiritual practices, and much more. At that time, I was being responsive to Lama Rod Owens' call to embodiment as a coming home to our bodies, opening spaciousness that could allow us to respond to the wounds and wonders of the now. "Disembodiment," he writes, "is the primary strategy through which oppression is maintained," precisely because we become desensitized to the conditions around us and lose awareness of our inner and collective realities. By turning to creative practices, we were able to call back a pedagogy of *acolhimento* into the classroom.

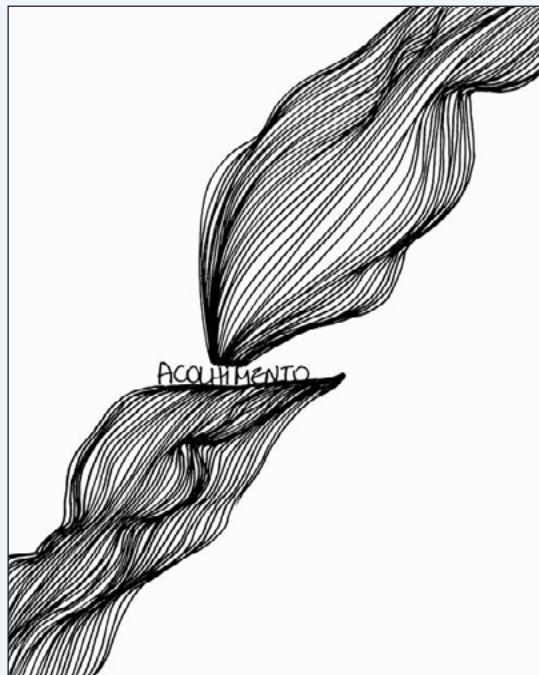
*Acolhimento* is a word in Portuguese that has no translation to English. It is an act and an effect of receiving tenderness—the very opposite of isolation and loneliness. It is a manner of creating space with others where our whole selves are welcomed, considered, and regarded deeply. *Acolhimento* is a gratuitous shelter, a deep practice of hospitality. And it is so much more than that. It is an embrace, a soothing bath, and clean sheets after arduous travel. *Acolhimento* lives and breathes in the enfolding we receive when the load is unwieldy and when experiences are felt-with. It's an honoring of all that we are and have gone through. It is a deep and intimate welcoming. In *acolhimento*, there is no place for judgment and plenty of place for rest, reciprocity, joy, and tenderness. To *acolher* is to invoke the sacred into a space, it is the probing of each other's being, a profound act of presence, of saying: "I see the entirety and the miracle of you." It's an offer, a prayer, a gesture, a poem. It's a bundle of herbs

that brush up against our soft skin and awaken the divine within. It's a reclamation of our collective right to be whole, to be healed, and to be here.

Such pedagogy of *acolhimento*, of meeting students as and where they were, engendered yet another bundle of kindness: the Spiritual Care Packages, designed based on each week's readings, the unfolding of the pandemic, the rise of anti-Black racism and anti-Asian hate, the wildfires of a boiling earth. It was a practice that my colleague and co-teacher, Dr. Aizaiah Yong, welcomed into our Spiritual Practices Class. They became a series of centering and creative exercises that invited us to meditate, embody, and create for about one full hour per week. The packages included prompts to draw, assemble elements from nature, rest, experiment with the senses, and have sensorial experiences that helped us to deal with what had been accumulating in our flesh, cognition, and senses. This also provided opportunities for creative embodiment, integrating what students learned in class with their lived experiences, somatic processes, spiritual traditions, and research. The Spiritual Care Packages ritualized and generated spaces that allowed us all to tap into the power of our spiritualities and creative vigor. In moments of pain, dis-ease, conflict, and unknowingness, these spirit bundles gave us a container to see, touch, and create in exuberant ways. After all, art allows

us to become anchored in our bodies, access, re-member, and revive "what most links us with life."

Thanks to the support of Wabash Teaching Grants, I was able to understand the psychological impact of these exercises by holding conversations with Dr. Miriam Rosa dos Santos, a clinical psychologist and embodied healing facilitator from my home country of Brazil. Dr. Santos helped me understand how a heightened sense of anxiety, stress, and neurosis is very much present in contexts such as the ones where these activities took place. Not only was the pandemic looming large, but teacher-learners were navigating graduate studies, which placed tremendous demands on us psychologically, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. These numerous pressures, she explained, tend to "stiffen" us as we try to minimize our pain and sense of vulnerability. By doing so, however, we also limit our ability to be creative, experience transformation, and perhaps even healing. To Dr. Santos, creative practices that can be sustained over time, such as the ones proposed in the Spiritual Care Packages give participants an opportunity to broaden and "soften" their view of themselves and their communities while



engaging in exercises outside of the demands of the classrooms. As a praxis of *acolhimento*, they can enhance our sense of compassion, confidence, and vulnerability, making us more adaptable and capable of undoing harm, stress, and trauma. Some of the critical reflections from teacher-learners at the end of the semester named the implications of having other learning modalities available to them. They reflected on both thoughts and feelings engaged in the readings and discussions, which led to a visible improvement in self-awareness over the course of the semester. Some students named that having the freedom to experiment with the format of final projects gave them an incredible sense of agency over their learning.

The careful curation of the weekly exercises was my attempt to open a space of *acolhimento* in the classroom, tracing the sensations, behaviors, and emotions that emerged in each moment. As Cornelia Elbrecht put it, these creative exercises help to implicitly trace discomfort, distress, and pain, to transform them in tangible ways. This approach, she writes, transforms passive suffering into active responses, which can move us "from survival to gradually feeling alive." Calling back the split-off parts of ourselves, she explains, these exercises "turn into a carefully titrated dance between what happened once, how the body responded at the time, and what the body needs to heal."

Pedagogies of *acolhimento* have allowed me to co-create and invent new ways to resist and exist in the classroom, even in the face of the most dehumanizing and traumatizing experiences. They have nurtured a creative becoming that establishes the learning community as a locus for returning to our bodies, cultures, ways of knowing, ancestral ties, spiritual traditions, and creative power. Through these practices and pedagogies, learner-teachers have met and supported one another, trusting our inner and collective courage to face the abysses as they open beneath our feet. They have allowed us to aerate the classrooms. And, by moving such stagnant air and energy, we have made space for the expansive, connective, and emergent collective, integrating what was once dissociated into a conjuring of new worlds.



#### About the Author

**Yohana A. Junker** (she/hers) is an Assistant Professor of Art, Religion, and Culture at Claremont School of Theology and Associate Dean for Strategic Planning. Her research probes the intersections of art, religion, and decolonial studies, with particular attention to contemporary art practices across the Americas. Her art practice is informed by an embodied poetics of resistance, justice, and healing. As an ongoing learner of healing modalities, she investigates how artists, spiritual seekers, and healers create sacred spaces that allow us to reclaim our sense of agency and wholeness even in the face of impossibility.

# Tell the Truth and Shame the Devil: Testimony and Justice from Ferguson to the Classroom

Seth Emmanuel Gaiters

University of North Carolina-Wilmington

“At approximately noon on Saturday, August 9, 2014...”

Lezley McSpadden, *Tell the Truth and Shame the Devil*

Histories cannot be more certain than when he who creates the things also narrates them.

Giambattista Vico, *New Science*

The linking of those gone, ourselves here, those coming; our continuation, our flowing not along any meretricious channel but along our living way, the way: it is that remembrance that calls us. The eyes of seers should range far into purposes. The ears of hearers should listen far toward origins. The utterers' voice should make knowledge of the way, of heard sounds and visions seen, the voice of the utterers should make this knowledge inevitable, impossible to lose.

Ayi Kwei Armah, *Two Thousand Seasons*

There are these moments in which it seems time stands still. When everything seems to stop. Without closing your eyes, in your mind's eye, the recollection is so strong that you can still imagine yourself there. Our brains are so delicate and fragile; they imprint the details of the sudden and the tragic. At a cellular level there are these microscopic scripts we enfold where the body, with all of its unfathomable material, affective, and spiritual qualities, internally shares stories of tragedy and our place in it. As humans we (in)voluntarily tell our stories. We testify. We bear witness. We first tell our stories to ourselves, and we remember them, before we direct those stories to others and the world. The body remembers. Anne E. Streaty Wimberly put it so well, “Story is a powerful part of human existence...our stories are the ‘sacred texts’ of our lives.”<sup>1</sup> Life is a story in evolution that is formed from the narratives around us, and we both shape the storied world around us and find our place in it by testifying and sharing our stories too. We must remember the sacred texts of our lives.

## LM and the Traumatic

After her son's death, Lezley McSpadden testifies to the visceral registration of the tragic and consequently chronicles, through life narrative, what Henry Louis Gates calls “the impulse to bear witness.”<sup>2</sup> Someone called her cell phone. And she answered, “Hello.” “Somebody been shot on Canfield.” When first hearing this she “quickly straightened up...beginning to shake all over...hands trembling now.” Though the details were not fully clear yet, they were nevertheless foreboding fragments formidably fomenting fear since her mother lived in the Canfield Apartments and her son Michael Brown had been visiting her for the summer. McSpadden remarks, “I swallowed, my mouth was all of a sudden dry, and I felt a dull thud fill my chest...trying to stay in control, but my hand holding the cigarette was now shaking uncontrollably.” Between sobs Brittanie, her sister, “was able to get out eight words: ‘Nette Pooh, the police just shot Mike Mike.’” Shell shock settles in; “I heard her, but my mind wasn't trying to understand nothing like that. I quietly started gasping for air. What she had just said was trapped between my ears like some muddy standing water...A gust of wind shot through my body, and then like lightning...tears exploded from my eyes...” The poetic and creative expressions she mobilizes to demonstrate the viscosity of her fear, anxiety, rage, tears, and grief, in colliding with this traumatic event, share the emotional valence of her memoir as testimony. She testifies to move us—into the truth she knows so deeply settled in her bones. Registering within her body is an impulse and compulsion to Tell the Truth and Shame the Devil, as her memoir is entitled. While within the devastation she lyricizes the life, legacy, and love of her son Michael Brown as a way of creatively getting at the truth and refusing the satanic capture of that devastation. The truth shut up in her bones she cannot forbear to tell. Through autobiography she bears witness. She remembers her story out loud.<sup>3</sup>

## SG – Faith and Justice

I wasn't there. I didn't go to Ferguson. I was not there to face the extremely militaristic police force. I did not experience the punch and bruising of their rubber bullets. My head did not ache nor did my ears ring, because of the shrill of the sound canons they call LRADS (Long Range Acoustic Devices). I did not need

a comrade to rinse my eyes out with milk to quell the irritation of tear gas that was fired my way. I was working on writing my thesis paper to complete a Master of Theology Degree at a seminary in Pasadena, CA. There was no curfew behind my desk, no armored vehicles passing by my window to regulate my complicated and controversial thoughts about race and religion. I wasn't there, but I was there. The moment and the movement, which exploded through it, reached me. Though I had participated in Los Angeles-based actions before this, beginning with the outcry following Trayvon Martin's death, Michael Brown and Ferguson left me with new eyes; after this activation I saw things differently.

There was something powerful about August 9, 2014, the Uprising in Ferguson, and the Movement for Black Lives that ensued which changed me and transfigured my conception of faith. It left me asking, “How can you espouse a faith that has no connection to justice?” James Cone had learned through the conjuncture of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, that faith “is not abstract but concrete, not neutral but committed.”<sup>5</sup> I had learned this too, through this contemporary movement. Beginning with *Black Theology and Black Power*, Cone, clearing his throat, clarifies that decrying racial domination and “speaking truth to power” on behalf of the least of these is a faithful act demanded by the gospel. As such, Cone actualized the practice of his faith through scholarship. Cone's scholarly awakening and vocation to justice came through his convergence with the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, whereas I found my own came through collision with the BLM movement. I too recognized my vision of scholarship expanding as an explicit act of faith working through justice. Through my concrete experience, beyond the theorizations of others, I learned that the question of the relationship between faith and justice, or religion and social movement, or the gospel and liberation is very much alive, through the testimony of others. Their testimonies moved me and I have heeded the powerful call to story by testifying myself. The question of faith and justice abides, is active, and continues to remain unresolved. It was through my own kairotic access to this catalytic moment that the question was revived in me. Entirely attributable to the Spirit's guidance, the movement, contending with tragedy, taught me and offered me a renewed opportunity to explore this inexhaustible intersection, in a world in which the condition of Black life remains in the wake of anti-Black violence. Now. I. Know. What. Faith. Means. I could not believe what I was seeing. I remember sitting in front of my computer screen and watching this moment and trying to figure out what happened. And pondering deeply about what was happening, in that moment. I wish I could detail the paradigm shift that was registering in the cells of my body. Something characteristic of what Thomas Kuhn would call a “revolution” of knowing. It was like “scales falling from my eyes,” an attempt at answering “flashes of intuition,” like lightning striking me through the computer screen, and into a “conversion.”<sup>6</sup>

The movement taught me. Ferguson forced me to answer a call. This call somehow became clearer through tragedy and required I find my footing in scholarship to follow it. For this entry I consider the place of testimony in the learning process, in a moment and context that demands justice. I am particularly interested



in examining the phenomenon of testimony within the African American tradition as a way of teaching connections between faith and justice. For instance, what does education and scholarship in social justice mean, from the perspective of faith? And how are teaching and research impacted by the vocation of involvement in justice? I contend that the practice of testimony, emanating from traditions and practices of Black political faith, has pedagogical value in academic formation. Testimony is needed in protest and building connections for marginalized communities. Comparatively I explore fragments of three different stories of “that day” (August 9, 2014)—two testimonies I have already begun to pry open, and one sterilized account: these are Lezley McSpadden’s story in Ferguson, my own story in absentia, while in Pasadena, and the report of the Department of Justice (DOJ) scripted from the many hours several officials took peddling about Brown’s lifeless body. I want the comparative collision of these multiple layers—of testimonies alongside an administrative report—to illuminate another analytical layer that examines how testimony provides pedagogical value in teaching justice. I do this through stories, through testimony: Lezley McSpadden (indicated by “LM”), my own (indicated by “SG”), and the Department of Justice Report (indicated by “DOJR”).

### Testimony and Protest

Black people in America are familiar with the knowledge-making and spiritual power of testimony. Testimony is a weapon, an ideological weapon, a counter-narrative, a counter-discourse, a sword of the word that Black people have wielded to contend with the racial regime of anti-blackness and white supremacy, and other forms of domination interconnected with it, that seek to obscure the voice and obfuscate the humanity of oppressed communities, so that their needs are obnubilated and out of sight. Testimony is a type of political engagement, as it is “a personal story that contains a message from a subordinated group involved in political struggle.”<sup>7</sup> This understanding of “testimony” is also carried by other subordinated groups; such as, “testimonio,” which elsewhere finds expression in the works of Latinx scholars.<sup>8</sup> Unless McSpadden and others practice this tradition of telling and retelling their experiences as knowledge from the margins they cannot talk back. Testifying is how they speak truth to power. Testimony is a way of interrogating the “official ideological accounts of the story of the Republic”<sup>9</sup>—such as the “Department of Justice Report Regarding the Criminal Investigation into the Shooting Death of Michael Brown”—and getting at the truth that many times gets obscured through the amnesiac sterility of various administrative formalities, procedures, and regulative protocols. Instead of acquiescing to the sterile abstractions and forgetfulness of the powerful, African Americans and other marginalized communities have remained committed to what Toni Morrison, in her magisterial text *Beloved*, termed “rememory,” the remembering and reassembling of experiences past.<sup>10</sup> Rememory is a burden not only embodied in Black culture, due to the weight of traumatic history during and after slavery, but it is also an en fleshed practice of remembering correctly and sharing the story of that trauma in spite of the systematic and intentional distortion of historical fact in white culture. Pedagogy can and is used imperially. But McSpadden, grounded in a tradition of truth-telling, remembers—or remem-

ories—to tell the truth and shame the devil. Though the trauma follows her, in opening herself and releasing through testimony what is within her, she claims her self and her truth in spite of a world that seeks to deny both her and her testimony. Without her testimony, “as Hegel had it, there could be no ordered repetition or memory, and without memory, there could be no history. Without history, there could be no self.”<sup>11 12</sup> And she refused to let go of herself and her son.

Shrieks, cries, cursing, yelling, screaming, lamenting, anger, joy, celebration, shouting, writing, dancing, and the myriad ways in which an en fleshed testimony takes shape reminds us of the truth of the humanity we are hearing. Testimony takes us beyond protocol, juridical reports, and media reviews. In *Bearing Witness*, Gates writes, “If the individual black self could not exist before the law, it could and would be forged in language, as a testimony at once to the supposed integrity of the black self and against the social and political evils that delimited individual and group equality for all African Americans.”<sup>13</sup> McSpadden will not remain silent. She testified, bore witness, and both claimed and proclaimed herself and her son as an intrinsic part of the world.<sup>14</sup> Lifting up her voice she reminds us she is Michael Brown’s Mama, that he is her baby, and that they deserve(d) so much more—love, justice. Following testimony, we land in what Theodore Adorno describes as, “the condition[s] of truth, [which] is to allow suffering to speak.” For the scholar, listening to the testimonies of the oppressed and their suffering, alongside their own testimony, must be part and parcel to the work of scholarship in getting at truth, in both teaching and research.

My research and teaching help me make sense of things; they help me to get at truth and understand false claims. On the one hand, they help name the lies and distortions of the powerful and the privileged, and on the other hand, they help me to more acutely amplify and appreciate the truths that those without power and privilege are telling. They offer me the opportunity to experiment and connect human experiences with theories that illuminate those experiences, and by taking those human experiences into consideration they also let me interrogate those theories. In fact, scholarship for me is an act of faith: it presents me with instruments and opportunities in building a just world. Listening and embedding these tools within the testimony of everyday people guides the work and insight of research and teaching to a just world. In this sense, testimony provides pedagogical value in teaching justice and can be a part of reorienting us to new perspectives of the world, as just and habitable for all. To this end, teaching and research must be grounded in love and justice—which is a new way of looking at the world, where the “first are last and the last first.” Our stories are linked, compassionate listening is encouraged, and the conditions for community are created.

The witness of this contemporary social movement and the movement space it created—closing distance and building relationships—participates in this long tradition of truth-telling. McSpadden is a witness raptured up into this movement space as well. As Deva Woodly so wonderfully positions us to perceive in *Reckoning: Black Lives Matter and the Democratic Necessity of Social Movement*, I believe the BLM movement has so much

to teach us about democracy, radicalism, faith, power, justice, “and the pragmatic paths toward making other worlds politically possible. And though I am neither architect nor visionary of this movement, I am a witness. The movement made me a witness.” And what I write or teach is my testimony: it is “an act of political care rendered by way of scholarship,” because this language of research and teaching is a language I know well and a service that I can faithfully render.<sup>15</sup> I must tell the story.

### DOJ – The Report

#### Department of Justice Report Regarding the Criminal Investigation into the Shooting Death of Michael Brown by Ferguson, Missouri Police Officer Darren Wilson (DOJR):

“Wilson shot Brown at about 12:02 p.m. on August 9, 2014.” (8)

It seems the epigenetic impact of trauma illuminates that we are physiologically and psychologically inclined to tell stories. Autobiographical memory is genetic. We are anatomically inclined to autobiography, even at a cellular level. The body remembers. The body keeps score.<sup>16</sup> There are pains of the past that will never leave us. It’s like an assertion elsewhere of Howard Thurman I remember: “Black people carry the memory of lynching in their bodies and that the nation as a whole has not come to terms with the history of lynching.”<sup>17</sup> Living in such realities, Black people carry the memory and the impulse to share the story. As James Baldwin aptly shares in *Sonny’s Blues*, “While the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn’t any other to tell, it’s the only light we’ve got in all this darkness...and this tale, according to that face, that body, those strong hands on those strings, has another aspect in every country, and a new depth in every generation.”<sup>18</sup> McSpadden’s articulation of memory and mourning is deeply needed in lifting light to forge a path forward and present new depths of understanding, not only for herself, but also for a country that functions by not remembering her trauma, Black trauma—functions by means of social and cultural amnesias.<sup>19</sup> As Benedict Anderson argues, there is a forgetting that is central to the project of American nationalism. There’s something so American about just scrubbing the blood off the pavement of Canfield Drive with soap and brush, and just moving forward and moving on. Wash. Rinse. Repeat. But no, McSpadden reminds us, his body, in so many ways, is still on the ground. She honestly contends, in her memoir, “I’ll never get over what happened to my son.”<sup>20</sup>

DOJR: “Crime scene detectives and the SLCME [(St. Louis County Medical Examiner)] medicolegal investigator completed the processing of Brown’s body at approximately 4:00 p.m., at which time Brown’s body was transported to the Office of the SLCME.” (9)

I remember what I saw.  
I remember where I was when I saw it.  
I remember what I felt.  
I remember.  
I remember what the Department of Justice said.  
I remember what the St. Louis Police Department said.  
But I remember what I heard.  
I remember what I saw.  
I remember what I felt.

