ECOLOGY

The Wabash Center Journal on Teaching

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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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ECOLOGY

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Publisher's Note

Conversation concerned with space, place, environment, earth and the ways humanity must co-exist with all creatures is long overdue in our pedagogical discourse. Underpinning each of the works in this sixth volume of the Wabash Center's *Journal on Teaching* is the premise that all life affects all other life. This simple, but often overlooked truth, calls teachers, learners, and institutions toward a more just, more humane and compassionate reality for doing the business of education. There are few ideas more pressing, and more controversial, than the notion of ecology, especially in critical conversations about reimagining and rethinking educational systems.

The urgency of these discussions can be felt in the nine pieces gathered here. Each author grapples with a wide spectrum of concerns and joys concerning the ecologies of education as well as the societal contexts which shape, or mis-shape, educational paradigms. They share expansive reflections on ecology as it relates to teaching, learning, and the future of pedagogy. At the heart of this volume is a profound regard for relationships and an acknowledgement that reciprocity, mutuality, and compassion must permeate how we live, teach, and learn anew.

We will not solve our problems with the same thinking and methods used to create our problems. Any thoughtful conversation about ecology is a conversation calling for imagination and transformation. We hope that these contributions, individually and collectively, provoke dialogue that acknowledges, rather than reject, the necessity for pluralistic approaches. We hope this work contributes to a collective opening to new possibilities about more effective teaching in theology and religion.

Nancy Lynne Westfield, PhD
The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion

Editor's Note

In a world marked by beauty and fragility, it is crucial to consider our collective stewardship of this Earth—our responsibility to each other, ourselves, and the generations to follow. In the pages of this sixth volume of the Wabash Center's *Journal on Teaching*, our authors direct attention to the theme of ecology. The pieces collected here feel urgent and poignant, inviting others to consider the challenges, and potential opportunities, of teaching in an age of ecological disruption. Beyond environmental crises facing our planet—climate change, habitat degradation, and species extinction—this volume explores the epistemologies of dominion and creation, and presents new frameworks for reconsidering the pedagogy of theology and religion.

If, as these authors suggest, our relationships with the natural world and other living beings are interconnected, then the act of teaching must also be understood as an act of mutuality—one that requires attentiveness, care and a willingness to learn from those outside the human sphere. How do our classrooms and institutions reflect and reshape the natural world? How does exploring teaching through an ecological lens, redefine our understanding of what it means to live and learn together? These pieces do not provide easy answers. However, we hope that the work gathered in this volume provokes dialogue, within academic communities and beyond, aiding in new ways to instruct, practice, and share the interconnectedness of all life.

Donald E. Quist, PhD
The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion

Beyond Monoculture:

Humanities and the Root of Land Grant Universities

Sarah Dees,
Iowa State University

As I write, I'm sitting at the edge of a reconstructed prairie near Ames, Iowa, sipping a tart local beer and soaking in the view. Native grasses and wildflowers sway in the breeze. A variety of birds flit about, carrying on whatever important bird business the day requires. When the sun dips down, the sound of frogs and cicadas intensifies. My favorite evenings out here are the ones where the sky turns peach and plum, with cotton candy clouds. Quiet nights at the brewery are perfect for contemplation – especially that essential stage in the writing process known as "staring off into the distance." Beyond the prairie is a small sustainable farm, and beyond that, larger commercial farmlands. I know that, for those who haven't spent much time in the country, this type of wide-open expanse might, paradoxically, feel suffocating. As someone who grew up in towns and smaller cities throughout the Plains, I had similar

feelings when I was younger. But now, over a decade after I left, I've found myself back in the region, in a small town bordered by farms and prairies, and in a better position to thrive in this environment. Now, situated so close to it, I am struck by how aptly the unique prairie ecosystem serves as a metaphor for the work I do here as a professor of a humanistic discipline at a large state research university.

I currently work at Iowa State University, one of the nation's first land grant universities. I started my position in the Fall of 2019, shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic upended teaching – and the world – as we knew it. Over the course of my first few months, before other serious issues arose, I wrestled with the question of how to understand my role as a humanist at my STEM-focused institution. Iowa State was initially founded as the Iowa Agricultural College and Model Farm in 1858. In 1862, the state of Iowa became the first to accept the provisions of the 1862 Morrill Act, which granted funds (via land sales) to each state to establish public institutions of higher education. Iowa opted to use Morrill Act funds for the newly established agricultural college. The institution welcomed its first students in 1869, and the first class, consisting of twenty-four men and two women, graduated in 1872. In 1898, the college was renamed Iowa State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts; in 1959, the name was changed again to its current official designation, Iowa State University of Science and Technology.

The university's primary emphases are practically-oriented science and tech fields, including agriculture, engineering, chemistry,

biology, physics, and computer sciences. According to *U.S. News and World Report*, Iowa State's highest-ranking graduate programs are Veterinary Medicine, Biological and Agricultural Engineering, Statistics, and Analytical Chemistry. Business, Psychology, and Kinesiology are three of the school's most popular majors. Iowa State is the only university in the country that houses one of the U.S. Department of Energy's laboratories, which were established to advance research related to national priorities including energy, national security, health, and the environment. We are also home to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Laboratory for Agriculture and the Environment. Beyond STEM, our College of Design – which might be understood either as the most creative form of engineering, or the most practical manifestation of art – ranks in the top twenty-five among public four-year universities.

As a scholar of American and Indigenous religions, I am not a science and technology person. I am a concepts person. An ideas person. A words, images, emotions, and analyses person. I do history and culture, not STEM. I remember my annoyance as an undergraduate when I had to take classes that didn't align with my interests or majors (Religious Studies and Creative Writing). To fulfill science and math requirements, I begrudgingly enrolled in Unusual Weather and Elements in the Theory of Computation (which, unfortunately for me, still involved numbers). Looking back after I finished the courses, I was able to better appreciate the chance I had to stretch my thinking and learn about things that I didn't even know I didn't know. This is, indeed, the purpose of a college education: to gain a depth and breadth of knowledge.

While my interests lie in the humanities, I do recognize the value of STEM fields, and I understand and respect my university's emphases on these areas. I also see my classes, and other humanities courses, as uniquely valuable to the university. For students in STEM, business, or other non-humanities fields, the types of courses that I teach offer students skills and knowledge that they may not otherwise encounter. They learn how to analyze sources, how knowledge is constructed, how people make

meaning, how identity is formed, and how power operates. What they gain in my classes, ideally, should help them to broaden and deepen their awareness of the world around them, and equip them with insight and capabilities to engage with others they encounter after they graduate. Not everyone sees these types of courses as valuable, though. In recent years, threats to the humanities have increased, Religious Studies programs throughout the nation have been subjected to cuts, and my colleagues and I have increasingly needed to justify our existence.

When I started my position in the fall of 2019, I asked the then-dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences how I might think about my role as a scholar of religion at our STEM-focused campus. Her answer reflected my own thinking on this matter: she replied that students at Iowa State need to learn about the world and other people and ways of knowing, and that this knowledge was essential to their education. There are distribution requirements at Iowa State to help students achieve these goals, and the introductory course I teach each semester – Religion in America – fulfills a U.S. Cultures and Communities requirement. (Due to pressure from Iowa's state legislature, the name of this requirement was recently changed to this from the U.S. Diversity Requirement.) However, a few years after I started my position, the dean announced budget cuts that would primarily affect humanistic departments. Like many of my colleagues around the country, I am uncertain about the future of my program and department. I feel – and my student evaluations indicate – that students are gaining something valuable from my classes. But this does not necessarily translate to support for these programs in the current climate. There seems to be a prevailing sense that courses on religion offer no "practical value."

As a land grant institution, Iowa State's goal is to "create, share, and apply knowledge to make our students, Iowa, and the world better." Its vision is to "advance the land-grant ideals of putting science, technology, and human creativity to work." A main emphasis of Iowa State, and other land grant colleges, is to offer practical training and create knowledge that is useful for industry.

They were also created to provide higher educational opportunities to those who would otherwise not be able to access it – people living in rural areas and from working-class backgrounds, and those without family wealth. Like many American ideals, the lofty goal of the land grant institution had its limits – the lands used to fund these institutions were taken from Native American nations, and people of color were initially excluded from some land grant universities. More work can be done to ensure that historically marginalized students, faculty, and staff – including Indigenous people, people of color, members of the queer community, disabled folks, and others who have historically been marginalized in academic spaces – feel safe and welcome.

Answers to questions of practicality and access become clearer if we examine the legislation that facilitated the creation of land grant universities. According to the 1862 Morrill Act, while land grant universities were to emphasize practical knowledge for the broad public, humanities and social sciences were still expected to be part of the educational program. The act was sponsored by Justin Morrill, a senator from Vermont. It involved the donation of "public lands" – generally, lands that had been taken from Native nations – to support the creation of public institutions for higher education. This wasn't a straightforward process in which a plot of land was offered up on which a university would then be built. Rather, each state was offered thirty thousand acres of land – not necessarily in that state – and the land was then sold for a profit. Any proceeds (that weren't subsequently squandered) were put toward public education. Lands in northwestern Iowa were granted to the state, and profits from the sales of those lands enabled the purchase of land in Story County in central Iowa and the construction of the first buildings. Each state was to create "at least one college where the leading subject shall be, without excluding other scientific and classical studies, and including military tactics, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts… in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life." While the emphases of

these institutions were meant to be practical fields, they were not meant to exclude other disciplines. They were meant to create opportunities for Americans to learn and grow, not only gain practical education for professional purposes.[1]

Until recently, when driving into Iowa, you'd be welcomed with a sign touting the state's "fields of opportunities." Sadly, this motto has recently been retired. It was quite fitting. Approximately 85 percent of the land in Iowa is used for farmland. Even so, 90 percent of the food that Iowans eat is imported from out of state. Most of the state's farmlands are instead used for industrial farming. Iowa produces mostly corn and soybeans, plus some oats and hay. Industrial farming in the state is primarily monoculture farming – the planting of a single type of crop in a field. There are some immediate economic benefits to monoculture farming. Specialization can lead to increased productivity and efficiency, leading to higher yields and profits. These profits can be invested to create more technological innovations, further streamlining processes. However, there are serious ecological consequences created by monoculture farming, as well. Most obviously, agricultural monoculture leads to decreases in biological diversity. The loss of diversity affects insects and animals that play an important role in the ecosystem. Planting only one type of crop destroys the integrity of the soil. And monoculture crops are more susceptible to pests, resulting in a higher use of pesticides. Runoff can poison lands and waterways. Ultimately, monocropping is meant for economic benefit rather than to feed the surrounding community.

In 2021, Iowa State landscape ecologist Lisa Schulte Moore was awarded a MacArthur "Genius Grant" for her work on "prairie strips." Prairie strips are fairly self-explanatory: strips of prairie that are interspersed with rows of crops on fields. Prairies once comprised one third of the land in what is now the United States. According to the U.S. National Park Service, the complexity and diversity of the prairie ecosystem is rivaled only by the Amazonian rainforest. The Midwestern region is tallgrass prairie; most of the

flora consists of different types of grasses. This is not the green stuff you see on lawns – tallgrasses have roots that extend over ten feet into the ground. Due to development and farming, prairies in North America have been depleted by 96 percent.