The DOJ so technically indicates on paper in their “Initial Law Enforcement Investigation,” that protocol was followed. Should one read the cold facts as the DOJ scripted them in their report it would appear that the work of those who first arrived before Brown’s body was taken off the ground—

the Ferguson Police Department (FPD),  
the St. Louis County Prosecutor’s Office (SLCPD),  
the Bureau of Crimes Against Persons (CAP),  
the Bureau of Criminal Identification Crime Scene Unit,  
the St. Louis County Medical Examiner (SCLME),  
the Highway Safety Unit,  
and the Tactical Operations Unit,  
amongst many other personnel,  
before and behind paramedics—

it would only appear that they reasonably took over four hours to do their job. The report stories tragedy with tragedy, as if it could be clinically detached from the feelings of a mother, a family, a community, a people—from truth, from justice. Its litany of units, personnel, and protocol exhibits the very violence and inhumanity that discarded and abandoned human life on the pavement, to fester, face down: bloodletting as a “terrible spectacle” of domination. On paper, to most, it may appear that they abandoned no details and professionally did their job.

But this is their story and I remember what I saw and felt.  
I know a different story.

Reflecting deeply on the dramatization and pedagogical function of such primal scenes Saidiya Hartman asks, “Are we witnesses...Or are we voyeurs?”<sup>21</sup> The invitation to voyeurism is brutal, systematic, and sophisticated; it exacerbates indifference to Black suffering, as a consequence of numbing spectacle, or it encourages prurience.<sup>22</sup> But McSpadden—and the “cloud of witnesses” about her—remind us to be witnesses and to tell the truth; to truthfully convey the impact of such brutal violence and its ongoing effects, to narrate and tell a different story.

### LM and DOJ

Lezley McSpadden, Michael Brown’s mother, contends, it was “Four and A Half Hours Too Long.” “They left his body in the street.” She keeps track of the humanity of her son, without the morass of inapt technicalities, and so-called protocol, when Brown’s body was still on the ground. She does not want us to forget the terrible spectacle:

I caught a glimpse of a blood-covered white sheet laying over the form of a motionless body stretched out on the ground and screamed, throwing my arms into the air, 'Naw, naw, naw, that ain't my child! It can't be!'<sup>23</sup>

'Let me see my son! Why ain't he off the ground yet? Do anybody hear me?' I begged, frantically running from officer to officer. Didn't these fucking police understand? I said, 'Do anybody hear me?'<sup>24</sup>

Though I was not there, I felt that I was there. I could not turn away from his body. I cannot forget this image. Like writer Charles Pierce, nationally recorded in *Esquire*, I keep coming back to that "one simple moment...one image, from which all the other images have flowed. They left the body in the street."<sup>25</sup> For four and a half hours in the unrelenting sun Michael Brown's body remained to fester where it fell, with from-his-crown blood escaping from underneath a shoddily splayed sheet melding into the pavement. Pierce goes on to express what many felt concerning this:

Dictators leave bodies in the street.  
Petty local satraps leave bodies in the street.  
Warlords leave bodies in the street...  
they leave bodies in the street. As object lessons, or to make a point, or because there isn't the money to take the bodies away and bury them, or because nobody gives a damn whether they are there or not.<sup>26</sup>

I saw a lynched human. I saw a lynched body. Lezley McSpadden, Michael Brown's mother, fiercely charged, "The police had a strategy... crucifying my son."<sup>27</sup>

DOJR: Darren Wilson has stated his intent in shooting Michael Brown was in response to a perceived deadly threat.... Because Wilson did not act with the requisite criminal intent, it cannot be proven beyond reasonable doubt to a jury that he violated 18 U.S.C. § 242 when he fired his weapon at Brown. (86)

Lezley McSpadden:

There were three people out there on Canfield that day. So there are three sides to the story. The truth hasn't ever been told. Your truth. You're not here to tell the world what happened. So I'm gonna represent, baby, as best I can.

Sometimes, when I'm laying in my bed awake because I can't sleep, you come to me. I see you so vividly, and I know that you are just watching out for Mama, I know. And I know I'll see you again one day.

I love you,  
Mama<sup>28</sup>

August 9, 2014, revealed anew the depth of racial hatred in the country. "Requisite criminal intent"? Does this need to be determined by a jury for us to know this was racist violence? Certainly not. As I watched the news a virulent wave of antiblackness and

white supremacy seemed to crest in my body with a Black teenager's brutalized body desecrated and disregarded in the street for all to see for over four hours. I was close enough in age to thoroughly identify with him. The officer that shot Michael Brown revealed patterns and practices of antiblack violence systematically oppressing Black residents. It revealed so much of what Black communities across the country—like Canfield—already knew. This moment in Ferguson, Missouri was not an aberration in America, but a microcosm of the larger landscape of antiblack violence in the country. Not a singular occurrence, but systemic. Not peripheral, but central and fundamental to serial realities of oppression. Ferguson is America. The reality of such brutality for many called into question the integrity of U.S. democracy. And yet, something about this moment was markedly different and tipped the scales of political engagement in the country, while also reviving religious engagement for many.

### DOJR: VI. Conclusion

For the reasons set forth above, this matter lacks prosecutive merit and should be closed. (86)

"Lacks prosecutive merit"? "Lacks...merit"? I remember what I saw. Protests began immediately after the shooting. Tensions erupted as demonstrators were met with riot police and dogs. They were demanding justice and they were not backing down.

"Black Lives Matter!"

More than a despotic object lesson of antiblack brutality, Brown's murder also pointed to a sociality of protest for Black lives that surged around him and transformed the direction of Black religion and politics in the United States, in the wake of his death. The energetics of this movement—belting "Black Lives Matter!"—moves beyond the officer's gun and exceeds into the critical connections of people caught in "the spirit of liberation." A new generation of activists and organizers quickly moved to pick up the mantle of justice for the defense and sanctity of Black lives. I was watching a movement of global proportions unfold. Before my eyes the mantle of justice was caught connecting BLM to earlier eras of the Black Freedom Struggle. Seeing all of these things unfold left an indelible imprint upon me. I found myself caught up into a wave of activation that swept across the country. I was being drawn to a story in a new way that now made sense. I was in seminary at the time, but the story of Black political faith in the streets was teaching me anew the place of faith and justice, the synchronicity of spirituality and social justice.

### Conclusion – Testimony and Connections

Is justice a value worth teaching? Is justice something that is teachable? What's the pedagogical value of being awakened to justice? What does it mean for students to be awakened? Where does this go? What does it mean for a teacher to craft these "burning bush" experiences? Must the scholar's teaching and scholarship burn? How might this burning occur? How does a scholar aflame for justice collide with those who just think that such teaching and scholarship is "indoctrination" and "brainwashing" of youth? How do such teachers and researchers

deal with people who think this is not something for the public space? In this current moment in which such engagement is often the targeted focus of restrictive legislation on diversity and inclusion we must grapple these kinds of questions. Testimony becomes a pathway into such wrestling. Testimony becomes a way of making connections.

Testimony functions as an invitation to genuine connection, whether in teaching or research. It functions as an invitation to students and readers to connect with the pedagogue, the scholar, even with other worlds. Across the gulfs fixed between us and our students—whether culturally, generationally, politically, racially, or otherwise—"the possibilities of connection" are opened when we raise the testimonies of marginalized communities and give audience to their stories.<sup>29</sup> Natasha Tarpley knows that the practices and possibilities of this linking and connection through giving testimony are rooted deeply in the fertile soil of Africana religious imagination:

reaching back to slavery (and before), to the places our ancestors created—behind somebody's wood cabin doubling as a makeshift church or meetinghouse, or in a nearby clearing—where they opened themselves up to one another, showed their scars, spoke of their day-to-day life, their hopes and dreams, prayed to their God, and tried to remember everything they had lost.<sup>30</sup>

In a society that still renders them invisible or in some way inferior, Black people have testified not only to commune with God, but "also to define and redefine [their] humanity; to ground [themselves] in community...in voices that know..., making a bridge from this world to the next." Testimony<sup>31</sup> has provided both religious and political function, whereby the marginalized have been able to make themselves visible and explore the acoustics of their own voices when they were rendered silent and unthought.

The pedagogue understands that historically marginalized communities' experiences are legitimate sources of knowledge and that their experiences can tell us all something about larger concepts we analyze in the complexity of social relations and human existence. McSpadden, alongside others, wants us to know that truth and justice cannot be understood apart from the perspective of the margins, apart from the traumatized of Canfield Drive, apart from those who are familiar with the ground of domination and antiblackness. Through traditions and practices of Black political faith I learned that the moral aim of my work must be connected to center and amplify the voices and testimony of the marginalized, while remaining attentive to the structural problems of racism and inequality that created their marginalization. Pedagogically, I express this commitment to justice and truth through the voices that I bring into the classroom (or my research), and how I bring those voices into the classroom (or my research). My positional experience of marginalization and theoretical reflection about it is related to a goal of enacting social change for marginalized people. Somewhere in the vulnerability required through the linking of stories—of teacher and of student with the stories of the marginalized—in commitment to truth and justice, do we discover anew our common humanity in testimony.



### About the Author

Seth Emmanuel Gaiters is Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies, and Africana Studies at University of North Carolina-Wilmington. He is a scholar of African American religious studies, with particular interest in the exploration of religion and race through Black progressive social movements and cultures in America. His interdisciplinary research and teaching trajectory engages the intersection of African American religious thought, political theology, race, African American literature, and critical theory. He is currently completing his book manuscript, tentatively entitled, #BlackLivesMatter and Religion in the Street: A Revival of the Sacred in the Public Sphere. In this project he brings his interests to a study of #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) as a way of broadening normative notions of (Black) religiosity and elucidating the synchronicity of spirituality and social justice in Black political organizing. He has received fellowships from the Ford Foundation, Louisville Institute, Forum for Theological Exploration, and Social Science Research Council.

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10 "What were you talking about?"

'You won't understand, baby.'

'Yes, I will.'

'I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.'

'Can other people see it?' asked Denver.

'Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes, yes.' [Sethe answers.]"

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# Walking Down the Mountain Together: My Father's Legacy

**Maria Liu Wong**

*City Seminary of New York*

The heart of how we come to know ourselves is through our family of origin, the soil in which we are nourished. We are formed by the wisdom of our communities. Our knowledge *and* our wounds are generational. We become who we are from roots deep in the ground, in the water that courses through our capillaries, and in the warmth of the sun and air we breathe, as we thirst for abundant life.

\*

Their blood in my veins. DNA marking potentialities. I am the "spear" my parents send out into the world to fulfill their dreams, so they have said to me. Their dreams. My dreams. God's dream for me.

I teach out of who I am and how I have been formed by those before and around me. I create. I curate. I convene.

My classroom is a physical meeting place or an online platform, a museum gallery or a public park, even the streets of the city. My students are urban-dwellers, ministry leaders and pastors, graduate students, high schoolers and retirees, families, artists, youth workers, and professionals. They are the priesthood of all believers. People who love God and the city. People who seek to know who and where they are and what they are called to be and become.

With them, I engage in and activate theological imagination and possibility. I become co-host, co-facilitator, and collaborator. Together, we make "good trouble" for a more just world.<sup>1</sup> Together, we inhabit place and opportunity to know, see, hear, and be. We become known, seen, and heard.

In my body, I enact an inheritance of generations on the move. My father's legacy.

\*

It is December 2022. I am in Hong Kong visiting my parents after busy schedules and pandemic restrictions have kept us apart for five years. My seventy-seven-year-old father has been giving me HKD cash to spend every day since I arrived, as if I were still a child. I have to remind him that I have a job and am raising a family of my own. I have reached the age where I now sport black-rimmed progressives. He is proud that after corrective eye surgery, he no longer needs to wear the glasses that he wore for decades.

"We'll be tourists together," he says as we leave together in the morning. He cannot remember how to get around much independently beyond his daily routine now. As we walk to the ferry terminal to take the boat to Hong Kong Island from Lantau Island and once more as we sit side by side on the boat ride, he asks me what our destination is.

At the top of Victoria Peak, a densely populated hill on the western part of Hong Kong island, tourists

and locals alike come for breathtaking views of Central, Victoria Harbour, Lamma Island, and the surrounding islands. Small shops cluster on the many levels of the Peak Galleria and the Peak Tower. My father, as usual, is reluctant to part with the extra fee to go up to the top floor viewing deck of the Tower, but I insist that we go up together.

"We'll be tourists together."



The view of Central, Hong Kong Island, from the top of Victoria Peak

As we open the door and step out onto the deck we are literally blown away by the blast of wind that greets us. We maneuver tactically amidst amateur and professional photographers to find a place to capture the view. One hastily taken shot reveals matching alfalfa sprouts, with my shoulder-length hair blown vertically and the little hair he has left following suit.

There is something about being here together at the top of the world. The air is clear and crisp, even as we find ourselves holding on to any loose items so they are not whisked away.

Time stops just for a moment.

We return to the ground floor of Peak Tower and walk towards the scenic overlook areas. A walking path winds around the top of the mountain, following the twists and turns of the topography of the land. Going in one direction leads to a beautiful tropical garden and going in the other brings us down to the road where we begin to see residences in the most expensive neighborhood in Hong Kong. Movie stars and the elite live here amidst government buildings with stern-looking security guards and barbed wire that shield the view from the public. Rather than return to the shop area to take the tram down with the crowds, we choose to walk.

My father and I begin the walk down the mountain. Sometimes, I walk with my arm in his. Sometimes, I follow him. I find myself gently redirecting him as he is beginning to forget while I cannot help but remember.

At first, walking along the road seems safe enough. But it begins to get dicey when the road narrows and there is no accompanying sidewalk. It seems we have gone off course and taken a path not intended for us. We hurry to the side and a quick, cool, close breeze means the cars are faster and nearer

than we prefer. At one point, we opt to take the maintenance stairs for landscaping personnel with forbidding “no entry” signs because there really is no other option. But we keep going.

We walk for a while in silence.

“When I am with you, I think about 爷爷 (Yeh-Yeh; my paternal grandfather). He was a good father. He cared about his family. Family is important,” he says.

Taking part in the history of Chinese migration to the West, 爷爷 traveled alone from southeastern China to northern UK in the 1950s, working in a fish-and-chip and curry shop in Wallasey. The shop, now named “Big Fish,” is still there on Trafalgar Road, not far from where my late grandparents rest at Frankby Cemetery in Birkenhead. Like those of his generation, 爷爷 worked hard to send money home to his family: 嬷嬷 (Maa-Maa; my paternal grandmother) and his three children (my father and his two sisters). They joined him after six or seven long years, and my father began his university studies in Liverpool.

My parents, who met earlier in Hong Kong, married in the UK. And eventually our family of four, including my older sister, moved to America. My father, after finishing graduate school and patenting a new communications device while working for British Telecom, was sponsored by a defense firm looking for talent.

Does he want me to say he was a good father?



A Chinese banyan tree on the side of the road on the way down from Victoria Peak

Along the way down, we stop in front of a Chinese banyan tree. The roots come spilling out of its outstretched branches.

“This tree must have had a hard life. Look at that branch!”

He speaks to me in English, though he could very well speak in Cantonese. Years spent abroad in the UK and USA mean he is bilingual, but I think he still prefers the culture and comfort of the Hong Kong of his youth. So many diaspora Chinese like him retain the memory and imagination of what was even as they live in the present version of that first home.

Where is he living now? What vision of Hong Kong and China does his life experience evoke, even as he probably has not processed the racism of his immigrant life in the West? I begin to see, as I listen to him and my maternal uncle who has also returned from Canada to work in China, why this generation of émigrés don't want to actually retire in the West. Perhaps it is just too hard to keep fighting and performing as if it were okay.

A branch has grown horizontal rather than vertical, indicative perhaps of a traumatic moment in its story. A drought? A moment that has changed its trajectory, literally.

Does he describe what is unspoken in his own life?

\*

I live in the tension of many worlds. Overlapping geographies, times, and spaces, form me into the dutiful younger daughter of two who anticipates others' needs. The one who works hard without question and the one who provides before being asked. I have come to know what it means to be a Chinese American daughter. I have come to watch and learn through experience.

I am a 竹升 (Jook-Sing; “bamboo pole”). At least this is what they call me. Born in the UK, raised in the US, I am not as Chinese as our elders might hope. They shake their heads when we—my generation and younger—don't understand and don't do what is expected of us. The water enters one end of the hollow bamboo stick and comes out the other.

I grow up as an MK (“missionary's kid”) in an affluent white town in suburban Long Island with “good” schools, wearing hand-me-downs with a whole world of mission work happening in our basement. My bi-vocational father, an engineer by day and a missionary by night, builds a recording studio downstairs to produce evangelistic programs in ten different dialects for the global diaspora Chinese community. First, it is through cassette tapes, then radio, and eventually, the Internet. My mother is the writer-editor, and my father, the technical producer. And for twelve years of my childhood, I negotiate the weekly Sunday suburban-Chinatown commute where I am majority-minority and minority-majority.

I am a TCK (“third culture kid”) who has learned what it means to exist in between and outside of spaces of belonging. I feel keenly that I am often in The In-Between. The interstitial place where it is sometimes okay to not be this or that, but to be who you are.

I travel the world, missing only the continents of Australia and Antarctica. I encounter with intention and curiosity diverse cultural geographies, siloed academic disciplines, and distinct social locations. I come to learn from and with others who are different. Because I am usually the one who is different.

And so, I become a maker of spaces. I create, curate, and convene others into process and discovery. I resist the usual categories. Brave space. Safe space. A space with porous boundaries. I cultivate room for opening up curiosity individually and together, for mutuality.

I lean into my father's legacy...

\*

### *Leading happens in less obvious ways.*

Like my father, while some situations require it, I don't prefer to be in the front of the room. I prefer to be behind the scenes. In my parents' ministry that lasted some fifty years, he was the technical support making things happen. My mother was the charismatic speaker in the front.

I lead from other locations. Beyond the presentation with a slide deck or lecture from behind a podium, I prefer to move tables, chairs, bodies, and materials in a variety of configurations. I open up space for ways of being and knowing that push beyond word, text, and speech into bodies, feelings, and experiences that come from a more complex acknowledgement of theology, learning, city, ministry, family, and world Christianity. It is place-making.

We are all in some ways in a margin and in a center except in my world there are many centers. Not just one.

Like my father, I draw strength from silence and activity. Voice has its place, but it is not always necessary. Power does not always come from the loudest voice, nor is the most heard most wise. A multitude of possibilities invite the experience and wisdom present in the room to become known without a sound. My father uses his hands to make things. I also make things, spaces, possibilities with my hands. Method Kit Conversations. Chalk Talk. "Recalculating Route" WhatsApp Photo Walks. Image Reflections. The list goes on.

Like these tiny ferns we see as we pause on our walk, having found their way to live symbiotically on this tree trunk, there are places to thrive in less obvious ways.



Japanese beard fern, also known as "green penny fern" grows on the trunk of a tree

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### *Teaching means taking risks.*

Like my father, I have learned to take risks when there is simply no clear path ahead. I have had to figure out what to do in unknown territory, leveraging courage and creativity as ways to strategize and claim a place at the table.

As an emigrant from Hong Kong to Liverpool, my father was not unlike many young adults using the resources of a colonial legacy to access education and opportunity. But that did not make him immune to the challenges of being the first in his generation to attend college. He learned the ethic of working hard to get a scholarship by studying to be first place in weekly exams in the Catholic school in Hong Kong he attended. He took this ethic of pushing himself to survive with him to a new country and then another.

In the UK, he went to college and graduate school, worked for British Telecom, and invented a patented device. And then in the US, when the Cold War came to an end, he reinvented himself by teaching him-

self how to use computers and the Internet, becoming an early entrepreneur of the "paperless office."

And then, he kept going until it was too much to keep up anymore.

I know this drive. I often wrestle with what pushes me to keep going. I want to think that it is a desire to fulfill God's call, God's dream for me, my vocation to be curious about "what if?" But workaholism, a slippery family trait, can also be easy to justify.

Like my father, I learn on the move. My path into theological education has not been traditional, but perhaps like this walk, it is a gift. I don't take for granted the status quo is how it *should* be. Building a new institution and learning community for almost two decades at City Seminary of New York has been re-imagining what urban theological education can be—emphasizing how we encounter God in place, people, practices, postures, and creativity as a community, living into what *could* be; we are rebels and dreamers who cherish something new without casting the old completely aside.

It has begun with listening to our city, and sensing with our bodies as pedagogical practice what and where the Spirit leads. I have come to read the city as much as texts, and have come to be read by the city, as I walk with students and faculty from neighborhood to neighborhood in prayer and on pilgrimage. We live into where we are. And it takes risk to try new things.

So, on this day, I journey down the mountain with my father, carrying in these bodies of ours the willingness to take risks, to go where we might not be expected or are not allowed to be.



My father walks down the peak on one part of the road that has a sidewalk

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### *Resilience creates space for mutuality.*

Like my father, I am stubborn yet resilient. "Don't be a quitter." "No doesn't mean never." This can go well in some situations, and poorly in others. It can be difficult. And yet I persist.

My father and I don't agree on everything, that is to be sure. I have learned to avoid certain topics like politics to keep the peace, but continuing to be present in spite of differences means there is space for a relationship. We don't close the door. We are open to change, although the likelihood may be small.

Progress is not always linear, as it can seem in the Western imagination. Cycles and seasons, life and death come as part of who we are and how we might understand what it means to change and be transformed. Sometimes things have to die, to be unlearned. We need to be unformed and reformed.<sup>2</sup> We need to let go in order to grow.

But that can also mean staying. Remaining in a hard place and processing with others, and not running away. It can mean having difficult and awkward conversations, and agreeing that we won't always agree but we can find a place to exist together. It can mean embracing the notion that we need each other in order to be complete as the Body of Christ, and part of that is being made and seeing differently.<sup>3</sup> And in doing so, we might take a first step towards mutual learning with others.

I have been struck on this walk by the immense biodiversity we have passed along our journey down the mountain. Yet these three evergreen trees stand out because they stand together. These trees remind me of my children, and the legacy of resilience I pass down from my father and his father before him. They are different from some of the other trees around them and yet there they grow and stand strong, part of a bounty of green and beauty.

Like my father, being persistent and remaining can open up another way, other possibilities of being together. Or relishing in difference as necessary for mutuality.



Three evergreen trees growing on the mountainside on the way down

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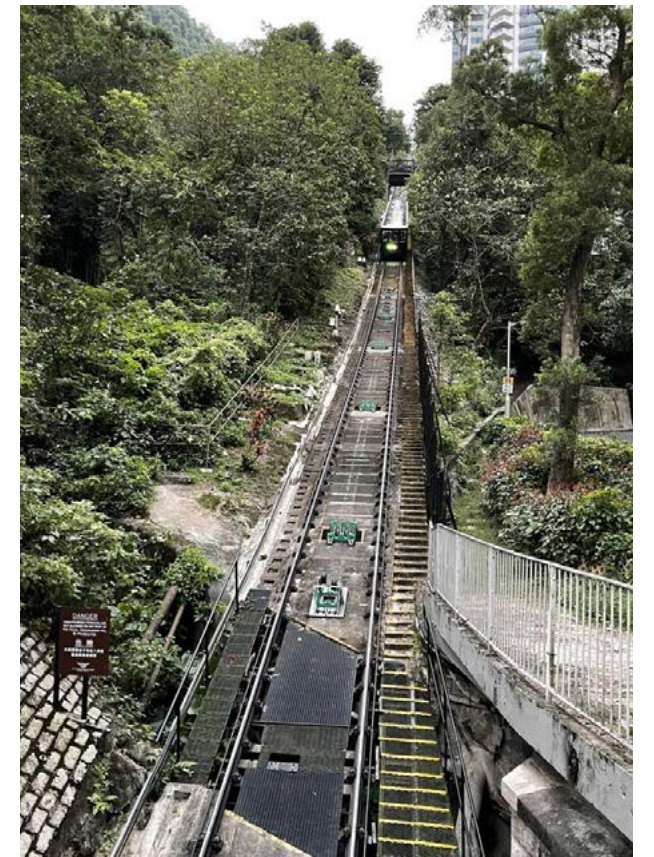
We finally reach the bottom of Victoria Peak, having followed the right direction, though perhaps not the designated path. Yet this is not our final destination. We see another possible destination, and begin to locate a way to get there. We continue on our journey of place-making, risk-taking, and resilience together, father and daughter, arm in arm.

As I have come to know it, formation is life wide, life deep, and lifelong. Teaching and learning happen in all kinds of places and ways. And the scholarship of this reality can be found in the deep praxis and recognition of expanded sources of wisdom and knowledge that come from many centers and communities.

Like my father, I continue to make "good trouble" on the move. I have come to also journey with a coalition of Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) Christian leaders in New York City, who are making their way in the world, with a curriculum that is developing and unwritten.<sup>4</sup> I am learning to "Speak up, speak out, get in the way...Get in good trouble, necessary trouble, and help redeem the soul of America"<sup>5</sup> in the activity of public theology. This theological formation in practice breaks open the constraints of formal theological education.

We are a community on the move. And this public space is one that I cannot influence as I would a classroom with walls. We respond to the ways that the Holy Spirit is moving us out into the world. And learning happens not in a program, but in the posture and practice of activity in a world made by God, theological formation in the everyday.

I create. I curate. I convene. I teach and am taught by others.



Tram up to Victoria Peak, Hong Kong Island, or the route not taken



#### About the Author

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#### Notes & Bibliography

[1] This refers to the late civil rights leader John Lewis' quote: "Speak up, speak out, get in the way...Get in good trouble, necessary trouble, and help redeem the soul of America." While the context here is voting rights demonstrations in Selma, Alabama, in March 1965, I teach in solidarity with those who see the work of resistance as essential for a just world. The classroom, wherever it may be located, is a space in which the necessary work of cultivating imagination and engaging in liberative practices towards different futures happens in community.

[2] I take to heart the argument Asian-American spiritual director Cindy Lee makes in *Our Unforming: De-Westerning Spiritual Formation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022). There is a need to unform the ways a dominant Western paradigm has monopolized our imagination, and reform in order to transform a wider range of possibilities.

[3] This resonates with the notion of the "Ephesian Moment" that the late Scottish missiologist Andrew Walls advocated in reminding us that no one part of the church is complete without the others; the diversity of the Church is necessary. See Andrew F. Walls, "The Ephesian Moment," in *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 72-81.

[4] Learn more about NY CAAPIC through this digital story map: <https://bit.ly/NYCAAPICstory>.

[5] Refer to the comment about the late civil activist John Lewis in endnote 1.

# Teaching Theory without Theory Talk in an Introductory Islam Course

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## Introduction

In an introductory religion course, how might one share conceptual arguments that are now taken as established positions in the study of religion and the broader humanities? For instance, take conceptual lessons such as tradition is not the opposite of modernity, religion is not the inverse of the secular, power is not only repressive but also productive, and so forth. How might one advance such theoretical arguments in a manner that bypasses the density and difficulty of scholarly theoretical texts and discussions? In other words, how can one do theory in the classroom without subjecting students to theory talk? These are the central questions addressed in this essay with a focus on the specific context of an introductory course on Islam. I will draw primarily from my experience of teaching religious studies for a little more than a decade at Franklin and Marshall College, a liberal arts college in the US, though I hope this analysis will benefit instructors teaching Islam in a range of contexts and settings. By discussing some specific pedagogical strategies, I want to advance the broader argument that rather than shying away from theoretical issues and questions in an introductory Islam course, the intro course is in fact among the most fertile sites for such inquiry and exploration.

Broadly, I wish to engage two connected objectives regarding the presentation of theoretical discussions in an introductory course on Islam: (1) cultivating a practice of thinking critically about key categories like tradition, modernity, secularism, and (2) disrupting conventional binaries (like tradition/modernity, religious/secular) through which such categories are popularly

approached. Perhaps the most difficult pedagogical task awaiting courses on religion and Islam is that of unsettling certain ingrained assumptions and attitudes about particular concepts that students bring with them.

Dismantling common stereotypes about Islam to do with violence, patriarchy, and political repression is quite doable with most reasonable students. Much harder is the task of disturbing students' entrenched assumptions about the presumed goodness of, say, modernity, secularism, pluralism, and liberal democracy. This is a problem that hovers over most religion courses, including the introductory Islam course. I will share some of my experiences in wrestling with this problem and offer possible pedagogical strategies to productively engage it. I will do so by highlighting some illustrative moments in an introductory course at different points of a semester: the beginning, at thematic units that typically emerge in the middle, and the end. I realize that this chronology might be more suitable to thematically arranged courses but I hope some of the tactics and strategies discussed here will be also prove useful for courses designed in other ways. In my concluding comments, I will take a step back from the pedagogy of teaching theory to reflect on the sorts of theoretical assumptions that often sustain pedagogy in religious studies. I will especially consider some of the ways in which the often-rehearsed distinction between the academic study of religion and theological studies replicates the religion-secular binary, and its implications for an introductory Islam course.

## The First Day: Presenting a Genealogy of Religion

On the first substantive day of the semester in which an assigned reading is discussed, I set the task of interrogating the concept of religion so as to begin the work of thinking about the central category that informs the disciplinary orientation of a course. I begin all my courses with chapter two of Carl Ernst's *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World*, "Approaching Islam in Terms of Religion."<sup>1</sup> This chapter charts in an eminently lucid manner major conceptual and political transformations in the category of religion over time. By comparing the understanding of religion espoused by premodern thinkers like Cicero (d. 43 BC) and St. Augustine (d. 430) with that of the seventeenth century Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius (d. 1645), Ernst highlights profound ruptures in the early modern and modern career of religion.

An earlier notion of religion (as articulated, for instance, by St. Augustine in his text *Of True Religion*) centered on the cultivation of virtue through repetitive practice. In contrast, the modern concept of religion was marked by intensified competition over the question of authenticity (as found in Grotius's text *On the Truth of the Christian Religion*). Moreover, Ernst shows that this modern competitive notion of religion was shaped in large mea-

Particularly effective in this regard is to complement Ernst's chapter with a sample of the British census survey in late nineteenth-century India. It is through this visually charged primary source that students get jolted into recognizing the tectonic implications of being compelled to box one's religious identity into one among several competing options. Also invaluable is the narrative told in this chapter regarding a student at the American University of Beirut who when asked to identify his religious identity in university registration forms, responds in puzzlement "But I am an atheist?" To which the university registrar replies, "But are you a Christian atheist, a Jewish atheist, or a Muslim atheist?"<sup>3</sup> This story (that we read aloud in class) brings home for students the point about a modern countable and competitive notion of religion with particularly clarity. This point can be nicely reinforced by complementing discussion on Ernst's reading with the viewing of author Reza Aslan's infamous exchange on Fox News regarding his book *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*, in which the anchor kept questioning Aslan's capacity to write a book on Jesus when he was a Muslim.<sup>4</sup>

While students generally get the idea that meanings attached to categories like religion shift over time, they struggle to dismantle a celebratory attitude towards modernity and modern pluralism. In the "religion" to "religions" argument, while recognizing



sure by the power and politics of colonialism coupled with the activities of European missionaries who in fact used Grotius's text as a debating manual.<sup>2</sup>

What I find remarkable about this chapter by Ernst is the way it presents in simple language the key features of the world religions argument that has occupied so much of the often-dense theoretical landscape of religious studies. I ask students (in small group discussions) to list and identify key differences between pre-modern and modern conceptions of religion, best encapsulated in the shift from "religion" as embodied practice to "religions" as exclusive clubs reducible to distinct scriptures and competing truth claims. We also spend considerable time discussing the intimacy of a modern competitive understanding of religion and the emergence of the modern state.

the problem of religions as competitive clubs, students tend to retain the idea that having multiple religions is an achievement of pluralism in modernity. That the discourse of pluralism is itself stained with the violence of colonialism and modern state power is a point they are not quite ready to entertain. Particularly instructive in this regard is the critical attitude students often adopt towards St. Augustine on why his text was titled *Of True Religion*. They protest: Why did St. Augustine not recognize (read respect) religions other than Christianity (the True Religion)? The tenor of this discomfort says much about the deep internalization of liberal gestures of recognition and respect among undergraduate students. But despite all this, what starting a course with Ernst's chapter does achieve is the attunement of students to the labor of taking seriously the histories and ideological arguments invested in the crucial categories of life, like religion.



But how can one sustain such a genealogically-oriented pedagogy in discussions on more specific topics in Islam? It is to this question that I now turn by discussing ways in which the themes of colonial power, Orientalism, and their afterlives can be impressed while teaching varied topical units including Sufism, gender, and popular culture and film.

### The Legacies and Afterlives of Colonialism and Orientalism

Before getting into specific teaching strategies, let me first describe the kind of conceptual problem I want to think through and address by means of this discussion. One recurrent tendency I have observed among students is to regard phenomena such as colonialism and orientalism as historical events consigned to a safely distant past, as belonging to a nineteenth century neatly separated from their own present. How could this problem of assumed shelter from the violence of colonial pasts and their attached knowledge legacies be addressed in an introduction to Islam course? How could the persistence of the shadows of colonial power be impressed upon students?

The first day of a unit on Sufism presents a potentially profitable moment for such a task. The unit on Sufism (for thematically organized introductory courses) represents a highly rewarding yet challenging stop on the pedagogical itinerary. While providing excellent possibilities for close primary-source readings, and use of narrative, textual, and audio-visual analysis, the danger that students will fall prey to viewing Sufism as the stereotypical exotic or eccentric variety of Islam is always all too ripe.

The first day of the unit on Sufism can also be utilized to do some important conceptual work on the interaction of colonialism, orientalism, and Islam precisely by tackling major commonplace stereotypes about the Sufi tradition. As an illustration, let me share some highlights from a lesson plan for this day that I have frequently employed in my introduction to Islam course. The goal of this class session is to make students think critically about the legacy of colonial knowledge production and Orientalism in the study of Sufism and Islam more broadly. We do this by focusing on nineteenth-century Orientalist stereotypes about Sufism and their continuation in contemporary popular discourses on the subject. In a nutshell, some of these stereotypes include: (1) that Sufism is foreign to Islam with Greek, Indic, or Persian origins, (2) that Sufism is opposed to Islamic law and that Sufis do not care about normative legal obligations, and concomitantly (3) that while Sufism is the exotic, soft, and liberal brand of Islam, Islamic law or the Shari'a is its harsh, puritan, illiberal other.

One can fruitfully show the effects of these Orientalist stereotypes in the present by juxtaposing text with film. More specifically, for this day, I combine discussion on the first chapter of Carl Ernst's *Shambala Guide to Sufism* (which they read before class) with the in-class viewing of the first twenty minutes of the 1994 documentary *I am a Sufi, I am a Muslim*.<sup>5</sup> The more recent documentary *Sufi Soul* by popular writer William Dalrymple is also a good alternative that serves the purpose.<sup>6</sup> In small group discussions, I have students identify and make a list of stereotypes about Sufism in the works of various eighteenth and nineteenth-century European Orientalists and colonial officials

(such as August Tholuck, Mountstuart Elphinstone, and James William Graham) as presented in the Ernst text.<sup>7</sup>

As student discussions are winding down, I pop in a documentary (either *I am a Sufi, I am a Muslim* or *Sufi Soul*). I then ask them to note and make a running list of any overlap between the Orientalist stereotypes they just discussed from the Ernst text and ways in which the narrator of the documentary describes Sufism. The overlap is astonishing. Almost all the Orientalist depictions (Sufism has non-Arab origins, it is opposed to "orthodox" Islam, Sufis don't prioritize ritual practices, and so forth) are repeated nearly verbatim in the two documentaries. This conglomeration of textual and visual evidence invites students to reflect on traces of powerful nineteenth-century discursive regimes on a popular and seemingly sympathetic documentary more than a century later. Film and text complement each other, the former amplifying the argument of the latter about the Orientalist reformulation of Sufism.

But this much is not enough. In addition to uncovering the problems and persistence of Orientalist narratives about Islam and Sufism, it is also important to have students address the question of how Sufis themselves understand their tradition, especially in regards to Sufism's relationship with Islamic law. For this we again turn to the Ernst chapter, that details Sufis' self-imagination of their tradition in clear, concise, and singularly productive ways.<sup>8</sup> By reading relevant passages aloud in class, we establish the point that in contrast to nineteenth-century Orientalist and contemporary popular stereotypes, the relationship between Sufism and law within the tradition is hardly understood in the form of an oppositional binary. Rather, this relationship is imagined as a hierarchy whereby abiding by the law and its limits represents a prerequisite to progress on the path to divine reality. This hierarchical arrangement is reflected in the rhyming progressive (in a literal sense) formula: Shari'a (divine normative order), Tariqa (the Sufi path), Haqiqa (divine reality).<sup>10</sup> Put simply, Sufis do not reject the law and its imperatives. They instead consider it a first step towards higher spiritual refinement. A hierarchy is not the same as a binary.

Through this class session, some highlights of which I have outlined above, students in an introductory course can be equipped to interrogate the afterlives of colonial power and Orientalist discourse in the present without being burdened with the weight of prohibitive theory talk. It also attunes them to ways in which a careful consideration of the logics and textual resources within a tradition can disrupt popular stereotypes and representations about it. Genealogical skepticism is thus usefully complemented with discursive analysis.

Another text that is particularly effective in bringing home the persistence of colonial and Orientalist stereotypes about Islam and Muslims in the present is Leila Ahmed's *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*<sup>10</sup> The first two chapters of this book, that I regularly assign in my intro course, dissect in piercing and remarkably accessible prose the Orientalist assumptions that sustain theoretically wanting yet powerful contemporary representations of Muslim women as objects of Western sympathy in need of urgent care and rescue. By interrogating the discourses of a vari-

ety of actors ranging from journalist Nicholas Kristof to popular ex-Muslim renegades like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Ahmed convincingly argues that critiquing patriarchy in Muslim communities need not resort to a patronizing practice of caricaturing Islam and Muslim women as primarily defined by their enchainment to patriarchal theologies and societal norms. Ahmed memorably, and from a pedagogical perspective very effectively, coined the term "Islamland" for the discursive product of such a practice of caricature.

Just as with the Sufism example, text can be nicely complemented with film. I juxtapose the Leila Ahmed reading with a film based in Syria called *The Light in Her Eyes*.<sup>11</sup> This somewhat slow paced yet often brilliant film showcases practices of pious embodiment, especially veiling, among Muslim women and girls by focusing on the aspirations and activities of a revivalist Syrian female Qur'anic educational institution. Houda al-Habash (the founder and principal of this school) and her students, are hardly suppressed or oppressed victims of unyielding patriarchy crying out for liberation according to a Western liberal template. The actors who populate this film, in effect, provide living examples of Leila Ahmed's argument and push to view Muslim women, including those who embody practices of piety like veiling, as complex beings irreducible to and unavailable for any predetermined needs and desires for freedom from mythically constructed conceptions of bondage. The film also does a particularly good job of showing the spectrum of views and attitudes on the place and role of Muslim women in contemporary Muslim societies, thus furthering the conceptual point of viewing Islam and Muslims beyond binaries like liberal/fundamentalist, and as involved in a dynamic and contested ongoing discursive tradition.