The prairie strips system was designed to mitigate some of the negative ecological impacts of monoculture farming. According to the Prairie Strips team:

> ***Prairie strips are a conservation practice that protects soil and water while providing habitat for wildlife. The STRIPS (Science-based Trails of Rowcrops Integrated with Prairie Strips) team has been conducting research on prairie strips for over ten years and we have shown that integrating small amounts of prairie into strategic locations within corn and soybean fields – in the form of in-field contour buffer strips and edge-of-field filter strips – can yield disproportionate benefits for soil, water, and biodiversity. Prairie strips provide these disproportionate benefits to a greater degree than other perennial vegetation types because of the diversity of native plant species incorporated, their deep and multilayered root systems, and their stiff-stems that hold up in a driving rain. STRIPS research also shows that prairie strips are [sic] one of the most affordable and environmentally beneficial agricultural conservation practices available.***[2]

The benefits of prairie strips mirror, I think, the benefits that humanities courses can offer to students. A diverse educational foundation can nourish students' lives. The academic study of religion is interdisciplinary, drawing on anthropology, sociology,

history, and literature. What religious studies can offer beyond each of these individual disciplines is the focus on the category of religion. While this may not, at first, seem terribly "practical," the study of religion equips students to more actively and thoughtfully engage in the world around them. I want my students to consider many different facets of religion, but they can be narrowed down into two primary categories: meaning and power. We examine the many forms of meaning that religion holds, and the way that it plays a role in power structures within, between, and among many different groups. First, religion provides meaning for groups – their worldviews, practices, identities, laws, and forms of relationality. Second, through direct and indirect means, religion influences hierarchies and power dynamics. Practitioners look to sacred wisdom and offer interpretations of sacred texts and stories that have real-world implications in the structuring of individual relationships, group dynamics, societies, and nation-states. I teach students how to consider religion empathetically and critically, balancing the perspectives of insiders and outsiders.

Many of my students who have never taken a religious studies class think about religion as a deeply personal matter. The goal in my classes is to turn their perspectives outward, to try to better understand the perspectives of others. In my introduction to American religion course, I combine a thematic and historical approach. We begin with a series of units that focus on different aspects of Christianity, covering Catholics, Pilgrims and Puritans, practitioners of Christian New Religious Movements such as Christian Scientists, Millerites, and the Oneida community. We discuss the role of religion in colonialism and the role of the Black Church as a social institution. Through an examination of these Christianities, we consider key moments in United States history: initial contact between Catholics and Native North Americans, the founding of the nation, and debates about slavery and gender in the nineteenth century. During the second half of the course, we focus on non-Christian religions – Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, African diasporic traditions, and Native American traditions. Some of the themes we cover are more serious, including immigration

and assimilation, violence, cultural commodification, and social justice movements. We cover lighter topics as well: technology, fashion, pop culture, music, and comedy. We end with another theory unit on secularism and Civil Religion, examining the latest trends in U.S. religion growth.

Even though my goal is to encourage students to look outward, I do still hope that this class helps them learn more basic skills and enables them to develop socially, intellectually, and personally. Being confronted with new ideas and unfamiliar histories can spur change and reflection. The capacities students develop in my classes encourage analytical thinking. They become sharper readers and writers. They learn how to find sources and analyze them. They learn how to conduct research and how to identify “expertise.” These are all skills that are valuable for other classes, and for their life and work after they graduate.

I have students in my course on American religions complete a short reflection survey at the end of the semester. In it, I ask them about what knowledge and skills they’ve gotten from the class that will be useful for the rest of their college career, their professional life, and their personal life. Students have identified many important elements they’ve gained from the class. Some especially appreciate the knowledge they have gained about different religions or the role of religion in history and culture. The class requires more reading than some of them are required to do in other classes, and many indicate that the course helped them strengthen their ability to read academic texts. Students turn in a final research project at the end of the semester, and some of them mention the value of this project, which helped them to develop their research skills, learn how to find and evaluate sources, gain familiarity with the required citation style, and strengthen their writing skills. They also gain the capacity to work in groups, to give presentations, and to have meaningful conversations with their peers. A major takeaway that is unique to this type of class is students’ mention of their ability to better understand other cultures, perspectives, and points of view; to have nuanced

conversations with others; and to respect others' opinions.

When exposed to diverse subject matter, students gain knowledge and understanding that can ground them – like the tallgrasses whose roots run deep into the ground. It can help strengthen their understanding and enable them to better engage with others – like the many prairie plants and flowers that create a mutually sustaining ecosystem. And it can enable them to be more resilient – like the sturdy plants that withstand storms and wildfires. Ultimately, through taking these types of courses, students develop intellectual strength, resilience, insight, the capacity for collaboration, and the ability to thrive. What's more practical than that?

Notes & Bibliography

[1] For more on the Morrill Act, including the text itself, see the U.S. National Archive's related page, https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/morrill-act.

[2] Iowa State University: Science-Based Trials of Rowcrops Integrated with Prairie Strips, "What are Prairie Strips?" https://www.nrem.iastate.edu/research/STRIPS/content/what-are-prairie-strips.

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Sarah Dees,
Iowa State University

The Root Work of Formation

Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi,
Iliff School of Theology

I never really noticed them on our weekly trips to town, except when they flowered. Their bright red-purple blooms – pillowed atop stout, greenish-gray branches – dotted the high desert landscape of southern Colorado in warmer months. I knew them most intimately in shrub form, but cholla cacti can grow up to fifteen feet in height or live comfortably on a kitchen windowsill.[1] *Cylindropuntia*, the chollas' scientific name, is the genus for a variety of species: tree, walking stick, devil's rope, rosea, cane, rope pear, teddy bear, desert buckhorn, chain-link, jumping, and coyote candles, among others.[2] I still don't know the species of our chollas, but they, their ancestors, and their progeny can be found directly across the road from the Ludlow Massacre Memorial, about three miles west of Exit 27 just off of Interstate 25.

More than the chollas' diverse expressions above the soil, however, I became drawn to what lay beneath the prickly surface. What sorts of roots held and nurtured these stately, many-appendaged creatures? Were they just as barbed? Did they burrow deep into the earth, or did they lay close to the surface to soak up water quickly,

like many of their cacti relatives? Were they stringy or stout like their branches? Did they bundle together or carve out a respectable distance from one another?

Roots are the heart of the plant. With every beat, they pump life into the organism. I never understood why seeds get all the press. Jesus talked about seeds – mustard seeds, seeds planted in various kinds of soil, sowing seeds and reaping their fruits. He likened seeds to "the word of God," sprouting within us so that we may better reflect the kin-dom of God in our actions.[3] As a result, the seedling has become a prominent symbol for Christian formation, particularly for children and youth in the church, and follows "a positive line of progression and growth."[4] We in theological education would not be so naive as to draw upon this metaphor for the formational endeavors we undertake with adult learners, would we?

Figure 1. Chollas with yellow fruits. Across from the Ludlow Massacre Memorial, southern Colorado. *(Photo by Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi.)*

Much of my own role in the teaching and learning space involves attending to student formation through contextual experiences, which are specific learning opportunities beyond the space of the classroom related to students' vocational directions in ministry. At my particular theological school, and in many other theological institutions, such contextual learning is completed through a months- or year-long internship at a church, hospital, or other nonprofit organization. I spend a great deal of time pondering the types of theological formation – various species within the genus – that we hope students will engage as part of their contextual learning, including the knowledges, skills, and dispositions that will form the habits of their ministry in the world. Deep down (no pun intended), I wonder if there are ways that I erroneously perceive students' formational starting points to be at the seed stage and assume that they will sprout up to a seedling stage of practice in internship. For example, at various moments along the internship journey, we explicitly ask students to identify where they locate themselves on the "Developmental Stages of Internship" map, a linear diagram that begins with the Anticipation Stage in beginning weeks, then moves to the Disillusionment Stage, Confrontation Stage, Competence Stage, and finally the Culmination Stage at the end of the experience.[5] Seed to seedling, seedling to plant. Most

Figure 2. A cholla beginning to bloom. Ludlow, southern Colorado. *(Photo by Terry Forbes.)*

models of experiential formation follow similar patterns, beginning at a pre-formed stage and ending up at the mastery level.

While this resource actually is a helpful self-reflection tool, and while I believe wholeheartedly that contextual learning must involve increasing capacities for ministry leadership, the structures themselves easily perpetuate the myth that formation is only seed sprouting work when, in fact, *theological formation more often involves root work*.

Adult learners enter theological education with myriad life experiences, values and commitments, and patterns of reasoning and behavior formed over decades. The roots are weathered, having endured cycles of rain, snow, and drought. As a result, theological formation becomes more about noticing the color and texture of our roots and how they are differentiated from – or have become entwined with – the roots of others over time. Or, noting in which conditions the roots thrive and what conditions leave the roots exposed to greater harm. Or, exploring the depths to which the roots have descended and identifying the ones that remain as enduring tethers to our sense of ourselves and our place in the ecosystem, as well as the ones that have just begun to dig their heels into the dusty rock near the surface, tendrils of who and how we might become.

Most students enter into the internship with a belief that the central formative elements of these experiences are the practical skills they will develop – an above-ground expansion of their branches and a blossoming of their fruits. In reality, the most salient learnings are the abilities of students to connect their own identities, histories, traumas, and generative experiences with how they show up in the world – their actions and relationships with others. This is critical root work, a mining of what lies beneath. Sure, what exists above the ground is more accessible and easily observed. A cholla reaching toward the sky, branch by branch, until yellow-green fruits appear like butterflies resting on the edges is breathtaking, but it is because of her roots that she endures.[6]

*****

My mother was captivated by the chollas, but they did not proliferate where we lived. The difference was nearly one thousand feet in elevation between the Ludlow cacti field and our house five miles up the road. That didn't stop my mom from coordinating a massive effort involving our neighbors, their equipment, and their blood, sweat, and tears to transplant several of the chollas from the field to the hill next to our home. My mother loved working in the "gardens" on our property, which included an array of colorful and shapely large rocks, deep-green glass insulators, old railroad spikes, and other assorted collectibles. Smaller cacti, bachelor buttons, cosmos, and purple and white irises would grow between the spaces if there were enough rains in the spring and summer.

The uprooted chollas were a sight to behold. Half buried in the clay-dirt clump with which they were excavated, the roots were shallower than I imagined, though it's likely that several roots had been severed in the digging process. It was hard to distinguish the roots themselves from the dirt and parts of the trunk surrounding the roots, but their hardiness seeped through the mass, which was about eighteen inches in both depth and width. Several large strands merged at the top to form the cactus trunk, then steadily unwound themselves into stocky veins that thinned as they descended into gray-brown waves.

Joshua Tree National Park also boasts a variety of chollas, and the brochure about their cactus garden states that the roots "rapidly develop delicate root hairs to absorb moisture when it is available. The water is stored in their fat stems and is given up very slowly, even during the hottest days. In times of drought, the root hairs wither and die to reduce water loss. Meanwhile the roots, protected by their thick bark, remain moist and succulent."[7] I wonder if these microscopic hairs were present on our uprooted chollas, though we were likely digging them up in the heat of summer when the ground itself cracked open. The resilience of such beings to thrive amidst a variety of conditions is a lesson, as we all wondered whether the three plants we plucked would flourish in their new habitat. It took

a few years, but I remember with fondness the summer that those red-purple blooms finally appeared.

Theological education also has the potential to uproot in the midst of its formational processes – deeply held beliefs and meaning-making systems, ways of living in community derived from environments of earlier years, and more. These are the relational tethers of familiar soils, bacteria, and microbial creatures among which roots have thrived and become interdependent. Rather than our roots simply existing within the particularities of an ecosystem, these tethers have shaped the roots such that to exist apart from them can be a shock to one's entire being.

My ancestors knew this kind of shock quite well. Both my paternal and maternal grandparents uprooted themselves from their countries of origin to resettle in New York City during the first half of the twentieth century. The hope in such transplantations is that life might reroot itself in new soils, in different conditions, and among more symbiotic microbes for greater flourishing overall. That was my ancestors' hope; and yet, two generations later, I am continually reminded of the relational tethers that were severed by their uprootings – loss of language (Spanish and Italian, as I speak neither fluently), a sense of belonging within a particular culture of place (Puerto Rico and Italy, and later New York), and a connection to people like me (Newyoricans and Italians on the East Coast, largely inaccessible to someone born and raised in the Southwest among Mexicanos and Chicanos). Those who came to the U.S. centuries before my grandparents, by force or by choice, and those who lived on Turtle Island eons before them but endured uprooting after uprooting, have become disconnected from so much more.

While perhaps not as extreme, the "deconstruction" often discussed in theological education is an uprooting force that can create profound shocks for students. Many individuals in my context come from restrictive religious environments in which their gender identities and sexualities were considered "sinful" and "against God." They have sought safety and a space

to dismantle those beliefs, with a distinct longing to relationally tether within an ecology of inclusion and belonging. Uprooting from harmful traditions and cultures of origin becomes critical to the formational process – for instance, encountering subject matter in the classroom that unearths a previously unknown root which has endured trauma. Such a root shows signs of damage in need of repair, yet it also may reveal a symphony of withered hairs that have preserved one's supply of sustenance and ensured survival season after season.

Contextual experience is itself an uprooting activity within theological formation, as it asks students to enter into – and spend a significant amount of time within – a setting that may be unfamiliar. Roots may cling more tightly to any variety of soils and climes: the comforts of academia with its descriptive syllabi and clear expectations; the familiarity and belonging of a faith community of origin; preconceived notions of what a particular vocational path entails; and more. In these instances, there is risk and uncertainty, the potential to be further dislocated from what is known.

For many flora, however, uprooting is what ensures the proliferation of species. It is actually quite difficult to grow chollas from seed. The best (human-involved) way to proliferate the cactus is by replanting one of the branches into new ground. Another example of transplantation beyond seeding is sweetgrass. In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, botanist and Citizen Potawatomi Nation member Robin Wall Kimmerer writes, "Sweetgrass is best planted not by seed, but by putting roots directly in the ground."[8] She continues, "The plant sends up flowering stalks in early June, but the seeds it makes are rarely viable. If you sow a hundred seeds, you might get one plant if you're lucky."[9] While the sweetgrass possess a better way to multiply beyond seeds, it's more difficult for them to do so given human-induced impacts on the environment.[10] As a result, uprooting and rerooting some of the sweetgrass ensures its survival.

The key question when uprooting takes place then becomes: What conditions make for a successful rerooting? Knowing that the exact conditions from which one is uprooted can never be replicated, identifying and cultivating *ideal* conditions constitutes the bulk of the work.

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Like three elders whose wisdom emanates from their weathered faces and withered hands, the chollas rest along the hillside next to our family home in southern Colorado. They've been there about thirty-five years now. With red-hued rocks and iris leaves dancing in between, the cacti have made their peace with their neighbor-relatives, including silt-clay, grasshoppers, and the occasional rattlesnake family seeking harbor. It has been nearly eight years since my mom passed, so no human tends to them now. They only rely on one another for what they need, save for the infrequent rains and ever-present sunlight. Cacti do not tend to form strong root connections between plants, as each must retain the moisture it needs to survive. But the same bees bounce from one cholla blossom to the next, so they relate with one another at some level. Since they live only feet apart from each other, I like to think their roots share a parcel of the same space, hairs touching ever so slightly. After all, they have been cohabitating for over three decades.

For many plants and trees, roots form part of a complex communication and nutrient sharing network that ensures the flourishing of entire ecosystems. In *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest*, scientist Suzanne Simard reveals that fungi create neural networks allowing trees to share messages back and forth, similar to neurotransmission processes within the human brain. Simard says, "The older trees are able to discern which seedlings are their own kin. The old trees nurture the younger ones and provide them food and water just as we do with our own children."[11] Furthermore, when the older "mother trees" die, "they pass their wisdom to their kin, generation after generation, sharing the knowledge of what helps and what

harms, who is friend or foe, and how to adapt and survive in an ever-changing landscape."[12] The trees do not simply coexist; they rely upon one another for survival. In other words, they cannot *be* without each other.

One of the enduring fallacies underlying theological education is that community is only *tangentially* related to formational processes. While theological institutions obviously constitute communities of teaching and learning, adequate attention is not always given to how such communities shape those who reside within them or, more directly, how they impact beingness itself. For example, relationships with faculty and peers can make or break a student's sense of their own capacities, understandings and presencing of particular identities, and abilities to learn and thrive within the classroom. *How* one learns and *who* one learns alongside are just as important as – or maybe more important than – *what* one learns, remembering that the how, who, and what are symbiotic, much like tree root and fungi systems.

This same fallacy exists within contextual education. Every year, there are students who envision internship as an individualized opportunity, giving little thought to the kinds of environments and relationships that will foster root-based learning. For this reason, students sometimes pitch "internships" that are more akin to research assistantships or apprenticeships that center on working with a single teacher or expert, rather than working within a setting in which they will become part of a community, with its messy mix of people holding both shared and divergent beliefs and practices. As a result, the task of a contextual educator is to help learners envision their personal and professional formation as a networked endeavor, co-created within and among the forest of religious meaning making and reflective practice.

To carry out the many beautiful and difficult tasks of pastoral leadership, root work is essential. Holding someone's hand as they take their final breaths, comforting a grieving mother who has just lost her son to suicide, or guiding a divided faith community

through a process to declare themselves LGBTQIA+ affirming all require a willingness and an ongoing commitment to root work. And that root work cannot be carried out in isolation. At times, individuals must receive nutrients from older, wiser trees who have built up a store of resources over long seasons. Even the wise trees rely on the network, as there exists a cadre of elders who remain dependent upon one another, being careful not to encroach on one another's sunlight.[13] In the internship, students select a site supervisor, but they also have the responsibility of inviting three to four additional persons to form what we call a Community Advisory Council, a group of people who journey alongside the student as they tend to their roots within the site context. Because internship is often an uprooting endeavor, the goal is to provide as much support as possible for learners to reroot into a network of belonging.

Figure 3. A cholla's edible fruits. Ludlow, southern Colorado. *(Photo by Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi.)*

It turns out that Jesus did mention roots a couple of times in the gospel accounts. It was usually in the context of seeds being planted and not having the right conditions to root, but he definitely understood their importance.[14] When Jesus revealed the meaning of the parable of the sower, for example, he interpreted the seeds sown on rocky ground as a person who has "no root." Jesus continued: "When trouble or persecution arises….that person immediately falls away."[15] The purpose of the seed, therefore, is to create roots and

systems of roots; but without nurturing elements of care, the roots wither and fade.

With an underground network of support and communication in place, contextual experiences can invite (re)construction, the complementary activity paired with theological "deconstruction" in formational processes. Most individuals, after having spent nine months with a specific congregation, hospital, nursing home, nonprofit, community organization, or other relation-filled context, have rerooted themselves within their respective network. In this setting, the roots have been exposed, examined, disentangled, re-entangled, severed, repaired, nourished, strengthened, and otherwise. Students become wiser, more sure of themselves in ways that have inextricably informed their vocational identities and – most importantly – their personhood.

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Irises, like the ones in my mother's garden, have rhizomes, "a subterranean plant stem that sends out roots and shoots from its nodes."[16] Rhizomes may look like roots, but they themselves can *create roots*, reproducing new plants from their stems. Every spring, more and more irises found their way in between the garden rocks until my mom decided to thin the bulbous bunches, especially when they started to crowd out longer blooming species.

Figure 4. Iris Rhizomes. *(Photo by Jamain, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)*

If formation within theological education is about root work in community, my hope for formation *beyond* theological

education includes rhizome work. While chollas are not rhizomed creatures, I imagine that iris rhizomes have encountered cholla roots in their search for space to further proliferate in the garden. Perhaps thousands of years from now, chollas will have evolved to create their own rhizomes for species survival. One of my greatest joys as a contextual educator comes when an alum serves as a site supervisor for a current intern. Root work, focused primarily on oneself, then becomes rhizome work, a commitment to the formation of others. Some pastoral leaders create new ministries or nonprofits where none existed previously, forming communities and meeting needs in unexpected places. In a few seasons, a bounty of colorful blooms paints the hillside.

My personal root-to-rhizome work has involved deepening my understanding of the choices of ancestors to migrate across worlds and time zones, and to reflect on what rerooting within lost identities, languages, and traditions looks and feels like for me. This work never ends; tending to the roots abides. I engage in these labors not only for myself, however, but also for my two young nephews. How do I – the mother tree of our family, the rhizome of our stalk – share with them all that has taken place before so that they know the lifeways flowing through their veins? They possess the resilience of generations uprooting and rerooting, making ways out of no ways, adapting and thriving, loving and losing, rising and blooming. One day, I will take them to the hillside near our family home and show them what remains of the gardens. The three chollas will be there to greet us all.[17]

Notes & Bibliography

[1] The pronunciation of cholla is choya (or chȯi-yə), according to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cholla.

[2] "*Cylindropuntia imbricata* (Tree Cholla)," Gardenia, https://www.gardenia.net/plant/cylindropuntia-imbricata.

[3] Luke 8:11 (NRSV).

[4] Cindy S. Lee, *Our Unforming: De-Westernizing Spiritual Formation* (Fortress, 2022), 15.

[5] H. Frederick Sweitzer and Mary A. King, *The Successful Internship: Transformation*

and Empowerment in Experiential Learning (Thomson/Brooks/Cole, 2004).

[6] Chollas produce edible "fruits" (flower buds) that can be picked before or after flowering, depending on the species. They are a hearty vegetable that absorbs the flavors of the dish being prepared, yet simultaneously evoke an artichoke, asparagus-like tenor.

[7] "Cholla Cactus Garden: Self-Guiding Nature Trail," Joshua Tree National Park, http://npshistory.com/brochures/jotr/cholla-cactus-garden-2.pdf. In addition, the cholla's "skeleton," which protects many of the roots and comprises the infrastructure of the cholla itself, posseses a patterned hole-filled design that makes it a collectible item across the Southwest.