Finally, another film that is especially effective in connecting Orientalism, its persistent manifestations in the contemporary moment, and Islamophobia is the documentary *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*.<sup>12</sup> In biting and often harrowing narrative and visual detail, this documentary displays the long history, extending to the present, of Hollywood simultaneously dehumanizing and exoticizing Arabs and Muslims in ventures ranging from a variety of early twentieth-century black and white movies, to Disney's *Aladdin*, to more recent movies such as the 2000 Samuel Jackson-starring *Rules of Engagement*. Addressing Orientalism and Islam through Sufism, gender, popular culture, and film can better show the far-reaching tentacles of Orientalist discourse and power. In the next section, I will offer another illustration of teaching theory without theory talk by reflecting on the topic of what could broadly be categorized as "Islam and colonial modernity."

### Islam, Tradition, and Colonial Modernity

In this section, I want to reflect on the experience of teaching two central and interconnected theoretical arguments: (1) that tradition/modernity is not an oppositional binary, and (2) that conditions and discourse are always intimately connected such that new conditions generate new kinds of argument and ways of arguing. These two points are now widely accepted by scholars of the humanities and the study of religion. But what are some specific ways in which these arguments might be im-

pressed in an introductory Islam course? Here are some examples that speak to this.

In this context, I have found working with collections of primary texts, such as the anthology of Muslim Modernist writings (edited by Charles Kurzman) (Kurzman 2002) and the anthology of Islamist texts (edited by Muhammad Qasim Zaman and Roxanne Euben) (Euben and Zaman 2009) most helpful.<sup>13</sup> Let me walk you through some moments from my teaching when I draw on these anthologies. I employ the relatively straightforward tactic of locating and discussing places in a primary text where the author's argument is indebted to modern conditions. For instance, in *Modernist Islam*, we find the example of the nineteenth-century Indian Muslim scholar Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898) arguing that Muslims should alter their explanation for why the Qur'an was miraculous. Rather than attach the Qur'an's miracle to the inimitability of its language (a long-running argument in the tradition), he argued that Muslims should locate the miracle of the Qur'an in the inimitability of its meaning and guidance.

More crucial than the argument here (which was not altogether novel) was the logic behind the argument: namely that a linguistic explanation for the Qur'an's miracle "cannot," in his words, "be put forward in confrontation with nonbelievers."<sup>14</sup> He continued tellingly, "it will not satisfy their mind." Clearly, the new condition of Christian missionary activity and competition in colonial India had a lot to do with the content and framing of Khan's argument. Similarly, elsewhere in the same anthology, we find the Lebanese/Egyptian scholar Rashid Rida (d. 1935) expressing his admiration for European "nationalism."<sup>16</sup> And even more illustrative is the case of the twentieth-century Central Asian intellectual Abdurrauf Fitrat (d. 1938) who championed a new system of education as a way to cultivate "perfectly civil, patriotic Muslims."<sup>17</sup> I have students reflect on the question of how desires such as nationalism and patriotism might be contingent to the emergence of the nation state as the center of modern politics. Would these desires have existed even a couple of centuries ago? What would they have looked like? Again, my goal in posing these questions is for students to ponder, even if indirectly, the interaction of conditions and discourse.

Perhaps the most effective case study for this task is the extract from the twentieth-century Egyptian thinker/activist Sayyid Qutb's (d.1966) landmark text *Signposts Along the Road*.<sup>18</sup> There are many moments in this text that can be mobilized; Let me offer one particularly cutting example. In pushing for an exclusively Qur'an centered understanding of tradition, Qutb exclaimed that Muslims should read the Qur'an "like a soldier studies 'the daily command' to act immediately upon what he learns in the battlefield."<sup>19</sup> "Knowledge is for action,"<sup>20</sup> he memorably continued. Again, these quotes provide an opportunity to have students think about possible connections between approaching the Qur'an as a soldier's manual and new technological conditions such as the efflorescence of print and the concomitant materiality of the Qur'an as a bound, printed book.

Having worked through some of these examples, I put a list on the white board of different categories of conditions including political (rise of the nation state, colonialism, etc.), technological



(print, commerce, railways), institutional (new educational institutions, etc.), and epistemic/intellectual (valorization of science, championing of secular reason and progress, etc.). In another column, I list the discursive moves of the authors we have examined that depended on and were made possible by any of these conditions. The point of this exercise is to show students that in analyzing discursive arguments, it is important to carefully consider the conditions, the terrain so to say, that make those arguments thinkable in the first place, and that shape the modality of their articulation. This is the now familiar conceptual point advanced and executed most forcefully in the scholarly oeuvre of anthropologist Talal Asad.<sup>21</sup> A careful navigation of and commentary on illustrative primary texts holds the potential of at least attuning students to such a conceptual orientation that takes seriously the interaction of discourse, conditions, and ultimately, power.

There are two limitations of this method to briefly mention by way of concluding this discussion. First, while this exercise is effective in demonstrating the dynamicity of tradition by showing ways in which it adapts, responds, and negotiates modern conditions, it is less successful in interrupting a celebratory teleology of modernity. “Ok, Muslim scholars can also desire modern stuff” is an all-too-convenient conclusion that some students might draw. Constantly reminding them about the power differentials involved in how modern conditions shape indigenous discourses and about the violence of colonial modernity (physical and otherwise) is thus very crucial. It might also be useful to frame modernity as a “narrative category”; a narrative that dramatizes its own claims to have eclipsed the past and tradition. I have found that students respond favorably when asked to think carefully about the kind of story modernity tells about

itself and to then reflect on the problems attached to that story.

Second, this teaching tactic makes acutely palpable the absence of a substantive anthology that engages the work [in English translation] of Muslim traditionalist scholars (the *ulama*). Certainly, many among the modernists and Islamists were also trained in traditionalist methods. But there would be much to benefit from a reader<sup>22</sup> that takes as its focus the writings of modern Muslim traditionalist scholars. Such a resource would be especially useful for discussing continuities and ruptures in Islamic legal and ethical reasoning in the modern period, a topic that adds a particularly rich layer to this discussion.

### The Importance of African American Islam to an Introductory Course

A few years ago, in the wake of the Trayvon Martin and later George Floyd tragedies, as protests and debates around questions of racism and state violence in the US intensified across college campuses including mine, I decided to add three class sessions on African American Islam to my introductory Islam course. This three-sessions unit explores the themes of Islam and the transatlantic slave trade, the Moorish Science Temple and Noble Drew Ali (d. 1929), the Nation of Islam and Elijah Muhammad (d. 1975), prominent women in the Nation of Islam such as Clara Muhammad (d. 1972), and the discourses and career of Malcolm X (d. 1965). For the first theme, Islam and the transatlantic slave trade, my class watches and discusses the tragic and fascinating 2006 documentary film *Prince Among Slaves* (based on a 1986 book by historian Terry Alford with the same title).<sup>23</sup> The documentary details the narrative of Abdul Rahman Ibrahima Sori (d. 1829), a prince from the Fouta Djallon region in Guinea, West Africa who was sold into slavery at the

age of twenty-six in 1788 and spent forty years in slavery in Natchez, Mississippi. After being finally freed in 1828, his quest to return home was unsuccessful. He died enroute in Monrovia, Liberia the year after. This nicely-paced documentary combines storytelling and scholarly commentary (by a range of scholars of Islam and the transatlantic slave trade) to probe important questions of love, religious identity, language, and the brute force and violence of slavery. Its central theme revolves around the tension between the agentive capacities of individuals like Ibrahima to circumvent the adverse conditions of slavery and the grossly unequal relations of power put in place by those conditions.

For the twentieth-century African American religious movements like the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam, I assign select chapters of historian Brent Turner’s monograph *Islam in the African American Experience*.<sup>24</sup> In this intellectual cum social history, Taylor presents a detailed yet accessible account of the socio-political context surrounding the emergence of these movements. But more importantly, he employs the enormously profitable category of signification or naming to interrogate the place and importance of Islam in the struggle of actors like

Noble Drew Ali, Elijah Muhammad, and Malcolm X to confront and overcome the traumas of slavery, structural and everyday racism, and white supremacy. Chapters in Turner’s book can be helpfully complemented by extracts from the writings and speeches of these figures found in the *Columbia Sourcebook of Muslims in the United States*.<sup>25</sup> Also incredibly useful are video clips from interviews of and speeches by Elijah Muhammad and especially Malcolm X in which they elaborate the key political and philosophical underpinnings of their struggle for justice, often to hostile audiences/interviewers.<sup>26</sup>

Why is the topic of African American Islam indispensable to a theoretically-grounded introductory course on Islam? For at least a couple of reasons. First, this topic opens up the difficult but fruitful question of how one goes about defining and circumscribing orthodoxy in any religious tradition. Seemingly, movements like The Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam—with their emphasis on theologies of racial justice, premised on narratives of racial purity, and articulated through claims of prophecy, and at times, divinity—seem rather distant from what one might imagine as “mainstream Islam.” However, Islam, as a discursive and lived tradition, was obviously very important to the pioneers of these movements and to their massive number of followers. Moreover, Elijah Muhammad is arguably the most influential figure in the history of Islam in North America. And Malcolm X, both prior to and after his embrace of Sunni Islam, is inarguably among the most influential modern Muslims, within the US and globally. What would it mean then to designate such important articulations of Islam in the modern world as outside the fold of “mainstream Islam?” Wherever students, Muslim or non-Muslim, might stand on this question, if it

gets them thinking about the politics of constructing categories like “orthodox Islam” and about the malleability of claims to religious authenticity, it will have done its job.

And second, focusing on the politics and political thought of a figure like Malcolm X yields the dividend of connecting struggles for racial justice in the Global North and South. At several institutions including mine, students enroll in the introductory Islam course to fulfill the terribly named “Non-Western” requirement. Even the name of this general education requirement plants in the minds of students the unfortunate impression that the “non-West” is some distant land elsewhere, unconnected to the histories and present of the “West.” In my first few years of teaching, I often felt confounded about whether I should feel proud or resigned over comments on my teaching evaluations that read, “He taught me so much about a different religion and culture.” For all my attempts to familiarize students with the language and vocabulary of Islam over the course of a semester, its underlying *difference* would persist. The topic of African American Islam represents an excellent avenue to address this problem. Through serious engagement with this topic, an instructor can advance the dual and interconnected arguments that (a) Islam is central to the story of race and religion in North America, and that (b) African American Islam is central to the discursive and political career of Islam as a religious tradition, especially in modernity.

### Concluding Thoughts: Being More Critical of a Critical Secular Pedagogy

To review, this essay explores ways in which one might present to students in an introductory course important theoretical arguments (for example, complicating binaries like tradition/modernity or religion/secular; appreciating the intimacy of discourse, power, and material conditions; interrogating the legacy of colonial modernity in the formation of contemporary categories of life) that are now commonplace in the study of religion. How might one advance such conceptual tasks without burying students in the often intimidating and prohibitive protocols and operations of theoretical discourse? I have shared my experiences wrestling with this challenge at different moments in an introductory Islam course. In these concluding remarks, however, I take a step back from the dominant theme of my discussion so far. Rather than reflecting on teaching theory through teaching Islam, let’s think through some of the theoretical assumptions that often sustain the teaching of Islam within the study of religion. More specifically, I wish to ponder aloud a certain discomfort I have often experienced on the first day of a course, especially the introductory Islam course.

On day one, to immediately set straight the intellectual menu, I explain to students what the study of religion is and how it differs from theological studies (as is common practice among religion scholars). This usually involves making a list of contrastive attributes. The study of religion (and Islam) is historical, non-confessional, nonnormative, and analytical as opposed to the normative confessional study of religion as an object of faith. This sentiment is usefully captured in the formula of the contrast between studying religion and studying about religion. There is obviously much merit in these explanatory gestures. One would not

want the academic classroom to become a space for resolving competing truth claims or of passing certificates of normativity and heresy. However, there is nonetheless an underlying secularity at work in this exercise that I find not only conceptually troubling but also a potential roadblock to teaching Islam.

To begin with, the act of contrasting the historical, academic, and non-confessional study of religion with the allegedly confessional character of theological studies risks reducing the latter to a caricatured representation. Surely, despite their normative preoccupations, Western seminaries and Islamic madrasas also often engage in analytically sharp and historically-informed scholarship, even if their logics of history and critical thinking might differ. Making a conscious and concerted effort to distinguish religion studies from theological studies might have the unintended effect of smugly suggesting the superiority of the former over the latter; “We are cooler than those people who are unable to separate personal faith from scholarly inquiry.” Even if not intended as such, it is hard to imagine this not being among the implicit messages communicated by the assertion of the religion/theological studies dichotomy.

Making such a contrast also embraces and replicates the secular/religious binary, which as many scholars have argued, is a very problematic binary. “We, the critical historians of religion, will undertake for the next fourteen weeks (or fewer, in the quarters system) the secular study and inquiry of this religion and these religious subjects.” That is the upshot of the eager disclaimer that the study of religion is not theological/seminary studies. There is an underlying nod to the virtues of secularity at the heart of the promise of historicizing religion. This secular gesture does bring the benefits of absolving a course on Islam from the sins of establishing orthodoxy, encouraging piety, or promoting confessional bias. But it also carries certain limitations that are important to acknowledge and engage, if not resolve.

Let me highlight just one such limitation. The positioning of an introductory course as a non-confessional (read secular) inquiry into Islam can hamper the effectiveness of discussions on

the affective and phenomenological aspects of a religion. An important moment in the introductory Islam course that speaks to this point is that of the revelation of Islam to Prophet Muhammad. This is an incredibly powerful moment. It combines awe, terror, anticipation, physical pain, and marks a permanent cleavage in time and world history. But the history of religion approach deflates the power of this moment. Having taken their position as detached (even if sympathetic) observers of a tradition, students are unburdened from the weight of entangling their beings with the experiential registers of the religion. They are absolved of feeling, perhaps even suffering, the mixture of perplexity and wonder that suffuses and accompanies moments like Prophet Muhammad’s revelation. They might sympathize with such moments or be fascinated by them, but the thick crust of secular historicism makes even the attempt at inhabiting the experience of such moments almost impossible.

My attempt here at articulating a less than fully formulated doubt and discomfort is not a rehearsal of predictable musings on the insider/outsider problem, namely the problem of how one studies a religious tradition while identifying with that tradition or not. Rather, I am noting the implications and effects of a pedagogical orientation towards Islam that renders it a foreign object of secular historicist inquiry and consumption. Such an orientation, animated by the assumptions and logics of secularity, captured most prominently by the secular imperative of historicizing and desacralizing life, can produce rather deleterious effects. Most notably, it relies on and perpetuates a binary between the enlightened critical investigator and the tradition-bound uncritical religious subject who is the former’s object of investigation. In other words, the history of religion approach to teaching Islam is a decisively secular approach that replicates and advances the religion/secular binary.<sup>27</sup> Obviously, recourse to a confessional approach is hardly the solution; that is both untenable and undesirable. Perhaps what is needed is a pedagogical orientation that is thoroughly unaccepting of the religion/secular binary in all its manifestations. Being more critical of the critical historical study of religion, especially when set in contrast to traditionalist theological studies, might be a useful step towards the cultivation of such an orientation.



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# Translanguaging Pedagogy: Strategies for Our Multilingual Classrooms

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Good teaching attends to context. It is tailored to each particular group of students. I teach differently when I teach at a Catholic seminary versus a Protestant one, a large university versus a small college, a suburban school versus an urban one. I teach differently when half my students are international students, when many are Latiné,<sup>1</sup> or when a quarter of them are LGBTQIA+. As professors we all do this, even if we have taught at the same school for so long that we have forgotten how tailored our teaching is to our school's particular student demographics. A lot of our knowledge of our students is hard to quantify, but it fundamentally shapes what we do in the classroom, the readings we assign, and how we craft assignments and assessments.

This article focuses on one particular aspect of student diversity: the fact that many of our students speak multiple languages. It arises out of my struggles to teach in classrooms where multilingual students are a substantial minority. Lacking good examples from my own experience, I explored research into teaching multilinguals from a wide variety of sources, with most of it originating overseas or in K-12 contexts. This required some adaptation for my various undergraduate and seminary teaching contexts, which tend to be more linguistically diverse than what is typical in other countries.

No efforts toward diversity, equity, and inclusion are complete without attention to the linguistic diversity of our students, a core aspect of our students' identities that is so thoroughly ignored in higher education in the United States that even our data-obsessed institutions do not bother collecting data on it.

We know how many of our students are Hispanic, but we have no idea how many speak Spanish. We know how many students come from other countries on student visas, but we never bother to ask them what languages they speak. Given how central language is for learning, tailoring our teaching to embrace the presence of multilingual students has the potential to significantly improve its quality and effectiveness.

## English Hegemony

One often encounters the assumption that education in the United States—one of the most linguistically diverse nations on earth—should take place entirely in English. This deeply-held ideology appears to arise more out of white supremacy and eurocentrism than any evidence, evaluation, or facts related to teaching and its outcomes. It is simply assumed to be right, unquestioned despite research suggesting the advantages of multilingual instruction and the rigorous debates over the languages of teaching and learning taking place in other parts of the world.<sup>2</sup> It reflects a subtractive model of education, where students are asked to jettison parts of their identities, histories, cultures, and competencies in order to succeed in spaces designed for others.<sup>3</sup> Might it be time for those of us in US higher education to reevaluate our devotion to monolingual English instruction?<sup>4</sup>

While the pull of English as the world's academic language is strong, this hegemonic dominance has numerous negative effects. These include the marginalization of those who are not native speakers of accepted varieties of English.<sup>5</sup> To be a native English speaker is a privilege that marks an unearned power

and advantage over others. To continuously promote English as the language of the academy is to unduly seek to strengthen and solidify that power at others' expense. Namsoon Kang puts this well when she writes that "the discursive hierarchy of English-speaking scholars and nations over against non-English-speaking scholars and nations becomes a form of discursive hegemony."<sup>6</sup> She reminds us that "when people do not affirm one's heart language, the loss of one's heart language and the need to use the acquired language become a constant reminder of one's diasporic location and the life of marginality."<sup>7</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa (2012, 80–81) puts it more bluntly when she writes, in her case of Chicano Spanish, that "repeated attacks on our native tongue diminish our sense of self. . . . Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself."<sup>8</sup> Monolingual pedagogies keep multilingual and non-English speaking students on the margins of education and hinder them from forming community and exploring their identities with each other.

Innovation and intellectual vibrancy often arise when multiple cultures, experiences, disciplines, or languages come together. A diversity of languages complements other diversities in promoting and prompting new ideas and exchanges of ideas. We should be wary of the increasingly monolingual nature of scholarship. English is well on its way to becoming a universal academic language like Greek and Latin once were, back before the standardization and elevation of national languages. This is despite the fact that the notorious difficulty and irregularity of English makes it a particularly poor choice for the task. This process may lead, as Minae Mizumura argues, to the end of national languages as we know them.<sup>9</sup> Of course, many non-European languages never reached the level of a "national language," having been marginalized by the languages of the colonizing powers, which remain in many cases the languages of government, the academy, and even literature—regardless of what people actually speak in the streets. The perseverance of many local languages does not mean that they are not under threat; as Christa van der Walt writes, "local languages have to be very strong to continue living alongside English."<sup>10</sup> This is especially true in the academy. While there is a certain practicality and efficiency to the worldwide use of English as the universal language of scholarship, there is also a stultifying danger in limiting ourselves to the concepts and thought forms of one particular language.<sup>11</sup>

Emphasis on the importance of English has led to poor pedagogical choices that sacrifice much in the name of learning English faster (including, it turns out, learning English faster). The idea that restricting learners to one particular language will help them learn it faster or better remains popular, despite research which shows that strengthening and utilizing existing languages is the more effective approach.<sup>12</sup> If you want someone to learn English faster and at a higher level, the most effective way is to encourage the use of their existing languages in that learning process. This should be familiar to many in theological education, as it is exactly how we teach biblical Greek: with explicit comparisons to English grammar. Many of the most popular biblical Greek textbooks include lessons on English grammar, recognizing that the lack of this knowledge is a hinderance to learning Greek. The same is true for students learning English. The most direct way to help them learn English is to use and bolster their un-

derstanding of their other languages. This requires movement away from monolingual biases and toward the celebration of multilingualism and the full integration of multilingual learners into the classroom.