[8] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Milkweed, 2013), 1.

[9] Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass, 261-2.

[10] Sweetgrass produce rhizomes and "can send them many feet out from the parent. In this way, the plant could travel freely along the riverside. This was a good plan when the land was whole." Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 262.

[11] Suzanne Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest* (Knopf, 2021), 5.

[12] Simard, *Mother Tree*, 5.

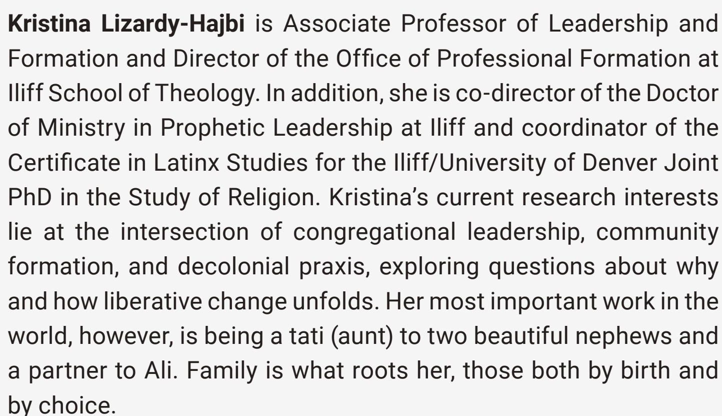
[13] One example is found in the forest network of beech trees. "With his big green boots crunching through fresh snow, and a dewdrop catching sunlight on the tip of his long nose, Wohlleben takes me to two massive beech trees growing next to each other. He points up at their skeletal winter crowns, which appear careful not to encroach into each other's space. 'These two are old friends,' he says. 'They are very considerate in sharing the sunlight, and their root systems are closely connected. In cases like this, when one dies, the other usually dies soon afterward, because they are dependent on each other.'" Richard Grant, "Do Trees Talk to Each Other? A Controversial German Forester Says Yes, and His Ideas Are Shaking Up the Scientific World," *Smithsonian Magazine*, March 2018, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/the-whispering-trees-180968084/.

[14] See Matthew 13:6, Matthew 13:21, and Mark 4:6.

[15] Matthew 13:21 (NRSV).

[16] "Rhizome," Wikipedia, accessed May 12, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhizome.

[17] I am indebted to the following people: Mayra Rivera who read drafts of this piece and offered critical feedback in the shaping of ideas; Donald Quist and Sophfronia Scott who provided guidance in the early stages of the creative process; my cohort peers whose incredible contributions proliferate the rest of the journal issue; and my stepdad Terry Forbes who helped me to remember the ways of the chollas and provided one of the photos for this piece. Finally, I dedicate this article to Matthew Floding, my mentor and friend, who passed from this world on May 14, 2024. The impacts of your ministry, your scholarship, and your encouragement and care of theological field/contextual educators, and of the discipline as a whole, continue to take root and cultivate deep life.



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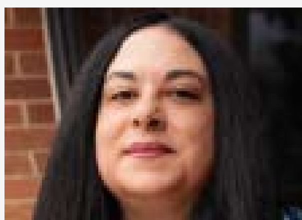

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Black Forest:

A Model of “Post” Pandemic Praxis

Joshua S. Bartholomew,
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By combining nature and Black cultural raw materials, *Black Forest* presents the most relevant response to the growing need for social interventions that address environmental disparities in the United States. As a young boy from Trinidad and Tobago in New England, my parents taught my family to love trees and nature. They would take my siblings and me to trails, parks, ponds, and arboretums to ride bikes or rollerblade. We would sometimes pile into the family car and take autumn road trips to Maine through the orange and yellow deciduous trees. This dynamic portrait, these core memories, of a family who appreciates the outdoors and has a connection to it, trees, the land, and the environment, serves as a metaphor for why *Black Forest* presents a pathway towards endless possibilities of wholeness for all communities.

Being a Black Bostonian from Roxbury, Massachusetts, I felt a responsibility to raise my awareness of history and reclaim a rich legacy of Black spirituality in nature when Ekene Ijeoma, artist and former assistant professor of media arts and sciences at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and founder in 2019 of the

MIT Media Lab's Poetic Justice, told me about the Black Forest project. Black Forest is a public art project that collects names and stories of Black lives lost during COVID-19 in the U.S. and plants trees in Black neighborhoods for them.[1] Given the disproportionate number of Black lives either infected or lost due to COVID-19 and because of the history of environmental racism that afflicts Black neighborhoods (i.e., poor air quality, fewer trees and green spaces, higher temperatures, etc.),[2] tree planting has long been utilized as ecological resistance to counter harmful histories and uplift Black life.

Before I heard of this "Black Forest," my millennial self only remembered a fourth-grade Social Studies textbook picture of the shade and darkness cast by tall trees in southwestern Germany's mountainous region. Ijeoma's vision of *Black Forest* activates our collective memory differently as a community-driven monument that includes an evolving, digitally networked story library.[3] Such a vision models self-empowerment and praxis, bringing together racial equality and ecological justice.[4] For

Figure 1. *Photo by Anthony Eggert/Courtesy of Ekene Ijeoma*

Ijeoma, *Black Forest* remembers the histories of Black people impacted by ecological inequalities as tree-planting breathes new life into communities. As a multisite, participatory project that reflects art at the scale of injustice, *Black Forest* mirrors the environment Black communities need to thrive and flourish. A type of moralized geography, this environment not only breathes life into its community but also helps its community remember its organic connection to life.

Figure 2. Ekene Ijeoma, Black Forest: Melvindale, 2022. *(Photo by Anthony Eggert. Courtesy of Ekene Ijeoma.)*

It was not until Ijeoma invited me to interpret *Black Forest* theologically that I began to realize how various manifestations of violence and systemic racism socialize Black communities out of healthy relationships with the environment. I felt challenged to think of "the environment" as more than nature; it also includes

social and political issues. Ijeoma imagined *Black Forest* after witnessing a tree that had been cut down and abandoned for days, "which reminded him of the murder of Michael Brown, a Black teenager who was shot and killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, MO, in 2014, his body left in the street for several hours."[5]

"Stereotypes persist that African Americans are physically and spiritually detached from the environment."[6] Historically, Black people have indeed had multifaceted relationships with nature.[7] However, it would be wrong to typecast Black people as anti-environmentalists or even as being apathetic to the environment. Historically, Black people have been systematically prevented from experiencing nature organically or even recreationally. Given that this trauma informs Black ecological experiences, people of the earth need healthy environmental spaces for our own thriving even outside of what the power structure allows. For the sake of Black liberation, *Black Forest* addresses the environmental displacements and ecological disruptions that afflict many Black communities and functions to reconnect humanity to the earth.

The history of Black people in America is rooted in relationships to the earth. According to environmental historian, Black feminist, and eco-theologian Dianne Glave in *Rooted in the Earth*, "African Americans actively sought healing, kinship, resources, and salvation in the land."[8] A sense of community has always defined Black Americans' relationships with the environment. Living through the challenges of racism in the South, nature and the environment have been both a nightmare and a haven for Black people. Trees played a particular role. During the enslavement period, runaways experienced the trauma of being tracked and captured by whites in the woods. Yet, it was in the woods that Protestantism transformed the meaning of nature for Black people, and hush harbors grew into our Black churches of today. Black folk have always had a collective connection to nature that matters for a vision of a better world. *Black Forest* communicates hope for a future of collective connection between Black people, all people, and our natural world.

As a Black liberationist, I know that something beautiful happens when personal and spiritual growth transforms your environment to heal pain and trauma. We all live on one planet that is vulnerable to destructive behavior, especially on systemic levels, but God's loving power liberates the oppressed. Right relations – relationships with God, neighbor, self, and the earth – reflect respect and sanctity of nature, rejecting the belief that humankind can exploit the world for the indulgence of human greed. A Black ecological theology, or a Black ecologically conscious spirituality, includes a deepening recognition that there is an intersectional correlation between environmental systems and the health of human communities. *Black Forest* activates and organizes this consciousness, partnering with local organizations and volunteers to plant trees. People can even offer up their land for tree planting.[9]

We are what we remember. This is particularly true for Black communities. As a child growing up during hot summers in Roxbury – a historically Black town in Boston – I remember regular walks to the corner store. After turning the corner at the end of my one-way street, I would pass by a traffic light control box covered in tags and bumper stickers. Popsicle sticks, sticky honey bun wrappers, half-drunk juice barrels, and empty bags of Lay's potato chips and Doritos lay on the sidewalk to the store. My neighborhood was not litter-free nor overflowing with green spaces, but I had tremendous pride in it, and it felt like my neighborhood… like I belonged. Nonetheless, the only trees were saplings at the edge of the sidewalk by the corner amid the smog in the air, the blaring ambulance sirens, and the sounds of Black life hustling and bustling up and down.

It was not until I lived in Denver, Colorado, that my formative childhood experiences in a northeastern Atlantic city began to affect me in ways I did not originally understand. Until Denver, I had memories mostly of life in dense cities characterized by population diversity and urban concrete landscapes. Living in Denver *felt* different, primarily because of Colorado's plush greenness, many

trees, and beautifully spread-out natural scenery. I enjoyed and adjusted to Denver's outdoorsy culture: hiking, running, whitewater rafting, attending park festivals, and more. Still, and not necessarily because I was away from my immediate family and hometown, I had difficulty locating a sense of belonging to the space. I knew I belonged, but the environment did not remind me of Roxbury or other places I had lived, like the Bronx or Harlem.

Figure 3. Ekene Ijeoma, Black Forest: Melvindale, 2022. *(Photo by Anthony Eggert. Courtesy of Ekene Ijeoma.)*

Leaving Denver, I returned to Boston right before lockdown. Pandemic times taught us much about our relationship with the environment. During lockdown, introvert or not, we all began to miss being outside without COVID-19 restrictions. We grew to appreciate nature more after we could not be in it. On the other hand,

Figure 4. *Photo by Anthony Eggert. Courtesy of Ekene Ijeoma.*

nature experienced a bit of respite for a short period without the physical presence of humankind. Pandemic restrictions positively impacted air, water, and noise pollution due to decreased vehicle traffic and factory closures. Nature recovered as we gained a new appreciation for nature and human connection.

So much of capitalism alienates us from nature. After the lockdown, society returned to the same capitalist practices and ideals that contributed to Black experiences of environmental racism and ecological inequality. COVID-19 poignantly reminded us of the pre-existing fact that we cannot fight for the planet *and* have a society of inequality. We still need responsive, not reactionary, sustainable prescriptions for ecological justice that entail longevity for an ongoing struggle. Joining a long tradition of organized resistance, the emergence of *Black Forest* signifies new capacities for restoration, Black community-building, and human connection through a more collaborative relationship with nature.[10]

As trees provide shade, reducing temperatures and refreshing the air in Black and urban areas that usually suffer from hazardous heat and bad air quality, *Black Forest* centers Black communities with redlining histories, often in areas with fewer trees and polluted land. As Ijeoma points out, "With COVID-19, we saw respiratory illnesses. At the height of the Black Lives Matter movement, we heard George Floyd say, 'I can't breathe.' We need trees in the communities that experience unfortunate loss."[11] *Black Forest* prophetically calls for a critical assessment of how we got to the present moment and follows up with a roadmap to community and a plan of action, or praxis – fostering a *collective ecological consciousness* that does not segregate injustices but integrates them with the fight for life in all its forms.