Theories of English language development traditionally argued that languages should be kept separate in teaching and learning, leading to efforts to ban students from using their native languages in schools, a reluctance to make any reference to existing language knowledge in the teaching of English, and other efforts to keep students' languages separate. All of these strategies have been proven pedagogically counterproductive for developing English language ability, let alone for engagement with content—where knowing more than one language is almost always an advantage—and for students' lives and career prospects in our multilingual world.<sup>13</sup>

Language segregation is also detrimental for basic communication. In research focusing on interreligious dialogue, Linda Sauer Bredvik has found that the use of multiple languages "often creates a more effective dialogue than rigid monolingualism" and that "far from leading to misunderstandings . . . prolific multilingual practices frequently lead to greater understanding and also functioned as a linguistic means of displaying hospitality."<sup>14</sup>

Resistance to multilingual education often relies on the language of racial segregation, with words like "contamination" and "impurity" being used to decry "language mixing."<sup>15</sup> Its history is closely tied to attempts to destroy indigenous languages.<sup>16</sup> The ideology of monolingual education has a long history that appears more rooted in racism than in legitimate science.<sup>17</sup> It is no wonder that such ideologies lead to the absurd practice of judging intellect on the basis of facility with an accent-free prestige variety of English, a prejudice often experienced by our students.<sup>18</sup> Despite what the language segregationists claim, our different languages are not housed separately in the brain and do not need to be kept separate to avoid confusion.<sup>19</sup> Danling Fu, Xenia Hadjioannou, and Xiaodi Zhou summarize this well when they conclude that

When emergent bilinguals are taught using a monolingual approach . . . this practice assumes that becoming proficient in English is a fundamental prerequisite to [their] future success and that their home languages are far less important or even completely irrelevant to their formal schooling. . . . However, evidence suggests that individuals have a single, unified language repertoire that encompasses the linguistic features of all their languages and they naturally translanguage to fit their needs for communication in different contexts and with different people.<sup>20</sup>

Efforts to decolonize our teaching must recognize the appropriateness and utility of creating space for students to use all of their linguistic resources in their studies.

## English Hegemony in Theological Education

Theological education, especially in seminaries, stands out in US higher education for its embrace of non-English languages in teaching. One-fifth of the schools in the US and Canada ac-

credited by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) offer programs taught in other languages, most of them in Spanish, Korean, or Mandarin.<sup>21</sup> Many have programs and centers aimed at supporting international students through cultural orientations, language classes, writing support, library programs and acquisitions, and other means.<sup>22</sup> Such programs often reflect practical needs, both the needs of students and the need of the church for leaders equipped to minister to its diverse communities. As H. Samy Alim and Django Paris write, in their case of K-12 schools, “promoting linguistic and cultural dexterity is no longer about equally valuing all of our communities—it is also about the skills, knowledges, and ways of being needed for success in the present and future.”<sup>23</sup>

The existence of such programs should not be taken as a sign that theological education is successfully including non-English-speaking or multilingual students, even those we manage to attract. In fact, these programs sometimes serve as object lessons in a failure to include: many were founded by immigrant communities precisely because higher education did not make space for them while those programs at historically English-speaking schools are frequently underfunded and kept segregated from the rest of the institution.<sup>24</sup> It would be a challenge to find a multilingual school where the various languages used have equal status. While there are glimmers of hope in certain places, Loida I. Martell-Otero’s conclusion that “theological education seems to be working on an older paradigm, or at least on an idealized paradigm of a homogenized world, when the global—particularly the poor, brown, and broken—stayed on their respective side of the border and did not invade the lily-white towers of intellectual purity” remains the dominant reality.<sup>25</sup>

Most institutions continue to think of the presence of multilingual students as a problem rather than an asset, all the while ignoring the significant costs of monolingualism and the structural causes of any difficulties these students may face.<sup>26</sup> This lack of hospitality toward linguistic diversity adds to a situation already marked by structures and systems built around white cultural values, a reality that, as Elizabeth Conde-Frazier has reminded us, is inhospitable, discriminatory, and oppressive toward minority students and faculty.<sup>27</sup> What we need instead, as Chloe T. Sun writes, is the orientation to one another and offer of belonging found when we teach in the languages of our students.<sup>28</sup>

When not seen as a problem to be solved—whether through more rigorous gatekeeping via tests like the TOEFL or through increased support—multilingual and international students are often (and increasingly) seen as a commodity to be procured as a source of tuition or to improve the education experience of white students rather than as human beings deserving of an education themselves.<sup>29</sup> Extension sites overseas—and the internationally-aimed online programs that will likely replace them—can also operate out of this same mentality. Typically unquestioned are the negative aspects of the internationalization of US higher education, including the relentless exportation of Western values and culture.<sup>30</sup> Partnerships with overseas institutions often reflect these same values. K. K. Yeo asks whether US theological institutions are really “ready to achieve organic and symmetrical partnerships, to become conversant in the language[s] and worldview[s]” of the places they seek to build partnerships.<sup>31</sup> That US faculty teaching abroad typically expect to speak through translators when the reverse is almost never true speaks to the role of language in the imbalance of power present in these “partnerships.” They often retain the dominance of English found in higher education in the United States, a dominance which emphasizes where—and with whom—the power resides in our societies and institutions.<sup>32</sup>

Efforts to decolonize our institutions and our teaching are one response to the imbalances of power created by colonization and globalization. Kang reminds us that “most resources for theological education in the world, in terms of institutional, financial, and human resources with enormous means to research, archive, and disseminate knowledge, have resided in the global North, while the dire need for theological education infrastructure and resources has drastically grown in the global South.”<sup>33</sup> She emphasizes that critically examining and deconstructing how knowledge is created and disseminated is “one of the urgent tasks for US theological educators,” a task that should lead us to decolonize theological education by (re)grounding it in “geopolitical sensitivity, radical responsibility, cosmopolitan justice, and hospitality.”<sup>34</sup>

For those teaching in confessional contexts, our responses to multilingualism speak to our theology.<sup>35</sup> What theological claims are we making when we exclude our students’ other languages from the classroom? What claims could we make by embracing them? What kind of church do we belong to? What kind of God do we worship? To embrace—or, worse, enforce—English-only pedagogies is to claim that the European-descended church matters more than the global church, that God is on the side of the colonizers, that diversity is a hinderance rather than an asset for the Christian faith. I propose we side instead with the Indian theologian Felix Wilfred, who takes up the claims of liberation theology that God is on the side of the poor, the victims, those on the margins, and argues that these imply a God who affirms difference. He writes that,

God speaks today in the language of diversity. From the viewpoint of the centre, only one language—the language of power—is the legitimate one. Making everybody speak this language of course is the easiest way to control and manipulate. God, however, is not a partner in this programme of one language, and it is not in consonance with her creation either. The Spirit of God is the source of differences and many tongues.<sup>36</sup>

Perhaps our guiding story should not be that of the Tower of Babel, which focuses our attention on the difficulties of communicating across languages, but the story of Pentecost, which points us to the opportunities and joys of doing so.

### Our Students

While hard data from schools, accreditors, and government agencies on linguistic diversity is lacking, we can be confident that our schools are serving large numbers of multilingual students and may have the potential to serve many more. Around sixty-six million people, 21.5 percent of the United States population, speak a language other than English at home.<sup>37</sup> While non-English speakers and multilinguals are almost certainly underrepresented in our student bodies, they are likely already one of the largest minority groups present in our institutions.

That is not to say that the multilingual and non-English-speaking students served by our institutions are one coherent group. They often come from different backgrounds and situations with very different needs. They include international students studying in the US for the first time, international students who have previously studied in the US as undergraduates or high school students, students who have immigrated on a permanent visa (at varying ages), US-born students whose families immigrated to the US and speak a language other than or in addition to English in the home (often known as “generation 1.5” students), domestic students from long-existing multilingual or non-English-speaking communities in the United States, and native-English-speaking students who have learned additional languages.<sup>38</sup>

Few students, including native speakers, arrive at college fully capable in academic English. For most students it is a strug-

gle to learn to read the kinds of materials we assign. This should be a reminder that students from the groups above will have widely varying proficiencies in their other languages. Students coming out of US school systems are especially likely to lack full literacy in their other languages, even if they speak them fluently. Graduate students who earned their undergraduate degree in the United States will only rarely have college-level academic proficiencies in their non-English languages. This is one of the things advocates of translanguaging pedagogies hope to change. By legitimizing and encouraging the use of all the languages students speak, such teaching strategies aim to support full multilingualism, which can dramatically enhance students’ readiness for their future lives and careers.<sup>39</sup>

### Translanguaging Pedagogy

Pedagogical strategies that take into account the languages present in the classroom allow multilingual students to take full advantage of their learning abilities and develop academic skills and discipline-specific vocabulary in multiple languages. These same strategies give students who are learning new languages a chance to practice them. Such pedagogies build on more general efforts to craft diverse and inclusive courses and help students develop cultural competency.

In most of the world, translanguaging—the strategic use of our entire linguistic repertoire, regardless of artificial boundaries between languages—is the default mode of communication.<sup>40</sup> Multilingual people speaking to similarly multilingual people naturally switch back and forth between languages, often within the same sentence. While an ideological aversion to such language mixing is common even among those who practice it, many linguists see translanguaging as a normal, appropriate, and sophisticated linguistic practice that improves the effectiveness of communication.<sup>41</sup>

Translanguaging pedagogy, which we might loosely define as any incorporation of multiple languages in class materials or instruction, is most common in classrooms where a large portion of the students share a language other than the language of instruction. It may take place with the professor’s participation or, in more limited ways, when the professor does not know the language in question. Unlike in bilingual classrooms, no effort is made to present all information in both languages. Navigation between languages is instead fluid and situational. While translanguaging is typically found in regions and classrooms where the language of instruction is not the local language, translanguaging strategies can also support students coming from non-dominant or non-local communities, as is most commonly the case in the United States and Canada.

So what does this look like in the classroom? The answer is dependent on what classroom we are talking about. Which strategies are appropriate and practical vary based on who our students are, our own language abilities, and what subjects we are teaching. What is consistent is that translanguaging pedagogy involves “an attitude or stance that sees the value of using all of students’ linguistic resources and

takes steps (some more deliberate than others) to use and develop those resources.”<sup>42</sup> Most often I teach undergraduates at a university with large numbers of multilingual domestic students, many of whom have been denied full literacy in their other languages.<sup>43</sup> This is a very different situation than when I teach at seminaries with large numbers of international students. In both cases the students in a given class often speak over a dozen languages between them, which makes many traditional translanguaging strategies less useful or more difficult to implement. The trick is to get to know your students and ask them what would be the most helpful.

Most professors can practice basic translanguaging strategies, sometimes with help from librarians, instructional designers, and other support staff. These might include:

- Making textbooks and readings available in multiple languages.
- Encouraging students to read texts translated into English in the original language if they can.
- Providing abstracts or summaries of readings in alternate languages.
- Giving students permission to use multiple languages in partner or group discussions.
- Creating discussion groups organized by language preference (allowing students to self-select informally).

These strategies do not necessarily require the professor to know the language and can work well for supporting multilingual students when they come from many different language backgrounds.

More advanced translanguaging strategies, most often used when a large portion of the students speak a common language other than the primary language of instruction, include:

- Translating readings or other media from or into the primary language of instruction.
- Providing translations of assignment instructions.
- Lecturing bilingually (everything is presented in both languages) or translangually (multiple languages used fluidly).
- Preparing bilingual slideshows with all material duplicated or translangual slideshows with explanatory notes, vocabulary terms, or other additive material in a secondary language.
- Highlighting cognate relationships between key terms in various languages during lectures.
- Taking and answering questions in multiple languages.
- Offering quizzes and exams in multiple languages or allowing answers in multiple languages.
- Allowing written work to be submitted in multiple languages, accepting minor assignments in any language while requiring major ones to be in the language of instruction, or encouraging research and preliminary writing in multiple languages while requiring the final product to be in the language of instruction.
- Having students translate course texts or other materials as a course assignment.

These strategies typically require the instructor or a teaching assistant to have proficiency in the language.<sup>44</sup> They are usually practiced in settings with only two or three main languages and strong institutional support for multilingual education, although they can sometimes be used more broadly.

Many of these strategies are already widely practiced in the teaching of religion and theology. In a survey of students, alumni, and faculty from ATS-accredited institutions I asked respondents to indicate which translanguaging practices they had experienced in a classroom in the US or Canada.<sup>45</sup> The results show that a slim majority have experienced at least one of the ten strategies listed, with most of those respondents experiencing more

than one. Here are the full results, ordered by what percentage of respondents chose them:

- 44.6% None of the above
- 28.7% At least some textbooks or other required readings available in multiple languages
- 23.9% Choice to complete papers, exams, or quizzes in a language other than the language of instruction
- 19.7% Courses taught entirely in a language other than English
- 19.4% Supplementary material (lecture notes, slideshows, etc.) available in a language other than the language of instruction
- 18.0% Instructor taking and/or answering questions in a language other than the language of instruction
- 15.9% Courses taught bilingually (students are assumed to know only one of the languages used)
- 13.5% Abstracts or summaries of readings provided in a language other than the language of instruction
- 12.5% Class discussion conducted partly in a language other than the language of instruction
- 12.1% Small group discussions conducted at least partly in a language other than the language of instruction
- 0.7% Courses taught translingually (students are assumed to have some proficiency in both languages used)

While most often experienced at schools with established programs for non-English speakers, many of these strategies have the potential to be used more widely and by individual instructors regardless of institutional support. The most common strategy, at least among ATS-accredited schools, is to make textbooks or other required readings available in multiple languages. This might mean listing non-English editions of textbooks in your syllabi, asking your library to purchase them, or providing students with copies of non-English editions of individual chapters. I have used this strategy extensively with both undergraduates and seminary students, primarily through posting translations of individual book chapters for students online on my schools' learning management systems. Whether my students use the non-English editions appears to vary substantially based on their backgrounds and language abilities, with many choosing to read texts in English even when given the option of reading them in their native tongue. Others find it refreshing to get a break from the arduousness of reading everything in English or choose the non-English edition to practice their other language.

### Implementing Translanguaging Pedagogy

Implementing translanguaging pedagogy requires thinking critically about our goals, capabilities, and classroom communities. As with all efforts to strengthen our teaching practices, finding ways to incorporate students' other languages into our pedagogy requires research, experimentation, and learning from our colleagues. This final section highlights some of the things I have learned while trying to better serve my multilingual students.

First, translanguaging strategies complement more general efforts toward greater diversity, equity, and inclusion, such as working to create a culture of inclusion in classroom interactions, recognizing and building on the knowledge and experience students bring to the classroom, assigning readings from a diverse array of contexts and scholars, using examples and readings from students' home contexts, and taking into account the impact of cultural factors on learning styles and expectations.<sup>46</sup> For example, using readings and examples from Latin America usually ensures that I can make a Spanish edition of the reading available to students and has sometimes prompted me to translate material from Spanish myself.<sup>47</sup> Translanguaging strategies such as these are part of my efforts to craft syllabi that do not confuse the North American church for the global church. They are a reaction to the fact that our curriculums are often "circumscribed by colonial boundaries," as Musa Dube puts it,<sup>48</sup> and need to be broadened to reflect the full diversity of Christianity.

Second, as with other efforts to diversify our pedagogy, translanguaging strategies often involve letting go of some control over the educational process. This may mean students having discussions with each other that you cannot understand. They may choose to research topics you know nothing about and use sources you cannot read. While such realities can make us uneasy, they allow students more control over their own learning and often lead to increased engagement and motivation.<sup>49</sup>

Third, like pedagogical practices driven by the needs of students with disabilities, efforts to recognize and value linguistic diversity provide benefits to a wider range of students.<sup>50</sup> Many of my native English-speaking students report reading texts in non-English languages, for example. For some this is a way of practicing languages they are learning; others are following my encouragement to take an advanced scholarly approach by reading texts in the original language. I see similarly mixed participation of native and non-native speakers in both classroom and online small group discussions conducted translingually or entirely in another language.

Fourth, efforts to embrace the full diversity of Christianity and of our students will always be incomplete. When I post translations for my students, that small act of resistance to English hegemony can easily replicate the very hierarchy of languages I seek to challenge. Whether a translation is available in a particular language is a sign of the language's prestige and of the economic wealth of its region of origin. Translations—and even original works—in regional and indigenous languages are virtually unheard of compared to translations in national and colonial languages. Other hierarchies of power are also replicated in what is available in translation. Translations of works by women are far less common than translations of works by men. In my own courses, only four of ninety-four non-English editions (4.3%) that I have been able to get for my students is of a work written by a woman—and I had to purchase three of the four from overseas because no US library had them available through interlibrary loan.<sup>51</sup> My courses also tend to privilege Spanish—itself a colonial language—because it is usually the only language spoken by a sufficient number of my students that translanguaging strategies beyond posting non-English editions of readings are practical and useful.

Fifth, it often makes sense to use multiple translanguaging strategies in tandem with one another. On days when all of the readings are available in Spanish, I will often encourage Spanish-speaking students to find each other for paired or small group discussions and use whatever mix of Spanish and English they like. This is even easier in online discussion forums, where I sometimes create parallel English and "Spanglish" threads for each discussion question and allow students to post in whichever mix of threads they prefer.

Sixth, students have been bombarded with messages that lead them to underestimate the value of building their literacy in their native languages, which may cause them to

ignore pedagogical efforts designed to help them develop their reading, writing, and speaking abilities in non-English languages. This is a common challenge faced by educators worldwide.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, students have often been convinced that their language is inappropriate for academic contexts.<sup>53</sup> This reflects the relative power and status of English and can only be countered by attempts to increase the status of other languages. The use of translanguaging strategies is in part an effort to signal that students' other languages are important and valuable.<sup>54</sup> The more such strategies are used, the less power English hegemony will have.

Seventh, there is no substitute for institution-wide commitments to valuing linguistic diversity. The goals of translanguaging pedagogy—inclusion, enhanced teaching effectiveness, and a reclaiming of the value of non-English languages—are achieved most fully when multiple professors or an entire institution commit to it. While translanguaging strategies can be used in traditional English-speaking classrooms, this might also mean offering courses in a variety of language modalities. It may be that in many contexts a fully non-English degree program is not as necessary or helpful as allowing students to choose from courses taught in English, in another language, bilingually, or translingually.<sup>55</sup> English hegemony is a systemic problem. What I can do in my classrooms is minimal in comparison to the systematic devaluing of my students' languages. Yet if we know anything about academia, it is that systemic change often starts with small experiments initially pursued without institutional support or resources.

Finally, we should not allow translanguaging practices to justify the infusion of English into non-English spaces. Guillaume Gentil argues that "the celebration of fluid multilingual-

ism and free language mixing should not lead us to forget that one original rationale for language separation in bilingual education programs was to avoid the natural tendency for dominant languages to displace minority languages in asymmetrical contact situations."<sup>56</sup> This means that "if the goal is the cultivation of linguistic diversity, then preserving some language separation and having rules over which language may be used in a given context may indeed be desirable."<sup>57</sup> This reflects what Django Paris calls the "paradox of pluralism," the need to "bridge . . . lines of division so that groups can cooperate in society, while at the same time maintaining spaces for particular groups to thrive."<sup>58</sup> The adoption of translanguaging pedagogy is best done intentionally, collaboratively, and with clear communication, and consensus about expectations. The goal of providing students the opportunity to use and strengthen their proficiency in their other languages should always inform curriculum and pedagogy that aims at inclusion and honoring linguistic diversity, lest these efforts devolve into mere tokenism.

### Conclusion

Pedagogical strategies that seek to include and value the linguistic diversity found in our classrooms have the potential to enhance learning (including the learning of English), increase the inclusion of marginalized students, and validate all languages as valuable and important. Efforts toward linguistic inclusion should be part of our larger efforts to shape classrooms and institutions that thrive by bringing diverse students and faculty together to encounter the full diversity of the religious traditions we study. As one seminary graduate who filled out my survey wrote, "The predominance of English is just one salient manifestation of a deeper predominance of Western thought and culture in theological education." Such students, their families, and their communities all see the value of education but, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith reminds us, "they do not want this to be achieved at the cost of destroying people's Indigenous identities, their languages, values and practices."<sup>59</sup> A move to embrace all of the languages of our students—and of the church—is an important means of opening up education to the experiences and knowledge of those who have experienced Western hegemony as oppression and marginalization. Even the small efforts of individual professors can show hospitality and challenge the power hierarchies embedded in higher education.