As *Black Forest* grows, the community broadens the image of environmentalism and ecological justice for Black consciousness and liberation. It positions Black communities in the driver's seat of their ecological destinies to some extent. It feels empowering

to know that art and activism like this exist. For some, like me, it may be the first time they are challenged to think critically about their personal relationship to the environment. For everyone, it is a call, or at least an opportunity, to join a better future in our shared natural world. Much like cookouts, family reunions, and “all-Black spaces” at the park, *Black Forest* will hopefully see that we become caretakers and stewards of our environment and one another. A living memorial, more than three hundred mid- to large-size trees have been planted in California, Florida, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, Rhode Island, and Washington. *Black Forest* is at hand.

Notes & Bibliography

[1] MIT Media Lab’s Poetic Justice will see forty thousand trees planted on public and private land primarily in urban centers across the United States.

[2] Black communities have long suffered in the U.S. because of the government and corporations dumping toxins and garbage into marginalized neighborhoods, indicating how race and poverty defined the treatment and status of Black people in U.S. history.

[3] *Black Forest* offers crowd-sourced sonic and video collages and continuously budding histories as users contribute their stories. Poetic Justice records stories from all fifty states. Trees will include a tag or sticker with QR codes that link to the archive.

[4] Black models of self-empowerment for environmental justice can be traced back to the 1960s with notable movements like Martin Luther King, Jr.’s civil rights advocacy for sanitation workers. Specifically, Neighborhood Tree Corps, founded by Hattie Carthan, a legendary activist remembered as “Bed-Stuy’s Tree Lady,” inspired Poetic Justice.

Under Carthan’s leadership, Neighborhood Tree Corps planted over one thousand five hundred trees throughout Brooklyn in the 1960s. Poetic Justice also looked to Africa and groups like the Green Belt Movement, founded by Wangari Maathai, which planted over fifty million trees in Kenya since the late 1970s.

[5] Annabel Keenan, “Tree-planting project memorializing Black lives lost brings 40,000 trees to urban centers across the US,” *The Art Newspaper*, July 30, 2024, https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/07/30/black-forest-living-memorial-tree-planting-covid-19-black-communities-monument.

[6] Dianne D Glave, *Rooted in the Earth: Reclaiming the African American Environmental Heritage* (Chicago Review Press, 2010), 3.

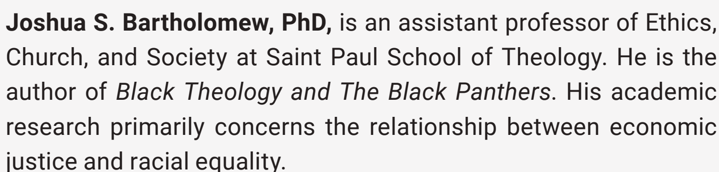
[7] During the enslavement period, Black folk worked the land; in the years after enslavement, Black people relocated from Southern rural fields and gardens to urbanized Northern cities.

[8] Glave, *Rooted in the Earth*, 8.

[9] Keenan, "Tree-planting project."

[10] Glave, *Rooted in the Earth*, 138. "African Americans have continued their legacy of resistance, combining grassroots activism, spirituality, and organization to craft a 'spearhead for reform' that African Americans who continue to be embattled by environmental racism can carry into the future."

[11] Keenan, "Tree-planting project."



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College as A House of Cards:

Finding Home/Making Home in Higher Ed

Elizabeth Rae Coody,
Morningside University

The classroom where I teach my 100-level classes is in a beautiful but severe building built in the 1890s (see Image 1). The building itself is not conducive to home. It's pretty much a castle transported to the upper Midwest, which makes it majestic from the street and worthy of a sign on the Interstate as a historical place of interest. Students will tell you it's haunted, that they hear the pioneer-era piano in the attic playing eerie notes at night when no one could be there. It's also inaccessible in just about every sense of the word – you literally cannot get in this building without making it up stairs no matter which angle you come from (see Image 2). But fixing this expensive problem is further complicated by the very historical designation that gets it a sign on the highway. There is a bulletin board outside my office with a list of quaintly worded complaints from students in 1892, many

Image 2. *(Photo credit: Christine Madden)*

Image 1. *(Photo credit: Elizabeth Coody)*

of which are still a problem: “Our physical health has been endangered on account of the extreme coldness of the building… We have but one water-closet for both sexes, and that one unfavorably located.” Thanks to some twentieth-century improvements, I’ve never felt my physical health endangered by the cold, but it’s not a temperate place. The one water-closet was long ago split into two, but it’s still unfavorably located in the basement. However, this building is still where it is most natural for me to meet my students. They expect it to be my natural habitat.

The room I teach my largest classes in is structured to reinforce and embody every pedagogical habit from the Gilded Age: tables are bolted to the floor in a tiered U-shape, there is a narrow whiteboard with multiple boards that roll up and down (presumably so students can copy down what the sage on the stage writes there with his [really his!] back to them), but the screen for the projector pulls down to cover that up. The designers (whose unfortunate spirits I regularly curse under my breath)

could not imagine the need for many visuals. There are two doors, both behind where the lecturer stands (and the person at the front is clearly supposed to be lecturing) so that everyone can see. The position means that coming into the room puts you immediately, if briefly, on stage (see Image 3). Even though my classes are capped at thirty-five, the whole shape of the room makes it feel like this

Image 3. POV: This is the view when you walk in – imagine it full of faces, all made judgmental in your imagination. Even Bernice Goldstein's portrait is another pair of eyes on you *(Photo credit: Elizabeth Coody)*

is a room where a passive audience is lined up watching a single speaker. Even though the U-shape does give some students a little bit of a view of their classmates, the three-level rows resist it. Most seats turn just to the front, to the center, to me (see Image 4). It's not designed for a learning community or comfort. It's designed to give you a good view of just one person at the front. So, what home there is, I have to make with my own body, in a space – physical and social – that often fights me. This struggle between myself and my haunted space is an exercise in ecology.

Ecology has a connection to home. Even though I want this piece to use what I know from my own body and not my research, I am compelled to tell you that this all works etymologically. The Greek *oikos* (home, or probably more properly, "household") sits at the head of the word "ecology." Famously, the Greek and Roman home is governed by its own particular gods and ruled over by women. Certainly, many people relate to the idea of "homemaking" that is often feminized and somewhat supernatural. No one is more surprised than I am that I have ended up writing this piece about homemaking – something that sounds so far from my public persona. I have directed my life in a way that "traditional" homemakers and I appear to have little in common – or might even fight. I am the opposite stereotype: a "career" woman trying to "have it all." I am a white woman, yes, but also a college professor with no children. Yes, I have a home in Iowa, but the making of it has grown organically in partnership with my spouse. However, here in this piece, I have elected to do something different than my usual research. Instead, I invite you to hear the echoes of the many

Image 4. From the back row. I feel like you can see the clock more clearly than anything I write on the board. *(Photo credit: Elizabeth Coody)*

guests that are calling out to you from my words here. They have made me. Even as I itch to cite, I will resist in order to think with you about how what I am doing both is and is not homemaking as a remedy to commodification, hostessing as a play on these transactions that remedies the impulses of capitalism, and ultimately mothering in ways that create a home for students who would otherwise go homeless. These all make my work worth doing and combat some of the most pernicious fractures that I see students struggling to overcome. And home is the center of it – the *oikos* as the seat of good creation.

ECONOMY TO ECOLOGY

Often, particularly in the cultures of capitalism and higher education, this *oikos* is paired with nomos (the law or the norms), so that *oikonomos* forms the word "economy." Economics is a site of concern for my students as the symbol of their striving toward security, framed almost always as financial security ("I am in college so that I can get a good job." "How will this class help me in my career goals?"). My students understand themselves to be entering college in order to collect a degree and to arm their individual selves with the tools they need to carve their own path. A few are here to make friends but rarely articulate it. They are more comfortable thinking of themselves as here to "win" – at college and at life. It's a game, and games have rules. While students expect *nomos* on that first day – and I do lay down a few laws! – I start by making ecology, pairing the *oikos* with *logos*, pairing home with word. Yes, we are heading toward the traditional "-ology" – toward study. But we start with the *logos*, the word. And they provide the words.

There's this exercise I like to do in my freshman-heavy 100-level religious studies course. I give students a three-by-five index card at the beginning of every class period. On the ruled side that has one red line across the top and is otherwise lined with blue lines, they write their name (last name, first name), the date (just to keep them grounded in time), and a short answer to a prompt that recalls what they read or anticipates the work they are doing that

day ("When was Siddhartha's story most like yours or least like yours?" "What's the last book you read that meant something to you?" "Describe the 'land' that you call 'home' with as many of your senses as you can"). On the back unlined side of the card, they can make a request for the class playlist (the songs that I play as they gather) and ask me any question that they want ("What's your favorite color?" or "SpongeBob SquarePants Y/N?" or "But why does anti-Semitism still exist?" or "What's that whole Atman thing all about, really?" or "Is pineapple on pizza okay?" or "But does the church think I'm going to go to hell? Is there a church that doesn't?" or "Isn't Judaism just a type of Christianity?"). The front side is just an excuse to get them writing for me. The questions on the back are a profound window into what they are learning and often bring me up short – sometimes pushing me into deeper theological or ontological territory and sometimes warning me when I need to go back and cover some basics or care for some wounds. Students test me here – both to figure out what exactly it is that a PhD in religious and theological studies is supposed to know and also to try out silly questions to see if I'll answer them. So far, I have always answered the questions. Some of them I answer with "I can't know" or "I don't know yet" but often I tell them about the research I did to find information I didn't yet know or take them through my reasoning process ("A hotdog and a sandwich are both better described as tacos," "Good pineapple improves a pizza, bad pineapple can only make it soggy, but neither is cause for alarm or coming to physical blows"). All these questions and answers establish mutual respect or a tone of inquiry or maybe a running joke for the room. One student asked, "Was Jesus Jewish?" on every one of his cards for months. The first time, it was genuine. I think the second was a mistake because he hadn't listened to my answer the first time. But after that it was a running gag. I answered it every time with a straight face – after all, "Yes" only took a second. Silly, yes, but no one got that question wrong on the final exam! But ultimately, it's not about course content. They are giving me their words, and I am making them part of the home we build together. They are delighted to recognize their own words on

my screen at the front of the room, their songs playing when they walk in the room. Ultimately, they make each class different by how their words bounce off each other, and me, and the subject, and the world we're inhabiting together. It makes it their own, even if it's also mine; their words make them feel closer to home.

CUSTOMER TO GUEST

There are more fractures to repair than just the commodified understanding they have of education before they can be truly "at home." They are at first comforted by the idea of a simple transaction between us. I am the teacher, I'm giving them a supply of something they can then trade for cash or security or badges or some nebulous future. This education is a transaction, but I want it to be gift. They want me to be their warden or their salesperson, but I want to be their hostess and make them become my guests.

My students often have a fractured sense of home from the jump that makes it difficult for them to feel like comfortable guests. Most of them are young and away from their caretakers' house or farm or trailer or apartment for the first time and find their way into college through a whole series of funny accidents and long, ancestor-planned designs. But being unhomed can be hard at first: Some can't do their laundry quite right, or they can't quite find the time. I can see they come to class in their new free college shirts a little more often than their enthusiasm for their new school warrants. Looking out over a room of school-issued maroon is the sure sign of a freshman class! But there are more subtle problems. Some have trouble figuring out how to feed themselves on a good schedule at first, though it takes conversation or extremes for me to find this out.

As their teacher, I know more quickly if they are struggling to schedule their time now that their days are suddenly their own. I can see it when they don't make it to class. I notice when they fail to arrive. I let them know that I notice as gently as I know how to with an email with the subject line "Missed you in class," the content of which varies depending on them and the class, but which always

encourages them to talk to me. (I did once title it “Cthulu Calls!” for a student horror fan who otherwise clearly never read my emails. It worked once, at least!) So many of them have been told by teachers or popular culture that college professors live in cold ivory towers and only descend to humiliate them. They’re often not expecting me to notice them at all, much less their absence. Sometimes letting them know I notice their absence is enough to bring them back into the fold, to get them back home. Sometimes it takes more persistence to find them under their often Midwest-inflected reserve. Sometimes, they don’t come back. This always feels personal, even if I try hard to resist. They are – all of them – a little lost at first, but they often, beautifully often, eventually find they feel at home. For some, this is the first time they feel that delicious sizzle of knowing you might belong in more than one home. It can be frightening and ungrounding, as it has been, I suspect for every coming-of-age story.

The home I am making for them is nestled in the middle of a transactional ecosystem. More and more, colleges and universities like mine make choices that are centered on the pressures of their tuition-driven economy. Students become consumers and customers. Course evaluations function more like Yelp reviews. There are power dynamics at play between my students and me at all times. I am the teacher – the professor, even. They are being graded. Those grades matter *for* them, even if sometimes not *to* them – and not in the ways I thought they would matter when I first started teaching, but they do matter. Most people with degrees like mine cared about grades at some point or, minimally, about approval or academic success. How else would you sustain your ego through the process? It had been a long time since I had been an undergraduate when I started teaching them. I forgot that Cs could get degrees – not Ds, as I have to remind some students. As much as I want my grading to communicate their growing edges or reinforce the places where they are getting things right, the way my grades matter to them is almost always strictly a math problem: does my GPA make me eligible to play my sport through our conference?

If this were a clear pressure from the beginning, it might be more spread out and bearable. Certainly, my school has created several points in the semester that encourage students to check their grades and even use a series of color-coded flags. But for most of my students, this realization (or the real weight of it) crashes down all at once, and usually when things are looking grim. Then the freedom of unrootedness starts to take on the sheen of true homelessness. Or rather, they see the tender roots they've put down with their new team threatened. If they are customers they suddenly find themselves vulnerable, but it is at this moment that they sometimes find themselves to be guests.

I see my task as hospitality, the task of making a home for learners so that they can find the confidence to make a community and dig deeply. If I want them to rescale the way I make home, I need to show them something about how to do this. So I take on the role of hostess. I try to be a good hostess in the classroom, but I've learned from hosting in my home. That is, a good hostess asks questions, but gives people space to answer and even disagree safely. A good hostess gives people the wifi password without being asked; mine is posted in the guest room. A good hostess has coffee and tea available in the kitchen and even shows you what button to hit to make that coffee happen, but then lets you decide when to hit that button. But guests need to understand their role, too. They need to participate, to be game for an adventure sometimes. To offer the occasional compliment. To be able to entertain themselves. To be able to accept gifts.

How do I make students feel at home? I start with some basic principles of hospitality that I learned from my church and my upbringing. Walking into my church means getting handed an order of worship. Throwing a party means greeting everyone who comes, which is why the exercise I do with my freshmen doesn't actually start and end with the words. The homemaking happens throughout the exercise from the moment when I give them the card.

How do I make a home and guests by handing out index cards? It's a ritual creation. I start by carefully keeping the cards in my hand, never putting them in a pile to be collected. I follow each student as they find a seat and (usually) flee quickly from the exposed front of the room. (Those exposed doors do have the advantage of making students truly strive to get there early so they have a smaller audience.) But no matter when they arrive, or what seat they flee to, I walk up to them and plant myself squarely in front of them, often on the tier right below them so that we are at eye level. I use the chance to make full-on eye contact with them as I smile and say "Good morning!" or "Good afternoon!" as cheerily as the day allows. (My smile is big, often toothy, usually goofy, and as disarming as my Southern upbringing can make it. Sometimes I waggle an eyebrow cheekily to surprise them as I comment on the weather or ask them about the reading they've done or another class they're working on. I've been known to wink as I compliment their wild new hair color.) They're not quite used to this on any level – grinning teachers excited for class are not at all what they have been told college will be like.

I put the index card in their hand – or if they don't reach for my outstretched hand, sometimes right in front of them on the table where they are sitting. There is sometimes a very brief moment of contact here as our fingers perhaps brush lightly. It's not at all what these pandemic-raised classes expect. I try hard to make them comfortable about it, though. I'm aware of the wide variety of cultural and neurological diversity that these students possess. I'm not on the attack here – I'm as disarming as I can be. Often, usually, mostly, I get a little smile back. They are so vulnerable at this moment, but so am I. They drive the conversation here as I invite it. The people who walk into my classroom in this Gothic building in the Midwest are so marvelously different (even if they are often all wearing the same school color) and their reactions run the whole gamut: from the standoffish natives of the region who aren't quite sure how to deal with me this close to their personal space (and on the wrong side of the podium), to the timid ones who seem grateful for someone talking to them today, to the ones from

cultures where this sort of eye contact is preferred and who have some witty reply (I've had quiet, private little running jokes from students that range from the confident afternoon class student who cracked a grin and told me "Good morning!" every time to the pretty sheepish one who would dodge me, grinning silently, until it became almost a game of tag). It gives me a chance to look at each of them closely – in some semesters I have seventy across two sections, in addition to my other course. I learn their names more quickly this way. It lets me keep an eye on them. It's delightful to track their morphing personal styles in their first months away from home. It's sobering to watch the ones who were a big deal on their high school football team slowly come to the realization that they are, in fact, not quite the incredible athlete here that they were back home. It's warming to feel them slowly start to expect my little questions and offer up something they are thinking about as the songs they've chosen play.

I remind myself of their humanness before we share a class together.

I remind them of my humanness before we share a class together – my humanness is hard to ignore when I'm looking at just you and asking about your day and complimenting your fit. It's not really about what they write to me, however profound some of them are – it's about handing them the card to begin to show I care. I begin to mend the tears worn into them.

MOTHERLESS TO CHILDREN

Part of the fracturing of students' home is the usual disturbance of college in their young lives, but it's also more than that and something deeper and more horribly specific to our fractured age: they often feel they must build their lives alone without roots in a tradition, or that it is their responsibility to choose and dictate traditions. Even the ones who have the most conservative ideas of themselves think of their plans to be exactly what their parents want them to be as countercultural. They are a pack of lone wolves. They have been trained or taught or forced not to trust or

they have never had a chance to try it. Of course, the shape of this motherlessness varies according to their contexts, traditions, and identities, but they are almost all the same at first in this feeling that they must make a path alone – that following in someone else's footsteps is ultimately boring or a sign of failure or doom.

The feeling I'm pointing to here is different from the usual healthy rebellion. I write about weird comics and raucous punks in academia; I love a good rebellion! I get a little worried when students show no signs of rebellion – at nineteen, if your parents are still your first and best role models, I wonder if you have gotten to know them well enough yet. And even as I respect that choice for some of them, I wonder what happens next without a little more variety in their lives. One can feel oneself to be "motherless" in this way I am working on while also revolving one's life around the hopes of your parents. No, this is not rebellion: they are individualized in a way that is key to late modernity.

This loneliness is compounded by the way that the most recent iteration of the digital environment has always served them what they want, material specially designed to take their attention away from whatever is in front of them. The "for you page" (FYP) of TikTok is typical of the internet design they have known from childhood – even though it was only launched in 2016, that's still their entire adolescence. They don't have memories of a world without iPhones, even if their families didn't have them as soon as they were available. As an elder Millennial, I was first introduced to an internet in my adolescence that was more DIY than FYP, full of people's scrappy personal projects on free sites that reflected their style and the limitations of the form with flashing gifs, waving flags, and garish color-schemes. You could find the end of pages then. (I do sound like an elder, don't I?) You could stumble into odd rooms – sometimes they were funny and sometimes they were terrifying, like the time I stumbled on a Ku Klux Klan fan page that was run by someone who was probably a student at my high school. Despite that unsettling feeling, the point was that I could know him. The aesthetic of the internet for my students now is

both richer and flatter. It's better organized and social, but social with people we will probably never meet and run by a series of black-boxed algorithms that are designed to keep us clicking and our eyeballs locked on.

No wonder my students feel disconnected, rootless, unhomed, and motherless. A whole system has taken away a sense of home, but I might guide them collectively toward finding that home anew as a community in the classroom. It's a small step toward understanding that we can't make home alone.

And coming home means coming to a place where people love you. Except when it doesn't. Of course, home is a fraught concept. There are dangerous homes; many of my students come from homes that offer none of the generous comfort and love that I associate with my own home and upbringing and mothering. I don't know this from the first moment we meet, but I sometimes come to know that their homes were terrifying places that they are gladly escaping. I do not think I know this for sure about all of them for whom this is true, but I know what I want out of a home for them – perhaps my homemaking is an example of a positive home. But it's also a fraught space itself; in trying to make this home I'm fighting not just the space but a larger ecosystem of higher education, late capitalism, misogyny, and numerous other often-hostile environments. How dare I try to make a home with index cards? Is it truly a house of cards?

I don't know when I realized that it was the handoff and not the card that counted. It wasn't a carefully planned pedagogical exercise. Like most things that I ultimately understand to be key to my own teaching, I did it first on instinct trained by good teachers, and then backed into what was so wonderful about it. I know I did it on the first day because I had an exercise planned for them to write on it. I probably heard from someone – perhaps my kind predecessor in the role – that filling out an index card with your information on it was expected at my school on the first day of class. I know I didn't want to ask them the usual questions. I began (and still

always start) by asking them on the first day for their name, their pronouns, where they were raised, the first name of the person who mothered them the most and about where that person was raised, and the first name of the person who mothered them and where they was raised. I did this because that first day walking into a room of undergraduates, I was afraid of how to start class, and I had seen Dr. Vincent Harding start conversations with big rooms in this way and make them feel like home. Dr. Harding (who insisted he was Uncle Vincent and called me his sister – and everyone else who spoke with him his sibling) was a Civil Rights veteran and powerful, hopeful man who called Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "Martin" casually in class because of their relationship. I have the good sense to follow good leaders, I think. It was a good start that first time.