#### About the Author

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## Notes & Bibliography

1 While “Latinx” has gained popularity in the US as a gender-inclusive alternative to “Latino” or “Latin@,” it is a difficult construction to apply to other words. Here I follow some Spanish-speakers who have begun to substitute a gender-neutral “e” for the traditional masculine “o” and feminine “a” noun endings, which works much better with Spanish grammar and pronunciation.

2 To cite some examples: Canada has long experienced fights to protect its francophone citizens and universities from the encroachment of English; universities in western continental Europe, some of which have negotiated instruction in multiple languages for generations, are now embracing (and resisting) the worldwide trend toward more instruction in English; universities in former Soviet states, many of which previously abandoned Russian instruction for national languages, are now facing pressures to adopt English; many formerly Afrikaans-speaking universities in South Africa have switched to English and are trying to elevate African indigenous languages; and universities in the Middle East and parts of Asia are increasingly conducting instruction in English and inviting US universities to open up satellite campuses.

3 H. Samy Alim and Django Paris, “What Is Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy and Why Does It Matter?” in *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World*, edited by D. Paris and H. S. Alim (New York: Teachers College Press, 2017), 1–21. Alim and Paris use this language of “additive” versus “subtractive” education, noting that state-sponsored education has often been central to the white assimilationalist colonial project, a “saga of cultural and linguistic assault [that] has had and continues to have devastating effects on the access, achievement, and well-being of students of color in public schools”(1). We could say much the same about private universities and seminaries.

4 What are we afraid of? Is it possible that the conviction that English is the only appropriate language for the academy is as racist, nationalistic, and xenophobic as it sounds?

5 See Chloe T. Sun, *Attempt Great Things for God: Theological Education in Diaspora*, Theological Education between the Times (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 126.

6 Namsoon Kang, *Diasporic Feminist Theology: Asia and Theopolitical Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014)195.

7 Kang, *Diasporic Feminist Theology*, 27. That said, Kang also argues that a diasporic condition can give such individuals an advantage, turning into “a site of inventive engagement with the world because the person of marginality can become deliberate in seeking, cultivating, and constructing a space of relationship with others and society. . . . The diasporic mentality of homelessness can offer theological grounds of radical hospitality, responsibility, and critical engagements with the life of living together, the potential site for a radical solidarity without a sense of claiming the ownership of a unitary we” (27–28).

8 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 2012), 80–81. The same is true of communities, since, as Carmen Nanko-Fernández writes, “language is created by community and in turn facilitates the creation of community” (*Theologizing en Español: Context, Community, and Ministry* [Maryknoll: Orbis, 2010] 73).

9 Minae Mizumura, *The Fall of Language in the Age of English*, translated by Mari Yoshihara and Juliet Winters Carpenter (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 166–68.

10 Christa van der Walt, *Multilingual Higher Education: Beyond English Medium Orientations*, Bilingual Education and Bilingualism 91 (Buffalo: Multilingual Matters, 2013), 92.

11 Robert Phillipson, *Linguistic Imperialism Continued* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2009), 206. As Phillipson points out, the trend toward English-language instruction outside of the English-speaking world also comes with an embrace of Anglo-American academic culture to the detriment of the alternative approaches found in other cultures.

12 See Masahiko Minami and Carlos J. Ovando, “Language Issues in Multicultural Contexts,” in *The Handbook of Research in Multicultural Education*, 2nd ed., edited by James A. Banks and Cherry A. McGee Banks, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 577–88.

13 See Robert Phillipson, *Linguistic Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 185; Minami and Ovando, “Language Issues,” 577–88; Ofelia García, *Bilin-*

*gual Education in the 21st Century: A Global Perspective* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2008), 160; Angela Creese and Adrian Blackledge, “Translanguaging in the Bilingual Classroom: A Pedagogy for Learning and Teaching?” *The Modern Language Journal* 94, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 104–5; van der Walt, *Multilingual Higher Education*, 5, 122.

14 Linda Sauer Bredvik, *Discussing the Faith: Multilingual and Metalinguistic Conversations About Religion*, Diskursmuster – Discourse Patterns 25 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020), 84. She found that “the most communicatively effective conversations were comprised of participants who sought to go where the less powerful were, who changed or adapted their linguistic behavior to co-create meaning with interlocutors who possessed less competencies in a target language or who were a minority faith group in the conversation” (177).

15 Van der Walt, *Multilingual Higher Education*, 115. Van der Walt, who describes this tendency, also notes the use of derogatory jokes like those sometimes made about “Spanglish” and “Franglais.”

16 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, (London: Zed, 2021), 22, see also 278–79. As she writes, “the colonizer did not simply design an education system. They designed an education system especially to destroy Indigenous cultures, value systems, and appearance.” This reality continues—and extends to language—since “the Indigenous language is often regarded as being subversive to national interests and national literacy campaigns, and is actively killed off” (169). Robert Phillipson also addresses the history of the promotion of English as part of the colonial project (*Linguistic Imperialism; Linguistic Imperialism Continued*).

17 Minami and Ovando, “Language Issues,” 577. They note that if one goes back in the literature, one finds such patently absurd claims as the idea that bilingualism is so damaging to children as to cause intellectual disability.

18 Sun, *Attempt Great Things*, 50, 86–87, 129.

19 Catherine M. Mazak, “Theorizing Translanguaging Practices in Higher Education,” in *Translanguaging in Higher Education: Beyond Monolingual Ideologies*, edited by Catherine M. Mazak and Kevin S. Carroll (Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters, 2016), 2.

20 Danling Fu, Xenia Hadjioannou, and Xiaodi Zhou, *Translanguaging for Emergent Bilinguals: Inclusive Teaching in the Linguistically Diverse Classroom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2019), 24.

21 Jeffrey D. Meyers, “The Importance of Linguistically Diverse Collections: Decolonizing the Theological Library,” *Theological Librarianship* 14, no. 2 (October, 2021): 26n5, <https://serials.atla.com/theolib/article/view/2889>.

22 Of course, others provide very little support at all, even when they have student populations that would justify more substantial efforts.

23 Alim and Paris, “What Is Culturally Sustaining,” 5.

24 In my experience, students in such programs seldom have opportunities to interact with other students, are often taught by adjunct faculty excluded from the life of the institution, and are frequently provided with academic resources (such as those in the library) far inferior to those available for English-speaking students. Van der Walt also notes how officially bilingual or multilingual schools often unnecessarily build strong separations between programs taught in different languages. This is despite the fact that many of their students are to varying degrees multilingual and could easily take a mix of courses taught in different languages or courses taught bilingually or translingually (*Multilingual Higher Education*, 134).

25 Loida I. Martell-Otero, “Hablando Se Entiende la Gente: Tower of Babble or Gift of Tongues?” in *Teaching Global Theologies: Power and Praxis*, edited by Kwok Pui-lan, Cecilia González-Andrieu, and Dwight M. Hopkins (Waco: Baylor, 2015) 146–47. The result, Martell-Otero writes, is that “we have ill-prepared our students to live in a global world. We provide educational credentialing, but too many of our students graduate *mal educados*—with a lack of a holistic spirit of hospitality toward, or concern for, the cultural, religious, and linguistic ‘other’” (147).

26 See van der Walt, *Multilingual Higher Education*, 5; Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 105.

27 Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, *Atando Cabos: Latinx Contributions to Theological Education*, Theological Education between the Times, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 82.

28 Sun, *Attempt Great Things*, 94.

29 See Peter Fleming, *Dark Academia: How Universities Die* (London: Pluto, 2021)

14, 30, 135; James F. Keenan, *University Ethics: How Colleges Can Build and Benefit from a Culture of Ethics* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 158–62).

30 Namsoon Kang, “Global Politics of Knowledge and US Theological Education: From Globalization to Planarization,” in *Locating US Theological Education in a Global Context: Conversations with American Higher Education*, edited by Hendrick R. Pieterse (Eugene: Pickwick, 2019), 25.

31 K. K. Yeo, “‘Made in the USA’: A Chinese Perspective on US Theological Education in Light of the Chinese Context,” in *Locating US Theological Education in a Global Context: Conversations with American Higher Education*, edited by Hendrick R. Pieterse (Eugene: Pickwick, 2019), 147.

32 Sun, *Attempt Great Things*, 87.

33 Kang, “Global Politics of Knowledge,” 32.

34 Kang, “Global Politics of Knowledge,” 35, 41.

35 Lucretia B. Yaghjian, “Pedagogical Challenges in Teaching ESOL/Multilingual Writers in Theological Education,” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 21, no. 3 (July, 2018): 162–76. Similarly, Yaghjian writes that “when we work with ESOL/multilingual students. . . . We carry across the ethos of an institution, its values and its commitments, our openness to the student’s culture and our fears of embracing it” (168).

36 Felix Wilfred, *Margins: Site of Asian Theologies* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2008), xvi.

37 US Census Bureau, “2020: ACS 5-Year Estimates Detailed Tables,” 2020, <https://data.census.gov>.

38 Johnnie Johnson Hafernik and Fredel M. Wiant, *Integrating Multilingual Students into College Classrooms: Practical Advice for Faculty* (Bristol: Channel View, 2012). I have adapted this typology from Hafernik and Wiant. They stress that the differences within each group are often as significant as the differences between groups.

39 See Edwin I. Hernández et al., *Spanning the Divide: Latinos/as in Theological Education* (Orlando: Asociación para la Educación Teológica Hispana (AETH, 2016), 193. Career-readiness is especially important for seminarians, for whom fluency in the languages of their future congregations is essential.

40 Ofelia García, *Bilingual Education in the 21st Century: A Global Perspective* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2008), 109.

41 García, *Bilingual Education*, 115.

42 Catherine M. Mazak et al., “Professors Translanguaging in Practice: Three Cases from a Bilingual University,” in *Translanguaging in Higher Education: Beyond Monolingual Ideologies*, edited by Catherine M. Mazak and Kevin S. Carroll, (Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters, 2016), 72.

43 Strikingly, school systems in the US often actively suppress students’ other languages while simultaneously investing in helping English monolinguals learn the very languages they refuse to allow students growing up in multilingual or non-English speaking households to use.

44 K. K. Yeo, “‘Made in the USA’: A Chinese Perspective on US Theological Education in Light of the Chinese Context,” in *Locating US Theological Education in a Global Context: Conversations with American Higher Education*, edited by Hendrick R. Pieterse (Eugene: Pickwick, 2019), 134–57. Linguistic competence in multiple languages may need to become a much larger factor in faculty hiring, PhD program admissions, and PhD requirements. This might also facilitate increased language requirements for students studying for ministry. K. K. Yeo, for instance, argues for a modern language requirement for all theological students (148). As Chloe T. Sun reminds us, “speaking different languages is not a curse, but lack of understanding of different languages is” (*Attempt Great Things*, 95).

45 The research survey was conducted November 2020 through April 2021 and primarily focused on perceptions of how programs and libraries are supporting non-English speaking and multilingual students and faculty. Academic deans (or similar leaders) from one hundred randomly-selected schools were asked to forward the survey link to their students and faculty via email. Twenty-six agreed to do so. In a few cases it was forwarded only to a subset of students (like those in particular degree programs). Alumni were recruited primarily via social media during pilot and follow-up phases, which generated a handful of current student and faculty responses as well. The survey received 301 responses from 223 students, thirty-one alumni, and fifty-nine faculty members (some respondents identified with more than one role), 172 of whom (58%) identified as multilingual or non-English speaking. The survey was available only in English and Spanish, which resulted in students in Chinese- and Korean-language programs being underrepresented.

46 On the last item, see Glenn Fluegge, “How Online Learning May Disadvantage Students from Some Cultures and What to Do About It in the Theology Classroom,” *The Wabash Center Journal on Teaching* 2, no. 1 (March 2021): 187–202.

47 I have also worked with a Spanish professor at one of my schools to have her students translate material into English for use in my classes (I make the original Spanish available as well). Such collaborations may be fruitful ways of producing needed translations. Additionally, I am slowly amassing a collection of readings translated by my graduate students as a course assignment that I share with their permission.

48 Musa W. Dube, “Curriculum Transformation: Dreaming of Decolonization in Theological Studies,” in *Border Crossings: Cross-Cultural Hermeneutics*, edited by D. N. Premnath, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2007), 125.

49 Danling Fu, Xenia Hadjioannou, and Xiaodi Zhou, *Translanguaging for Emergent Bilinguals: Inclusive Teaching in the Linguistically Diverse Classroom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2019), 107.

50 Yelena Luckert with Lindsay Inge Carpenter, eds., *The Globalized Library: American Academic Libraries and International Students, Collections, and Practices* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2019), x. Luckert and Carpenter note how a number of authors have come to the conclusion that pedagogical efforts aimed at multilingual students provide benefits to monolingual students as well.

51 I suspect that this reflects both lower rates of translation of works by women and higher rates of translation for older works, which were more likely to be written by men. The plummeting rates of US library purchasing of non-English titles exacerbate both of these factors (see Meyers, “The Importance of Linguistically Diverse Collections,” 11–28). Of the non-English editions of books I assign a single chapter from, that I know exist but have been unable to or have not tried to acquire, two of sixty-two (3.2%) are works written by women. A small grant from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Religion and Theology allowed me to purchase thirty-one books to add to those I was able to obtain through interlibrary loan.

52 See van der Walt, *Multilingual Higher Education*, 79–87.

53 This is also true for non-prestige varieties of English.

54 See Yanitsa Buendia de Llaca, “Chisme and Spanglish as a Pedagogical Tools,” *Religious Studies News: Spotlight on Teaching* (July, 2022): 10–12. Buendia de Llaca describes how in the US Spanish has been both racialized and relegated to the private and familial realms. She writes that giving students the opportunity to use Spanish in their learning “breaks parameters of exclusion and domination” and “can be a powerful and healing experience” (11).

55 See Sun, *Attempt Great Things*, 70, 114. Sun, who teaches at one of the Mandarin-language seminaries in the US, writes of the lack of structures for helping students learn English at many such institutions and the ways this can limit and impede their ministries, especially as the younger generations in their immigrant communities switch to English. Despite highlighting the value of such institutions, she argues that “limiting the instructional language to one [language] tends to limit the global nature of the kingdom of God. . . . God’s kingdom does not belong only to those who speak English, nor only to those who speak Mandarin, but to people from all nations and all tongues” (71).

56 Guillaume Gentil, “Afterword: Moving Forward with Academic Biliteracy Research,” in *Academic Biliteracies: Multilingual Repertoires in Higher Education*, edited by David M. Palfreyman and Christa van der Walt (Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters, 2017), 214.

57 Gentil, “Afterword: Moving Forward,” 214.

58 Django Paris, *Language Across Difference: Ethnicity, Communication, and Youth Identities in Changing Urban Schools* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 16.

59 Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 154.

# Emmaus Encounters: Building Community on the Road, Hawaii, 2022

## A Case Study on Teaching Future Ministers How to Build Community

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Yale Divinity School

### Introduction

Andover Newton Seminary became an embedded unit of Yale Divinity School (YDS) in 2017. Doing so required Andover Newton to move its educational program from one context to another. Some dimensions of its curriculum were easier to move than others. Faculty members who came from Andover Newton to teach at YDS were largely well-received, especially by students seeking formation for ministry in faith communities. Worship and fellowship took shape quickly and, barring the upheaval all communities weathered during the COVID-19 pandemic, the community found itself able to talk about very difficult subjects, including gender (“Me Too”) and racial reckoning (Black Lives Matter), more quickly than those coordinating the move might have dared hope.

One program that did not translate well to YDS was called, in Andover Newton’s freestanding iteration, “Border-Crossing Immersion.” The school had a long history of offering travel seminars that students found transformational. Faculty members led groups to China, India, Ghana, the US-Mexico border, and Nicaragua; students came back changed. The program became a curriculum-wide requirement in 2007, and the school introduced local Border-Crossings to the mix, working with populations previously unfamiliar to students. As for where Border-Crossing fit into the faculty’s understanding of goals for student learning, it was clear that Border-Crossing’s primary objective was to teach students about social justice.

Even before Andover Newton relocated to New Haven and affiliated with Yale, the program was under strain that surely would

have necessitated revision in the very near future. First, built into the program were certain assumptions about who Andover Newton students were. To tell students that they must cross a border to encounter difference was to suggest that they all came from the same background, a background that was shaped by whiteness and all the privileges built into whiteness. This assumption, never uttered aloud, was incorrect and harmful in its incorrectness.

Second, the program suggested that the best way to learn about social justice was to learn about “the other” by becoming “the other.” Pedagogically, it is altogether possible that students learned a great deal by experiencing disorientation and needing to reorient themselves (this form of teaching and learning will be discussed in the next section). That said, to suggest that social justice can be taught by instrumentalizing a foreign community, using it as a learning tool, is problematic at best. Using another person or a community to benefit the one who already holds privilege sets up an irreconcilable gap between the teaching method and the hopes the teacher has for the learner.

Finally – and here is the good news – Border-Crossing Immersion’s side effects were ultimately its most important asset. Students and faculty members who participated in them bonded with one another and with their various hosts around the world. They overcame adversity together and were able to sustain difficult conversations due to their sense of shared purpose. Ultimately, through investigation and deep discernment, educational leaders at Andover Newton at YDS came to understand that travel seminars are incredibly valuable, especially now,

today. But their value lies in their possibilities for teaching students how to build community. By moving the side benefit to the center, Andover Newton discovered that a travel seminar built expressly to focus on community building is directly relevant to preparing tomorrow’s faith community leaders. This article will describe how a travel seminar can provide future ministers with the tools, knowledge, and attitudes necessary to effectively bring people together for meaningful envisioning together: an old value – community building – learned in a new way.

Religious leaders today must help communities make sense of a wide range of concerns they have about our world and its future. They seek to bring people together around difficult topics to dream of new directions, yet even persuading people to gather is a challenge today – people are anxious, and differences loom large. Even before COVID-19 shut down in-person gatherings, faith communities were struggling to stay together over growing political, generational, ethical, and racial divides. How can a religious leader build community that enables meaningful conversation and discernment as to what their faith is calling them to be and do?

Individuals who worry about the climate crisis, wars, cultural upheavals, disease, and widespread hopelessness are rational to worry. Gathering in the context of the practice of faith should also be considered a rational response to that worry. To fulfill this societal expectation of faith communities, religious leaders must learn how to build communities strong enough to stay together amidst disagreement, foster dialogue despite difficult topics, and infuse dialogue about the most challenging issues our world is facing with the wisdom we find in faith traditions.

The question for seminary leaders, therefore, is this: How do we teach students to build life-giving community? The simplest answer might be, “We build it, and then reflect on it; and build it up some more.” Yet the theological curriculum has worked so hard to establish itself as a viable academic endeavor that some of the structures through which community can be built, and then reflected upon theologically, have fallen away. Today’s theological educators must rebuild them.

### Review of Relevant Literature

In his book *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, large-group dynamics theorist Peter Block writes that associational life in communities is both an end and a means.<sup>1</sup> It is an end, in that communal leaders consider cohesion and strong identity to be worth striving for as an inherent good. It is a means, in that cohesive communities can bring about social change for the better. Any person who endured social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic can tell you that they came to understand the importance of community in new ways, and now is the time to harness that learning, rather than continuing to assume that building community is as simple – and learnable through osmosis – as it ever was. Block writes that the effectiveness tomorrow’s leaders will result from their capacity to convene.<sup>2</sup> Convening is the outward action of the community-builder, and in a diverse and complex society, none of us was born knowing how to do it.

The creation of a new kind of travel seminar with the education-

al purpose of teaching future ministers how to build community requires educators, as Block writes, to “treat as important many things we thought were incidental.”<sup>3</sup> Rather than skim over the surface of what a travel seminar might do to teach community building, it is important to take the question down to its essentials rather than operate on assumptions about what community is, why ministerial leaders ought to build it, and how they might do so well. The following questions will guide that deconstruction that predicates reconstruction.