And I still ask my students those questions on the first day because of the wonderful way it makes us all feel to hear those names ring out together. I'm Dr. Coody and I was raised in Shreveport, Louisiana. My mama is Johnny from Atlanta, Texas, her mama was Celesta from southern Arkansas. The names humanize them for each other – students from wildly different parts of the world or life situations find their mothers have the same name. I'm not asking them for their major (which many of them don't know yet) or what sport they play (which some of them already feel too defined by). Instead, I make them say Pam or June or Sachiko or Verna or Margo or Dan or a thousand other names. It's not about biology or the person who birthed them. Mothering is a verb. Someone had to mother them, I say, or they would not be here – we can't survive alone. Someone cared for them. Calling their name gives them a spiritual space in the room that gets us started on that homemaking.

And I think I handed them another index card the next day because I wanted to know more.

And I did it again because it felt right.

And then I started to feel lost without something to hand them when they walked in the door.

And then I just wanted an excuse to look them in the eye, despite the sensibilities of the Midwest.

And then a student told me that saying his mother's name and his hometown and not just that he was a soccer player from Denmark made him feel seen for the first time in the United States.

And then the habit was a ritual, and I was hooked on homemaking for students – creating an environment, a whole ecosystem in miniature, that loves them. They are guests in my home, and ultimately children, no longer motherless.

But all my students are going to leave the home I'm making and try to make another home again – somewhere out in the hostile world, out in the beautiful world, out in the exposed and terrifying, horrifying, harrowing, and loving world. But this classroom is my territory. It's not pretend for me either – it's real.

Very few things offend me in feedback, but I deeply resent the idea that anything is "busy work" that's somehow irrelevant or not real! I try to give my students a little more "inside baseball" about what we're doing and why. That is, I've considered every assignment, every reading. My home is my castle. Sometimes I tell them that I only assign books that I would like to read again – which is why my class is very short on traditional textbooks and long on good stories and classic writings. Every assignment is a practice version of something I want them to be able to do when they're working on their own territory.

Despite the fact that they will leave it, the home I have made is not a playhouse. What we do is real, even if it is on a different scale. It's a map, not a territory, to borrow a phrase. This map is my territory – and they are guests there. My goal is not to make a lot of new religious studies scholars – the field couldn't accommodate them

all, even if I could turn them out! Instead, I'm going to make around one hundred slightly better citizens every year. One hundred slightly more compassionate people. One hundred slightly more skeptical thinkers. One hundred slightly more critical readers who are nevertheless sometimes able to find joy in what they read. I want my students to turn my territory into their maps, orienting themselves to a world that does have things in common with my classroom, but doing it at their own scale.

It rattles me when I have occasionally heard my class called "easy." That disturbs me more than the gendered insults in the feedback. I've even heard about faculty talking about religious studies classes being easy. It flummoxed me at first, but I think I have figured out what they mean. They mean that religion is a seemingly familiar subject. That familiarity means it is on a family footing. But families, multivalent and complex as they are, are never easy. This is a perverse familiarity. The first thing you learn in an Introduction to Religion course is that religion is not quite familiar, whatever you think it is.

It's also, of course, gendered. The fact that I am a woman weaves through everything. I live in my body all the time, like most all of us do. I live in a culture that still, still, still does not take the voices of women as seriously as those of men. My classes must be easy because I am a woman. Even though men are slowly leaving my part of higher education, I teach a lot of men from traditionally male fields with traditionally male ideas about women. I have to attend to those expectations early on. If they hear they're being signed up for an easy class and walk in and see me smiling warmly, pressing a card into their hand, or playing with markers and crayons, they've unfortunately been socialized to believe this means they will not have to take my class seriously. But, despite every effort, students fail this class every semester. Grades are distributed around the letters. Even with all my rebellious feelings toward the way grading commodifies our work together, I use them as they are designed, for the most part. Students often mistake mothering for something gentle or permissive, when I think

Image 5. *(Photo credit: Elizabeth Coody)*

everyone should know that mothering means loving you enough to make you.

And if it's not clear yet, I love these students. I love them with every atom of my being. I love them when they are frustrating and when they are diligent – when they are doing exceptionally well and when they are failing utterly. I love them so much that I get lost sometimes in the hours I spend trying to make something

for them or make a home for them. I know that this is starting to sound motherly, and it is. Mothering is a verb. I making home. If I'm not here to make them better human beings, I'm not sure why I'm here at all.

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What do I do with all the cards at the end of the semester? It happens on the second to last day of class – the last day of new material before we have a huge review for my cumulative final exam. I try to offer a little comfort and healing. At the end of this class I tell them that they'll be able to use one of my index cards during the exam with anything they care to write on it. But, before we get to that treat of a card, we discuss how religions are involved in how we understand time. This is how we bring together and remember the many concepts and communities we've brought up during the term. As we talk about ways to mark time, I bring out a long box full of index cards, filed neatly week by week. I announce that these are all their index cards from the semester. I explain how I have read every word, treasured every doodle. Sometimes I mention some notable questions or reveal my admiration for their developing style. Some of them perhaps didn't consider what it means that I took them away at the end of class.

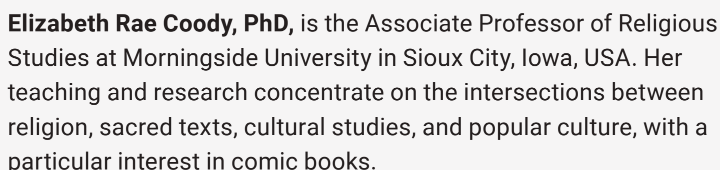
Image 5. *(Photo credit: Elizabeth Coody)*

That I read them. That I paid attention. That I valued their serious musings and their silly thoughts and every day in between. They are suddenly confronted with the entirety of the semester and my memory of them day by day. They are usually rapt and attentive. They lock eyes with me. We have a moment together, usually, if I play it right. I have known them as new freshmen, finding their feet, and here at the end of the semester, I have measured out their lives in index cards. They are faced suddenly and unexpectedly with my attention and with my love for them.

Homemaker, hostess, and mother have power in my classroom. A box of cards is something each of these figures would recognize as a measure of memory and love: calling cards, greeting cards, recipe cards, and the sketches of children stuffed in boxes. All of these are a common sight in a comfortable home. I face the homemaker-hostess-mother's problem with them too; once I have shown them to the room and made that final point, I don't know what to do with them. It's only been six years since I started doing this, so I keep stuffing them into a cabinet (see Images 5 and 6). I know it's unsustainable, but I somehow can't recycle them. There's something so comforting about them all there – some little piece of the students I've had, a physical reminder of the measure of their meaning to me. It's fraught, too, with valences of hoarding or disorganization or simply how I cannot maintain what I am doing here. This is not a measure that works well in institutional assessment. My box of cards will not fit into the set of metrics presented to our board. Those memories are too often short, but I am training mine to be long. Unfortunately, most of the institutional decision-making processes of higher education are not outfitted with ways to account for a long memory or my cards or my love. Our training has often devalued these immeasurables, these homemaking skills, by design or simply neglect. I struggle to express it, even here. But this fragile, vulnerable house of cards I am building here is everything to me.

When my students finish their final exam, they walk over and pick up the cookie that I have baked for them. Since I figured out how to

make it work, I have them give me a high five before they leave the room. Sometimes they ask me if I want them to hand over the card they used on the final exam. “No,” I say, “Keep it.” I laugh a little, quietly since people are still taking the exam, and sometimes say: “Put it in your sock drawer. See if you need it again.” Sometimes they recycle it before they get out of the building, even before they get to the stairs. But I hope, like every teacher, homemaker, hostess, and mother, that the right things stay with them.



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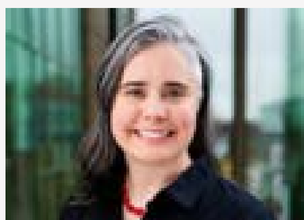

Elizabeth Rae Coody, PhD,
Morningside University

Step Into a World

Ryan M. Armstrong/B-Boy Loose Goose,
Oklahoma State University

Campus was bleak this early January morning. It was twenty degrees Fahrenheit. Many spaces were beginning to allow masked, double-vaccinated groups to gather indoors, but spring semester had not started. Aside from a few staff and stray researchers, the only people on campus at Princeton Theological Seminary were there for me. I walked the length of campus with a swirl of emotions. It had been a thirteen-year battle to get to this dissertation defense, and I felt the weight of my sacrifices. I was in my forties and on food stamps. I believed in my work, but I still got butterflies in my stomach when thinking about the challenges that my professors would level at me today. Despite all this, the biggest thing on my mind was the eclectic group of people who were making their way to Princeton that day. They represented different worlds from my past. There was my mother, who flew in from the Seattle area. My sister, the Instagram model, and her husband, an Italian-trained bespoke tailor. Uncle Brad would be there, a professional cowboy. My Brazilian-Taiwanese girlfriend was there with me. My best friends: a child of Jamaican immigrants who is now a sci-fi

writer, and a child of Hong Kong immigrants who is a creative type working in corporate America. While most of those who began the PhD program with me had graduated, one of them became a professor at PTS and would attend my defense as a member of the dissertation committee. One of the younger PhD candidates came to support me as a colleague. A number of undergraduates from Princeton University were coming. A few academics had come to town for it. And, of course, my dance crew would be there.

Photo credit: Photo by John Moeses Bauan on Unsplash

WORLDS APART

I didn't grow up in the hip hop community. This is not necessarily because it was foreign to my white family in the suburbs. While music was valued very highly in our household, the truth is that rap, rock, and most anything other than Christian hymns were rarely heard in our conservative Christian house. Somehow, I convinced my parents to let me listen to Christian rap in eighth grade, and I was hooked. It was something new and different. And it was fun. Hymns were great and all, but rap was fun. Our family did not have cable television, and MTV was a completely unknown entity to me. I was an energetic fourteen-year-old, trying to learn how to fit in with my peers and how to stand out at the same time. I was coming of age and hoping to figure out my identity while I was sheltered from exposure to the outside world. In such an environment, it may seem like a paradox that my family also encouraged me to learn from people who are different from me, but my father lived during the civil rights movement and engrained a healthy amount of xenophilia into his kids. Christian hip hop music let me explore the edges of my boundaries without overstepping them.

As chance would have it, I was also the least musical person in my family. While I struggled to clap on beat, my sister and father would belt out praises that sounded like a choir of angels had descended upon Clear Creek Baptist Church. It's not that I wasn't a performer; I had been doing stand-up comedy for my family and neighbors since I was four years old. But there wasn't much of an outlet for stand-up at church, where musicians were front and center. I had tried my entire life to be musical enough to join my family jam sessions, but my pitch was so bad that I was usually asked to leave or criticized until I cried. I joined a few youth choirs along the way in hopes of learning to sing on pitch, but it never worked. By stumbling into hip hop, I thought I might have found a way of doing music without fighting the endless battle for pitch. Maybe one day I could perform for our church like my sister and father. I started writing goofy Christian rap songs. Other than DC Talk and Vanilla Ice's appearance in a Ninja Turtles movie, I really didn't know anything about hip hop. Finally, someone humored me

and let me perform one of my raps at a summer camp, and some real rappers in the audience invited me to join a freestyle circle that night. I had no idea what I was doing, and they were clearly disappointed. But I learned a great deal from that brief encounter. Now I had heard of “freestyle,” and I started practicing nonstop. Unlike my singing, my rapping actually did get better with practice.