### What is Community Building?

Block writes that connectedness is not the same as belonging.<sup>4</sup> Human beings have never been as interconnected as they are now due to the wonders of technology, yet their sense of meaningful, mutual, life-giving relationships might never have been so thin. The options that exist for gathering are so numerous as to overwhelm the one charged with convening people. Block writes that selecting options must now begin with the question, “How are we going to be when we gather together?”<sup>5</sup>

Answering that question relies on both intentionality and a goal orientation often looked down upon in religious circles. “We come together to worship God,” or “We come together to build the Kingdom” are of course reasons in themselves to get together. But leaders must also think strategically about gathering. Block writes that social fabric is not woven accidentally; rather, “[W]e choose the people and the conversation that will produce the accountability to build relatedness, structure belonging, and move the action forward.”<sup>6</sup> Perhaps that relatedness, structure, and action will happen organically, but the leader must be able to curate such experiences through convening people skillfully. Someone must teach those skills.

Although one would think the expectations Block places upon the skillful convener-as-leader are very high, he argues that healthy communities are not codependent with their leaders. He in fact describes dependence on leaders as a mark of a sick system, or a “retributive context.”<sup>7</sup> He believes that the formation of citizens takes place through leaders convening people well and pointing them toward possibilities rather than encouraging them to ruminate on problems. He writes that “citizen” is the opposite of “consumer” or “client.”<sup>8</sup> Those who depend on their leaders expect to be treated like clients, and they forfeit the growth in them and their communities that comes from intentional community building through coming together. Here is the value-added proposition Block makes: “Every time we gather becomes a model for the future we want to create.”<sup>9</sup>

Where Block focuses on building community within populations, convening those in the leader’s care to imagine a new world together, others write about connecting beyond communities. In his *Joining God in the Great Unraveling*,<sup>10</sup> scholar on the emergent church Alan Roxburgh writes about previously insular faith communities getting out into their neighborhoods. Rather than expecting the wider community to come into the sanctuary, the new way of thinking about church Roxburgh describes relates to coming to understand the deeply held hopes and dreaded fears of those in the church’s neighborhood. He writes that getting into the community and forming relationships with those around us



is the only way that human communities will find the new hope they need when old structures – like the conventional Christian congregation – falls away. Those from the congregation do not bring God into the neighborhoods, but rather they follow God, who is the primary agent,<sup>11</sup> already presenting and bringing about transformation all around us. Roxburgh writes, “We need simple practices that unbind us from the Siren song of ‘it’s all falling apart’ to help us see where the Spirit is fermenting God’s future right in our neighborhoods.”<sup>12</sup>

### How Is Community Building Taught?

A variety of scholars from different fields offer advice as to how to teach community building, and all pay special attention to the “how” of educating. To transmit information about community building without building community among learners would, of course, seem ironic and awkward. Imagine a course on community building in which none of the teachers nor learners seemed to care about one another? That said, a sense of community among learners is not a by-product, according to those who write about educating community-builders, but it is the primary and foundational. Beyond that one common thread, one also finds variety in approaches among authors who write about teaching learners how to build community.

**Posing questions.** Theological educator Letty Russell relied on travel seminars as an important teaching tool as a member of the Yale Divinity School faculty. She wrote that Christian theology is all about asking questions: seeking to understand the world (logos) in the mind of God (theo).<sup>13</sup> She describes education as partnership in learning. She points to education-for-liberation pioneer Paolo Freire’s model of teaching through posing questions as the most effective way to teach theology. She argues in *The Future of Partnership* that seminars must model teamwork and teach students how to be good partners.

**The keenly aware small group.** Block echoes Russell’s thoughts when he writes that, if we want to change a community, we have to change the conversation.<sup>14</sup> He argues that the small group is where transformation in a community starts: “the small group is the unit of transformation and the container of the experience of belonging.”<sup>15</sup> Block describes these essential building blocks for a small group that can bring about transformation by engaging in life-giving conversation:

1. Accountability and commitment
2. Learning from one another
3. Bias toward the future
4. Intentionality regarding how individuals in the small group engage one another.<sup>16</sup>

**Acknowledgement that all need transformation.** Ann Curry-Stevens is an education scholar who writes about education for those with privilege.<sup>17</sup> Whereas many educational models seek to provide space for those who come to the learning environment with certain deficits related to their resources, Curry-Stevens emphasizes that students learn better when all are treated as though they have some privilege, some disadvantages, and promise for change. Her writing has important implications for travel seminars as an instructional strategy, in that everyone is out of their element when traveling, taking away the home-team advantage from any one learner.

Curry-Stevens refers to the pioneering work of Jack Mezirow, who wrote about education for transformation and how it begins with a disorienting dilemma and then continues as students reorient themselves. Mezirow does not take into account, writes Curry-Stevens, that everyone – not just the

comfortable – are privileged in some part of their lives. When classrooms of learners sort themselves into categories of “oppressed” versus “oppressor,” the possibilities for building community are limited from the start.

Curry-Stevens argues that education for the privileged calls on all to embrace confidence-shaking and confidence-building activities without reference to whose confidence started in what position. She writes that transformational education for the privileged is important to the whole of society, so finding educational options that make such transformation possible – rather than withholding transformation in an attempt to level the playing field – has widespread benefits for whole communities.

**Following God into the neighborhood.** As mentioned previously, Alan Roxburgh writes about the emerging church. He advocates connecting with neighborhoods as a first step for building or rebuilding community. He writes that engaging communities comes with risk, and it leads to a sense of relationship and groundedness through experience that cannot be achieved any other way.<sup>18</sup> When a community connects with its neighborhood, participants empty themselves of the power one finds when in their comfortable space.<sup>19</sup> This act of letting go of comfort simultaneously melts away assumptions, and it causes a person to give themselves over to God. “Knowing is ultimately about revelation,” writes Roxburgh.<sup>20</sup> Knowledge is not to be conquered, it is to be revealed by God.

**Dialogue.** Education scholar Peter Rule writes that dialogue is “a socially situated practice that is linked to a transformative agenda.”<sup>21</sup> Although often referenced in casual conversation as an inherently positive form of human engagement, dialogue has its critics among educators. Rule writes that dialogical pedagogies’ critics say its results are not measurable, and that power inequality causes dialogue to break down into manipulation. Some question whether dialogue can lead to new understandings, given how different people are from one another.

Within a liberal paradigm, with its emphasis on the individual as the source of meaning and value, dialogue could be divorced from a “liberative praxis” and retained in the context of interpersonal classroom relationships. [A post-modern critique] would interrogate the assumptions about language and communication that underpin dialogue: the possibility of reaching common, stable meanings when language is, in post-structuralist terms, an infinite play of signs that endlessly defers meaning.<sup>22</sup>

In other words, Rule writes that critics say dialogue can become circular quickly without participants in it changing in any deep way. Rule, however, disagrees. He writes that dialogue requires a mutual commitment to learn from one another, and such a commitment can lead to continual breakthroughs among dialogue partners who come to understand themselves better as they learn about each other.

Whereas Peter Block writes that the small group is the primary unit of community, Rule drills down deeper to the one-on-one dialogue. “What is at stake in this dialogue is not only the individual project participant but also the nature of the educational project itself and, in microcosmic form, the broader society in which it is situated.”<sup>23</sup> Rule refers to the kind of learning that can take place in dialogue as “diacognition,” and he describes it as both a means and an end to further learning about self and other.<sup>24</sup>

**Partnership.** Letty Russell writes that partnership is one way in which we build community, and the creation of a partnership teaches community

building. Russell writes that partnership, and becoming a true partner, is a way in which leaders learn to build community. She names the following attributes of a partnership as its essential ingredients:

1. Commitment that involves responsibility, vulnerability, and trust.
2. Common struggle involving risk and growth in pursuit of a goal.
3. Contextuality that takes into consideration a wider array of relationships and makes room for corrective feedback when values do not overlap.<sup>25</sup>

She writes that partnerships include synergy, serendipity, and sharing that leads to an increase in knowledge and wisdom for all.<sup>26</sup> The kind of learning about community building made possible through partnership is as different from learning alone as the difference between an object and an animal. Russell writes, “Partnership is always growing and dying, for it is a human interrelationship that is never static.”<sup>27</sup>

### What Challenges, Perennial and Emerging, Complicate Building Community?

Given that community building is largely assumed to be a good thing to do, one wonders why doing it is difficult for leaders. Part of the challenge lies in widespread denial of how power dynamics affect communities coming together. Another difficulty lays in the demand that all involved in building community must be ready to engage in mutual servanthood, where everyone gives something up in order to gain something more. To teach tomorrow’s leaders how to build community, those learners must be prepared for challenges, rather than underestimating the steepness of the climb or losing hope in the face of it.

Russell acknowledges the difficulty of building the partnerships that lead to building community, and to teaching community building, when she writes, “Partnership as a meaningless platitude is to be seen all around us. Women have been unequal partners [to men] for centuries.” Russell therefore names the fact that the term “partners” has long been used not to describe a pairing of equals, but as a euphemism for the one-way service of a helpmeet to the one who is helped.<sup>28</sup> Russell cofounded an organization called Partners in Mission that will be described later in this article. She names that calling first- and third-world churches “partners” did not change the dynamics of financial control between them.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to the challenge of building community amidst power inequalities, Peter Block names another obstacle: the way in which individuals who have their own issues to work on tend to play them out in the community rather than taking responsibility for resolving them. Block writes specifically about projection, whereby participants in a community attribute their own poor qualities to others rather than facing them.<sup>30</sup> He also names the tendency to label others, rather than truly get to know them, as an obstacle to building community.<sup>31</sup>

In writing about education for the privileged, Curry-Stevens writes that another challenge in building community relates to identity, and how identities fluctuate depending on the context in which an individual is located. Whether a person is privileged or marginalized depends on who is around them.<sup>32</sup> For instance, in a setting like an Ivy League graduate school, a student who is a person of color might experience discrimination and oppression from those who represent dominant groups, but that same person might themselves be viewed as dominant in a setting where others are less educated or culturally influential. Building community among those who are different from each other can be difficult, but doing so amidst fluctuating identities is harder still.

In an article about the benefits of travel for leveling playing fields in building community, Alun Morgan writes that travel helps communities to set aside assumptions about who has and does not have power, who is to be assigned what label, and who might be understood as privileged or underprivileged. He writes, “[O]veremphasizing cultural Otherness over commonality runs the risk of exoticizing, romanticizing, essentializing, and superficializing the lived experience of people encountered through travel which is more likely to reify than transform existing frames of mind and consequent power asymmetries.”<sup>33</sup> Group travel, when carried out thoughtfully, blurs frames of mind within groups and among groups and those they encounter on the road.

### How Might Travel Catalyze Learning?

Travel in and of itself does not bring about transformation in learners, but the space it creates is conducive to lowering barriers and, therefore, building community. Morgan describes three qualities that make travel seminars an ideal setting for discovery regarding self and others. First, he notes that travel is inherently multidisciplinary.<sup>34</sup> Encountering a new setting calls all senses to alertness: sounds, smells, sights, touch, and flavor stimuli all stoke imagination for learning. The thoughtful traveler engages in different forms of thought that include religious studies, philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and geography as well as history, literature, and biography.<sup>35</sup> In addition to these disciplines for thought, travel brings together many different ways of knowing into a “transrational” understanding of being and knowing. Amidst a sense of knowing beyond cognition, groups open up to the possibility of transformative learning processes beyond disciplines, beyond words.<sup>36</sup>

### Methodology

Andover Newton Seminary at Yale Divinity School approached the question, *How can a travel seminar teach seminary students how to build community?* as an action research project. The seminary endeavored to create a travel seminar for future ministers whose express purpose was to teach students how to build community. As stated in the introduction, the school had a long history of offering travel seminars as a means for learning, but the learning goal associated with the travel related to competency for social justice ministry. The assumption was that, by becoming “the other” in a new setting, students would learn what that felt like, and they would lead with greater compassion. As the intersectional identities of students expanded and became more complex, the idea of “otherness” did, too.

### Discernment of Need for Change

It became clear that the Border-Crossing Immersion style of travel seminars needed to be reevaluated when students came away from two subsequent trips with negative feelings about the experience. Students reported feeling like they had been exposed to “poverty pornography,” voyeuristically engaging others rather than meeting partners through a sacred encounter. They did not feel like they were building relationships, but rather witnessing uneven transactions. Andover Newton suspended the program, and just a few short weeks later the COVID-19 pandemic shut down global travel.

The school assembled a task force to discern the future of Border-Crossing Immersion. Its first meeting took place simultaneously with the school’s first emergency meeting to discuss pandemic possibilities. Of course, it was not known at the time how long shutdowns would continue. After a three-month suspension of activity, the task force resumed its work, connecting with stakeholders and learning about options for travel seminars in the future.



This first task force made the recommendation that travel seminars should resume, as all who participated in them described them as extremely valuable. That said, they should no longer focus on social justice, which requires a different kind of teaching and learning; Andover Newton is now tackling that topic through a colloquium that includes community organizing training. The task force recommended that travel seminars should instead do what participants said they did best: teach students about building community within groups and with new, previously unfamiliar partners.

### New Program Design Process

Once teaching future ministers how to build community was named as the right goal for travel seminars, and the appropriate authorizing bodies (the Andover Newton trustees' Program and Life Committee, and ultimately the Andover Newton affiliated faculty) affirmed the recommendation, work began on designing how the new travel seminar would function. The first task force worked together from March 2020 through the end of the 2021 academic year; a new group received the baton in the fall of 2021. Their hope was to design a travel seminar focused on community building for March of 2022. The delta and omicron variants of COVID-19 delayed progress, and the group ultimately zeroed in on preparing for a pilot seminar in the summer of 2022.

The group decided from the start that its first foray would be to the great state of Hawaii. This destination made sense on a number of levels. First, Andover Newton has a current relationship with the chaplain to the Punahou School, who taught on the Andover Newton campus in 2018. Second, Andover and Yale have strong historic ties with Hawaiian churches, many of which were founded by missionaries from one of the two schools. Third, the destination was domestic, meaning that there might be fewer restrictions on travel in the immediate post-COVID travel landscape. Fourth, Hawaiian partners presented the possibility of not just visits, but exchanges, which were named by the first task force as a priority, relating to creating reciprocal, rather than parent-child, relationship structures.

The task force divided into three subcommittees. One group would focus on the name for the new program, which of course included discussion about the program's mission and the seminary's identity. A second group was to focus on key current issues in Hawaii that would create docking mechanisms for meaningful conversation. The third group focused on the who and the what of partnerships: who would be our partners in Hawaii, and where might the group identify counterparts that went beyond historic ties from the past?

The naming subcommittee, in consultation with the whole task force, arrived at the name "Emmaus Encounters: Building Community on the Road." The Emmaus story in the Bible (Luke 24:13-35) has served as a gathering theme for Andover Newton since it became embedded at Yale Divinity School. One member of the task force had suggested "Emmaus" as the name of Andover Newton's now-thriving Thursday evening worship experience. The story of the resurrected Jesus becoming identifiable through walking together, sharing stories, and breaking bread was just as powerful for a community-building travel seminar as it was for gathering a worship community around word and sacrament.

The subcommittee focusing on key issues named the following

priorities as important to the attitude and affect of the travelers from Andover Newton at YDS:

- Reciprocity and mutuality
- Avoiding voyeuristic behaviors
- Relationship-building toward inclusive community
- Connecting with Hawaiian people on shared areas of concern, such as
  - o Climate change and water issues
  - o Sovereignty and independence
  - o Housing
  - o Cultural appropriation
  - o Language issues
- Reflecting on experiences toward developing transferable skills
- Restorative justice practices
- Mind-body engagement with setting
- Volunteerism
- Networking with historic denominational partners

They also named the importance of being outstanding guests: humble, unassuming, unentitled, and ready to listen. The key issues the subcommittee identified fed into the work of the team considering partnerships. How might the group's priorities intersect with its hoped-for host's priorities? The task force framed a clear statement for its purpose to be shared with partners so that none to whom the group reached out would worry about sub-agendas or ulterior motives. One member of this subcommittee was the chaplain from the Punahou School who had come to know Andover Newton at YDS and was deeply familiar with potential partners on the ground. This group provided guidance for the staff who would ultimately schedule visits with partners in Hawaii.

Through the work of the task force and its subcommittees, a pilot initiative took shape. All were invited to participate, but based on the change of schedule and availability of members, a subset participated and brought back knowledge for the whole group.

### Learning From Peers

While the task forces worked to affirm that travel seminars should continue and then designed a new approach to them, Andover Newton staff leaders were keenly aware that other options existed for seminary student travel. Three examples explored follow.

**International Partners in Mission (IPM).** This organization, connected with Yale Divinity School by Professor Letty Russell whose work on partnership was explored above, was the initial partner with whom Andover Newton Seminary worked when it relocated from Newton, Massachusetts, to New Haven, Connecticut, and partnered with Yale Divinity School. According to its publications, IPM works across borders to promote justice and peace through learning opportunities. IPM works across borders of culture, faith, and economic circumstance with children, women, and youth to nurture partnerships that build justice, peace, and hope through transformational learning opportunities and programs. Founded in 1974 by Lutheran missionaries, the organization became ecumenical in the late 1980s and interfaith in focus in the early 2000s. The group now has partners with whom

it hosts immersions in Brazil, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, India, Italy, Kenya, Nepal, Nicaragua, Tanzania, and the US.

It carries out its work through forming connections with community organizations on the ground and then bringing learners to visit partners. IPM currently boasts 320 different Project Partners. One reads on the IPM Web site, IPM's Project Partners are independent, community-based organizations around the world that accompany women, children, and youth who are working for social change and justice. IPM collaborates with these organizations on accompaniment, advocacy, bilateral and multilateral sharing, funding, meditation and prayer, micro-loans, regional gatherings, solidarity, technical assistance, and training programs. Together we leverage local assets to address the self-identified needs of each community, working together for societal transformation and sustainable change.<sup>37</sup>

**International Ministries of the ABC(USA).** The American Baptist Churches (USA) is a Christian denomination that is known for its unusually diverse history, membership, and leadership. Its "International Ministries" work cross-culturally to provide short-term missions ("Discovery Trips") and virtual immersions in foreign countries. The purpose of the immersions is to teach learners about the histories, struggles, and social realities of contexts beyond their own. Like other faith traditions with a strong, historic commitment to overseas missions, the American Baptists sent disciples of Christ overseas to spread the Gospel, adopting Matthew's language that God want all people to have life, and have it abundantly (Matthew 6:10). Today's virtual immersions connect US-based Baptists with 250 international partners in 70 countries including South Africa, Haiti, South Sudan, Congo, Yemen, and Japan.

Founded in 1814, at the high point of the Second Great Awakening's fervor for revival and mission in the US, the American Baptists' missions adapted their approaches to different contexts and different times. Whereas their original purpose was to evangelize, their goals expanded to include theological education for future clergy from all nations, support for immigrants and refugees, the abolition of human trafficking and enslavement, the promotion of health and wellness, and enrichment for youth and young adults around the world.<sup>38</sup>

**Overseas Adventure Travel (OAT).** This organization, headquartered in Boston, Massachusetts, offers personal educational opportunities whose purposes include spiritual and emotional growth. In that way, their objectives resonate with those of Andover Newton's Emmaus Encounters, as they relate to transformational education more than to learning content or promoting social change. Trips offered by OAT invite participants to leave the well-trod paths of tourism to engage communities through cultural connections and meaningful interaction with those who inhabit the countries visited.

Founded in 1978, OAT takes travelers on immersive trips in teams of eight to twenty-five, sometimes by small boat. They intentionally provide travelers with flexibility and freedom and provide lodging in intimate settings, such as family-run hotels. The intended participant pool for trips includes adults over fifty years of age. Destinations include Vietnam, safaris in Botswana and Namibia, and desert excursions in Nevada.

### Findings and Implications for Practice

Those redeveloping Andover Newton's travel seminars understood, based on experience, that a trial run would be crucial to planning a trip that would result in new learning about building community. The normal stressors of

travel, combined with unfamiliarity with contexts, might cause group leaders too much anxiety to focus on creating an environment conducive to exploration and discovery. Therefore, from the beginning, the second task force charged with new program design knew it would put together a trial-run trip.

### The Pilot Emmaus Encounter

To plan the pilot, the Andover Newton staff relied on the findings of sub-committees that looked at issues and potential partners and on the literature explored earlier in this article. That literature offered up these implications for practice:

- a. From Peter Block: the small group is the primary unit of community
- b. From Ann Curry-Stevens: all need transformation, whether they come from privileged or underprivileged backgrounds
- c. From Alan Roxburgh: community begins with following God into the neighborhood
- d. From Peter Rule: relationships build through dialogue that contains no agenda for changing the other
- e. From Letty Russell: partnership is the shape of community building
- f. From Alun Morgan: travel produces multidisciplinary experiences

Using these guidelines and relying on the collective wisdom of the planning group, Andover Newton staff members divided up the work of planning a pilot journey. One, TRE, focused on logistics. Another, SBD, focused on connecting with partners, so as to build community in an outward-facing way. A third, JKB, focused on designing experiences to build inward-facing community. The three groups met three times in the weeks leading up to the trip, but most communication took place asynchronously between meetings.

SBD, who scheduled conversations with partners, brought to that work a commitment that days should be rich and full, but not grueling as related to exhaustion. All agreed that two to three engagements per day would be ideal. SBD had to reach out to workers in various settings in Hawaii beyond the identified partners, as some initial recommendations led to dead ends. Ultimately, the pilot travelers met with a wide range of partners, making the most of the multidisciplinary travel provides. Partners included leaders from schools and churches with historic ties to Andover and Yale, partners doing meaningful work and ministry in Hawaii, and partners in settings bringing about post-colonial social justice.

The staff member who focused on planning to bring about community in the group, JKB, thought carefully about building time for worship and reflection into every day on the road. Each morning began with a devotion, and each setting visited included a time of introductions and greeting. Each traveler committed to leading two or more of these community-building tasks.

As for introductions and greetings, while planning logistics TRE learned of a tradition in Hawaii known as offering an Oli (oh-LEE). When a guest arrives in someone else's home in Hawaii, they offer a greeting and ask for permission to enter, and the hosts return with an Oli of their own. TRE suggested that this practice be undertaken not just in the one place that suggested it, but in all settings visited. This gesture of respect, which acknowledged hospitality rather than hinting at a sense of entitlement, bore dividends in the form of grateful reactions from Hawaiian hosts not used to such conscientiousness.

Daily devotions ranged widely, from singing to movement to reflections on scripture. Reflection time followed a suggested model from the book An-

other Way: Living and Leading Change On Purpose. That book, which came out of the Forum on Theological Exploration, offered the acronym, CARE, as a mnemonic for guiding life-giving conversations.

- C = Create a hospitable space
- A = Ask self-awakening questions
- R = Reflect theologically
- E = Enact the next most faithful step

A daily discipline of reflecting using the CARE model gave a shape not just to the day, but to the group as they interacted in all settings.

### Learnings to Reinvest for the Future

The following findings from the planning task force and Emmaus Encounters pilot will inform Andover Newton's future travel seminars. The hope is that they might also help theological educators and those who care about teaching leaders to build community within and beyond groups.

**How is community built?** Leaders can best learn how to build community through an action reflection process where they first build community and then shine light on what they have done.

How does one build not just any community, but a life-giving and liberative community? To achieve the goal of building a community that does not reify



oppressive structures of the past, sometimes dismantling must precede building. That said, once a group is ready to build equitable and respectful community within and beyond its bounds, some endorsed practices are available; one need not reinvent the wheel. As was the case earlier, these best practices emerge from the review of literature above.

From social sciences:

- Engage on equal footing, avoid parent-child dynamics
- Emphasize possibilities over problems
  - From adult learning theory:
- Expect that all take responsibility for their learning
- Maximize possibilities for agency and choice
- From education-for-transformation theory:
  - Disorient and reorient; shake *and* build confidence
  - Universalize: all have some privilege, some pain, something to learn

In building community, it is useful to bear in mind that one is never entirely

rebuilding community. A liberative and life-giving community requires creating something new.

**Key components.** The following values guided the design of the pilot initiative, which had followed the work of two task forces and a review of available, relevant literature:

- Shared leadership within groups
- Humility when entering new spaces, meeting new people
- Hospitality when encountering opportunities for exchange
- Engaging array of activities balanced with reflection
- Privileging presence amidst, rather than quantity of, activities
- Dialogue, not dialectics: nobody trying to prove anything, cause another person to change
- Asking and answering questions, listening, sharing

After the pilot initiative took place, two additional practices emerged as important for future planning:

- Creating space for atonement for what has happened and where harm has been done
- Including a service component where travelers volunteer in settings where those who reside in the host setting also volunteer
- Building an evaluation and survey tool into the trip itself so as to gather process-evaluation data in real time
- Making a practice of sending an advance leader or team to sites to be visited, as relationship building requires a primer

**Selecting settings conducive to an Emmaus Encounter.** Perhaps the most innovative discovery emerging from the task forces and pilot initiative described in this article relates the criteria for selecting a place to take participants for a community-building travel seminar. Churches and schools that have sought out life-giving travel have often skipped the step of discerning what was to be taught and learned and rushed ahead into selecting a setting.

Because of two consecutive travel seminars not leading to good feedback from participants, followed by the COVID-19 pandemic's travel restrictions, those redeveloping Andover Newton's travel seminars had no choice but to think deeply and intentionally about where to take and send groups. That which emerged as important to selection seemed counterintuitive at first, but after the pilot's success, seems useful and sensible. Here are the criteria that will guide site selection for Emmaus Encounters: Building Community on the Road into the future:

- Access: group can visit without insurmountable obstacles to meeting people
  - "Talking to strangers" not fraught by power differentials
  - Manageable language barrier
  - Partners already on the ground
  - Few or no restrictions for international students, participants with differing abilities
- Grist for the mill ("What things?" asked Jesus): settings provide opportunities to engage complex questions
  - Shared history (i.e. Hawaii)
  - Shared mission (i.e. overseas Christian seminaries)
- Practical feasibility: finances available, pandemic restrictions a non-issue

Successors of missionaries went to Hawaii to meet those whose ancestors' lives were changed by missionaries. They sought to enter dialogue humbly and with deep respect. They were aware of harm done by missionaries as well as their good results, such as diseases introduced and hos-

pitals constructed. The complexity of engaging cross-culturally with such mixed history made for learning far more valuable than previous immersions.

### Moving Forward

The Emmaus Encounter Pilot provided opportunities to reckon with the testimonies of Hawaiian siblings on the integration of colonization and worship, learn more about and uplift the legacy of Queen Liliuokalani, who lived out her Christianity by speaking out on injustices, and complicate responses to addressing the environmental crisis of our era. It is in this struggle, as Willie James Jennings names, that communion is found, community is built, and belonging is fostered.<sup>40</sup> This cultivation of belonging is the goal of this community-building seminar. It is a commitment to getting the “full story” as Kahu Kenneth Makuakāne, Pastor of Kawaiaha’o Church, imparted to the pilot participants. This distinction requires awareness as well as openness to re-think each step of the way alongside our siblings, on their terms. Pilot participants shared that their vision of the future of community building in a ministerial context was expanded.

In *After Whiteness* theologian Willie James Jennings asserts that “theological education [ought] to open up sites where we enter the struggle to rethink our people,”<sup>41</sup> our entangled histories, and our inherited realities. As Andover Newton Seminary prepares to bring their first full cohort of students, seeking new relationality with our people on Oahu, this charge echoes. Acknowledging that building community is strengthened by knowledge of our history, one the student members of the pilot journey exclaimed, “Hawaiian culture cannot be learned, it must be experienced.” Another student said that “community building is a practice of listening and then listening some more.” It is unknown where this challenging and edifying work will lead. Nevertheless, based on the reflections from the pilot journey, this travel seminar course has the potential to inspire hope for belonging and collaboration as we create modules and practice building community. The work of the course is fully embodied—you learn about history, listen to one another’s stories, and envision together what God is saying about our future – requiring an open mind, heart, and imagination.

### Concluding Thoughts

A word about the “What things?” criterion referenced above: that phrase, “What things?” comes from the story of Jesus on the road to Emmaus in the Gospel according to Luke, 24: 13-19a, 30-31:

Now on that same day two [disciples] were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem,

and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?”

He asked them, “What things?” [...]

When he was at the table with them, [Jesus] took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.

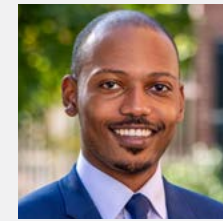
For action-based learning using reflective practice as a teaching tool for building community to work, learners and those they meet on the road have to have a lot to talk about. In Hawaii, Andover Newton’s pilot participants had much to discuss. How do we make sense of colonialism and empire while also plotting out a new future path together? What does the environmental degradation and reclamation of Hawaiian lands teach us about addressing the climate crisis? What role might the retrieval of language play in Hawaii’s next chapter? The group was aware of some, but not all, of these issues before travel. They provided meaningful – crucial – raw material for deep conversation that gave way to a sense of community.

A consultant who helped planners connect with partners, Hawaiian language and culture educator Debbie Lee, offered perhaps the most helpful advice for building community in a place once colonized and now seeking a way forward: “What you need to understand is that we [Hawaiian Christians] really want to have a relationship with you [successors of Andover and Yale missionaries]. But we need you to understand that there’s a lot of pain. Some who don’t know the whole history don’t want that relationship, but many do.”



### About the Author

**Sarah B. Drummond** serves as Founding Dean of Andover Newton Seminary at Yale Divinity School. She is the seminary’s lead administrator and serves as a member of the senior leadership team of Yale Divinity School. Sarah teaches about leadership and serves as combination advisor/minister/mentor to students engaged in graduate theological education. Sarah has written five books and dozens of articles on ministerial leadership. Her most recent books are *Sharing Leadership: a UCC Way of Being In-Community and Intentional Leadership In-Between Times*, published by the Pilgrim Press in 2021 and 2022 respectively. Sarah ‘blogs weekly on Medium, <https://medium.com/@sbdrummond/>, with a current series entitled, “Inspirit: that Love Might Grow.” Sarah uses a humorous and hopeful approach as she addresses the pressures and possibilities of leadership.



### About the Author

**JaQuan Beachem** (he/they) is a love-centered, joy-seeking, trauma-informed, and justice-oriented interdisciplinary artist, chaplain, and theologian (e.g. [gileadalbum.com](http://gileadalbum.com)). JaQuan serves as Andover Newton’s Director of Community Development & Spiritual Formation at Yale Divinity School. As the Founder of wellness organization, KEI, Inc., JaQuan consults and curates sustainable spaces for belonging, embodiment, and (re)imagination at the individual and corporate level. In their leisure, JaQuan enjoys jamming out to music, honing his yoga practice, trying out a new recipe, and noticing things bloom.

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# Good Morning, Grandma.

Gina Robinson

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## Good morning, Grandma,

When I contemplate my vocational expression as an educator, memories of Mama dropping me off at your house early in the morning—so she could go “make a day,” working at the library—flow through my 37-year-old body. I did not realize how much the experiences of working with you in your garden as a four-year-old formed the foundation of my teaching identity until I started applying to assistant professor jobs and had to write a teaching statement. “In 750 words, describe your teaching identity,” was the prompt. Do you remember when I would practice my handwriting later in the day after tending to the garden while *Young and the Restless* played in the background? By the end of the episode, there would be a spread of papers containing multiple drafts of the words or letters I was practicing that day. In like manner, thirty-ish years later my desk was covered with drafts of my teaching statement. This time, incomplete and scratched out sentences covered the pages. Sighing, I formulated two guiding questions I hoped would streamline my thoughts. Though the guiding questions, “Who am I as a teacher” and “What are my values as a teacher” were clear, my half-baked responses signaled a state of confusion. None of my responses felt right. None of them felt true. Out of frustration with myself, I paused and prayed to still my anxious mind. Per usual, your ancestral spirit appeared to comfort and journey with me as I remembered, recovered, reclaimed, and realized my teaching identity.

## Remember:

Mama and I would pass by you as she sped down our Georgia red clay road to drop me off at your house. You would throw your hand up to wave, but never took your eyes off the ground you were tilling. Upon hopping out the car, my day of learning began. Grandma, you were my first religious educator, and the garden was our

classroom. You always prepped my little red wagon with the items you needed to use in the garden that day: seeds, fertilizer, tools. I was tasked with fixing your jug of ice water before trekking back up the road on our farm to deliver the wagon of goods. “Hey Missy,” was often the greeting you offered when you called me in to your sacred space. I walked up to you with pride delivering your water with a Kool-Aid smile and a wild hug. One hand embraced me with a tender touch while the other hand steadied the cup to hydrate your sweating body. Complimenting me and extending gratitude through statements like, “Whew, this water is good! Thank you, Missy,” affirmed I had a skill that could make a difference in someone’s life.

We were intentional with our time in the garden because you wanted to get back to the home before the Price is Right came on. Yet, I never felt rushed. We moved in tandem at a pace of your seventy-plus-year-old body, so my little hands could keep up. Back and forth I would run to the wagon to bring the mason jar of seeds you needed for planting. You taught about the different seeds: what they were, how to plant them, how many to use, and where they belonged in the garden. This is knowledge I carry with me today. Seeds were being planted as I was planting seeds. Between digging holes and instructing me on how to plant the seeds, you would quiz me on more conventional lessons a soon-to-be kindergarten girl—whose family could not afford pre-k—needed to know. Counting seeds aloud, reciting the alphabet, singing church hymns, and talking about the ordinary trappings of rural living were ways you prepared me for elementary school. You made learning fun, purposeful, and play-filled. The scent of fresh soil was always accompanied by joy filling the air. The knowledges cultivated in and held gently by the garden were never finite. The possibilities of what I might learn in our sacred space were endless. The garden still teaches me today.

I hold fond memories of neighbors and people from church joining us in the garden. Sometimes they came by to help care for the crops. Other times, they stopped by to talk to you about their lived experiences. Though I was supposed to stay out of grown folks’ business, I listened with curious ears. As people helped us care for the crops, you cared for their souls by listening deeply and responding without judgment. Moments that shine bright are the times in which your southern sass was employed to make a clear point about something going on in the community you did not approve of and would not participate in. “I ain’t going along with that!” You made it evident that you wanted the community to thrive and be well through your practices of care. One way you cared for your beloved community was by inviting any and every one to participate in harvest time. Recognizing your gardens contained more food than our nine-person family could consume, you offered nourishment to anyone who would come. Boisterous sounds of conversation and laughter gave Mr. Rober-son’s tractor a run for its money as the folk communed in God’s divine presence. The garden is a place where everyone belonged.

## Recover:

Grandma, what I know to be true about my teaching identity is rooted in the precious memories we share. My first attempts at writing the teaching statement were challenging, because I was trying to recover authentic parts of myself from memories formed in the academic classroom. Don’t get me wrong... Much of my formation as a teacher happened in institutions of higher learning. The privilege to study at some of the top universities in our country created opportunities for me to think critically and creatively about theories and practices of religious education for a sustained amount of time. In academic classrooms, particularly in doctor of philosophy programs, the primary focus is often on what PhD students were studying to attain their degree. More in depth conversations about *who* you will be as a teacher in a classroom of your own are needed. Thankfully, your spirit guided me back to your classroom to recover core values I hold about teaching. The three core values I recovered are *hospitality, community care, and cultivating knowledges*.

You had a knack for offering hospitality to each person, who graced our land with their presence

and showed themselves friendly. The expectation for neighbors to enter into the garden with a spirit of love and kindness, accompanied by a dedicated attentiveness to the crops and soil in hand was set. You practiced radical hospitality with our white neighbors in a town where racial lines were historically thick and not to be crossed. Social norms did not determine rules of engagement in your classroom. Instead, you countered the divisive nature of racism, sexism, and ageism by fostering a space where difference is acknowledged and celebrated. The boundaries of your hospitality were expansive. Your hospitality wrapped itself around anyone who dared to experience the tenacious spirit of a no nonsense, compassionate, Black woman. Hospitality was the foundation for community care in your classroom.

Community care was most evident during harvest time, my favorite time of the year! The spirit of “whosoever will, let them come and harvest the garden” filled the air. Tending to the garden during the growing season was not a requirement for people to come and partake in the harvest. Neighbors from miles away, church members, and my Auntie’s friends would arrive with garden tools and grocery bags in their hands. People came ready to collaboratively reap what you and I had sewn.

As I close my eyes, I can see bodies moving in a cadence that matched their range of ability. Whatever each person could do was enough. You affirmed whatever they offered as a contribution to the collective reaping. Collective reaping fostered joy and facilitated genuine human connection, which was in part the soul care the community needed.

You never forgot the importance of nourishing the physical body with good food. Auntie was tasked to take us around in her van to share the goodness of the harvest with homebound friends. You used our portion of the harvest to create meals seasoned to taste like home. Sharing food and creating meals were practices of community care that expressed the purpose of your classroom. Your garden is a place where needs were met and lessons were learned.

Even though teaching was not your profession, I believe it was a core component of your vocation. You cultivated knowledges with the pedagogical tools indigenous to you and your kin. These tools were refined over generations as they were passed down. In your garden I experienced your ways of drawing out self-knowledge and demonstrating knowledges of care. Your lessons never felt like lectures, even when you were teaching me something new. Conversation was the primary approach toward cultivating knowledges within anyone who set foot inside your classroom.

By your spirit delicately guiding me through the process of recovery, I was able to identify these three values. Our process of recovery was not linear; however, it did involve the steps of connecting to my ancestor, allowing her to guide me to memories that held experiences from which I could glean lessons about teaching, and reflecting upon those lessons to see how they shaped my teaching identity. Thank you, Grandma, for the journey thus far.

### **Reclaim:**

While recovering values I hold about teaching and some of the practices indigenous to my maternal bloodline, aspects of my identity that I must reclaim surfaced. Taking this journey with you, Grandma, helped me realize I created distance between certain expressions of my authentic self and my professional persona. In particular, the tone of my authentic voice had gone flat. Laden with the pressure to assume a stoic academic voice when writing and a professional tone devoid of my sweet Southern accent when speaking, I suppressed my mother tongue. Remembering and recovering our conversations and the talks you shared with other folks reminded me of your voice. Truth sang as you spoke. You spoke with certitude, compassion, and

honesty. There is something about the way you would say “ain’t” that compels me to reclaim “ain’t” for myself. “Ain’t” articulates a level of agency that is often looked down upon in the academy and professional world. “Ain’t” sets necessary boundaries that guard my joy, foster flourishing, and prioritize my wellness. Knowing the difference between what I will and what I “ain’t gonna do” for professional advancement is vital. Knowing who I will stand in solidarity with and why I ain’t backing down from the perpetuation of social injustice is an intentional positionality. Knowing how I will advocate for and support students and how I ain’t deprioritizing teaching clarifies my approaches to being a teacher-scholar. Reclaiming my “ain’t” invites me to reclaim more characteristics of my authentic self that may have been suppressed by the academic process. As a result, my teaching identity comes alive!

### **Realize:**

After remembering experiences, recovering values, and reclaiming authentic characteristics of self that shape my teaching identity, I must explore the habits of mind and practices needed to realize this identity. How do I hold together the lessons I learned through the pursuit of higher education with the lessons you taught me in your garden? How do I explain my pedagogical practices that are rooted in creative instincts to students curious about how I teach my classes? Of course, I get to this step of our journey and have more questions. One thing that holds true now as it did when I was four-years-old, you always listened to and validated my questions. You were present with me, encouraging me to seek answers for myself and assuring it is okay to not have all the answers.

I trust that your spirit will continue to guide me as I realize my teaching identity in my flesh and bones over time. I trust that what I write in my teaching state will sing true. I believe the tools you’ve passed down will help me tend my own gardens and will be malleable to the refining needed to till today’s soil. Thank you, Grandma, for being a peaceful presence on this journey. Though my pen will soon stop writing this letter, the lessons you taught me will continue to teach as I realize my teaching identity. This journey never ends. Love you deep!

Until next time,

“Missy”

Gina A. S. Robinson, PhD



### **About the Author**

**Gina A. S. Robinson, PhD** is a native of Burke County, Ga. She holds bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Emory and Yale University, as well as her PhD from Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary in Christian Education. She currently works at the Wabash Center as an Associate Director. Her research interests intersect faith, race, culture, and emerging adult development.



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