I always struggled with team sports, and the basketball players were the cool kids at my junior high. I unsuccessfully tried to improve my basketball skills until I was homeschooled for a few years and team sports were off the table anyway. Instead, a lady in our church offered my parents a discount for me to attend her Tae Kwon Do school. Keep in mind that, like every other kid born in the 80s, I wanted to be a ninja when I grew up. A decade of Ninja Turtle fandom had prepared my heart for martial arts, and I fell into it like a fish in water. My supportive family would drive three hours to Portland every few months for my tournaments and belt tests, and every time my father would tell me how good I was. He also offered plenty of criticisms, but it was different when he saw potential in me. Around this time, my parents even started letting me watch Kung Fu movies, starting with *Rumble in the Bronx*. Every time I made a trip to Hollywood Video, I would rent a movie with Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, or Jet Li. I would try to practice their moves and implement them while sparring.

Returning to high school for a year, I once performed a lip sync to the epic (I’m sure everyone agrees on its epicness) rap song, “Turtle Power.” All the coolest kids in class – including the cheerleaders and basketball players – told me that I was a great dancer. My flying ninja kicks were one thing, but they also said I had rhythm! In fact, I learned to clap on beat around this time. It started happening when I let the music move my entire body. My church didn’t encourage much movement during hymns, which is why I learned rhythm from hip hop. Well, maybe not exactly hip hop. I probably learned it at a Carman concert. In any case, rhythm could only be unlocked by letting the beat into my soul.

At community college the next year I met a guy named Marc, who knew a little of the style popularly known as "breakdance." He wasn't an expert, but I asked him to teach me what he could. We started meeting for dance practice several days a week. It required the balance, flexibility, and coordination of martial arts, along with the creativity and rhythm of rapping. All my interest in martial arts and hip hop came together, and this dance started to take over my life. Marc's friend group became like family, and several of them used to break in high school. A few of them showed me some moves, like windmill, and my mind was blown. They helped me start learning it. My parents started opening up to secular music around this time. Soon I had rented Hollywood Video's entire collection of breaking VHS tapes: *Beat Street, Style Wars, Wild Style, Krush Groove, Body Rock, Breakin', Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo*, and even more recent ones, like *You Got Served*. I couldn't believe that humans could do these feats with their bodies. I saw a dancer doing a move called the "worm" during Usher's performance at the Grammys, and I kept the recording and refused to let anyone in my family tape over it. I learned that I could pay exorbitantly high prices at Mr. Rags (a hip hop clothing store) to buy VHS tapes of low-quality camcorder recordings of underground breaking battles. When I stumbled into other breakers practicing in parking lots or at the mall, I would ask them to teach me anything they could. I found websites on the nascent dial-up Internet that contained long explanations of moves in paragraph form. Once in a while I could convince my family to stay off the phone long enough for me to download a ten-second dance video. Along the way, I read whatever I could find about the history and culture of this art form.

Breaking was not a way to win my father's approval, by the way. Unlike my sister's glorious voice, or even my stand-up comedy, he actually shook his head when I watched breaking and said, "I don't know how you can waste your time with that stuff." But I was about to move out of the house, and hip hop connected these different parts of myself and helped me figure out who I am.

THE WORLD OF HIP HOP

The roots of hip hop were humble and organic. In the 1970s, the South Bronx saw a fusion of cultures that brought together dance and music influenced by funk, mambo, "toasting" (a Jamaican way of playing records), disco, and, of course, kung fu films. The Bronx was plagued by a struggling economy, grueling gang violence, and a series of fires.[1] Teens in this lower-income community started coming together for parties, and rituals and myths were formed that are still engrained in the culture fifty years later. As I began to learn about hip hop *culture*, rather than just the music genre, one term was repeatedly highlighted: "the four elements." Whatever the origin of the term, Afrika Bambaataa is credited with being the primary advocate of the idea that true hip hop is made of DJing, Breaking, MCing, and Graffiti.[2] Practitioners of these four elements are known as "hip hop heads."

(Photo credit: Photo by Sam Badmaeva on Unsplash)

As the legend goes, hip hop was born at a back-to-school party on August 11, 1973, at 1520 Sedgwick Ave. in the Bronx. A Jamaican immigrant named DJ Kool Herc played songs for a majority Black audience, and he noticed that people danced harder during a song's "break." This is the part where the vocals, guitar, keyboard, bass, and most instruments suddenly go silent. Only the drums continue. A break often lasts no more than one or two eight-counts. Ethnographer Joe Schloss draws an important

connection between hip hop's break and Barbara Browning's research on Samba. Browning notes that the syncopation in Samba music suppresses the strong beat, and this is what generates the dance of Samba. Her wording is poignant: "This suspension leaves the body with a hunger that can only be satisfied by filling the silence with motion."[3] When expected sounds are missing from a song, listeners tend to fill that void by clapping or dancing. Take a moment to listen to the Amen break, one of the most sampled breaks in history. The break happens at 1:26, and it lasts merely two eight-counts. Let yourself feel it. You *feel* the break hit. Kool Herc's awareness of this – at only eighteen years old – changed the world. He saw the dancers going crazy during the break. Right after it ended, he took his fingers and slid the record backward, so the turntable's needle was back at the beginning of the break. This "looping" of the break started hip hop. While the music of the time period (James Brown, Sly and the Family Stone, the Jimmy Castor Bunch, etc.) was foundational for hip hop, DJs like Herc would hunt and find breaks that no one could recognize, coming from any genre.[4] The role of the DJ was to give audiences a unique experience that they could not get anywhere else, introducing them to new music and new ways of partying. DJing is the first element of hip hop.

As partygoers danced with more enthusiasm on the break, they began grouping together in circles. The circles are still called "cyphers," a term likely taken from the Five Percent Nation, in which a "cipher" is a constant circle of knowledge, wisdom, and understanding. Within the hip hop community, dancers, rappers, or other artists form cyphers and take turns sharing their art with others in the circle. From the beginning of hip hop, artists tried to outdo each other. As dance cyphers formed around the break, the dance quickly became competitive and revolved around "burns" (insults). Herc and other popular DJs recruited the best dancers for their crews, and they became known as "B-Boys" and "B-Girls." Herc's original B-Boys performed theatrical dance moves inspired by larger-than-life performers like James Brown. The Legendary

Twins were known to dress like Groucho Marx and circle the room, while Clark Kent's signature move was "the Superman," in which he pretended to run into a phone booth and change into a superhero.[5] According to Herc, "B-Boy" and "B-Girl" stand for "Break-Boy" and "Break-Girl," because "breaking" was slang for "going off" or "going crazy" in the Bronx in the 1970s.[6] Of course, the happy coincidence of this turn of phrase is that the most enthusiastic dancing happens on a song's break. Every Bronx DJ needed B-Boys and B-Girls in their crew to throw lively, memorable parties. The dance of hip hop became known as "breaking," and it is the second element.[7]

The dance that is today called "breaking" is different from the dance of Herc's B-Boys, and the reasons for this are debated. While the original B-Boys called their dance "burning," a separate dance style that was also frequently called "burning" had already made its way around New York City's boroughs in the late 1960s. The prior dance is primarily remembered as "rocking" (sometimes called "uprock"), likely named for the rock music to which performers frequently danced.[8] It was a bit more athletic than Herc's B-Boys' style, though it also centered on burns, particularly during the break. From the outset, rocking crews met for competitive dance battles all over New York City. By 1981, a particular dance style of the Bronx was called both "rocking" and "breaking," and dancers were called both "rockers" and "B-Boys"/"B-Girls." This dance conforms very closely with the dance that is called "breaking" today. While connections between uprock and today's breaking have long been recognized, more and more people now argue that the dance currently called "breaking" traces its lineage *directly* to uprock, while the dancers at Herc's parties were merely an indirect influence.[9] Others claim that Bronx rocking crews revived the B-Boy dance of the hip hop parties in 1975 after it began losing importance among DJ party crews.[10] Dance battles in the late 1970s were less connected to parties, often taking place on the street and in abandoned buildings.[11] In any case, the dance conventions of today's breaking were solidified between 1975 and 1979, and the terms "rocking" and "breaking" were largely conflated.[12] By all

accounts, Latin Americans had a heavy influence on hip hop dance duringthis time, and they were increasingly more involved in other elements, as well.

Bronx DJs got members of their production crews to pick up the microphone and make announcements at parties when the DJ was busy. Announcements included details about upcoming parties or something along the lines of, “So and so, your mother’s lookin’ for you at the door.”[13] Over time, the more charismatic announcers had fun on the microphone and started rhyming. Of course, the person on the microphone would comment on the extraordinary dancing in the cyphers during breaks. Just as dancers are compelled to fill the silence in the break with motion, the announcer sometimes filled it by rhyming alongside the drumbeat. This is the third element of hip hop, called MCing (taken from “master of ceremonies”), and the focus was on bringing energy to the party. The rhyming was often called “rapping.”

DJs, dancers, MCs, and everyone else in hip hop took on new names that reflected their style or characteristics. All over New York City in the 1970s, kids were writing their hip hop names in highly stylized displays with spray cans and paint markers. While graffiti has been around for millennia, Joseph Ewoodzie argues that it served a particular function for marking gang territories in Philadelphia and New York in the 1960s and 1970s, which led to a unique subculture of its own. Unique artistic and social conventions developed, including two competitive aspects: to have the most widely distributed name and to have a name in the most difficult locations. In the 1970s, New York’s subways were plastered with names inside and out, which became a major topic of conversation across all sectors of the city. New Yorkers were forced to discuss the nature of art and vandalism as the city began to enact stricter prohibitions and policing measures.[14] Since the beginning, graffiti writers have both lamented and thrived on being targeted by authority. Graffiti writer Ron English notes that television viewers offer an unwritten agreement that they will watch advertisements

in exchange for content, but there is no equal exchange for street advertisements, in which people and businesses with money display their names with no benefit to those who have to see it.[15] As such, graffiti is often perceived to be an equalizer for those with lesser means. In one of the first news pieces about graffiti (1971), writer Taki 183 asks, “Why do they go after the little guy? Why not the campaign organizations that put stickers all over the subways at election time?”[16] Graffiti rounds out the culture as the fourth element of hip hop.

The story of hip hop is inspirational. Now that I teach in higher education, I begin each class by telling this story to my students. The Bronx in the 1970s was synonymous with urban decay.[17] In the face of adversity, teenagers decided to get together for parties and began creating art. They changed the world.

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FROM THE WORLD OF THE BRONX TO THE WORLD

Hip hop comes from a very particular environment. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968, and the final throes of the Vietnam War raged under Nixon in the early 1970s. Kids in the Bronx saw their parents and older siblings fighting for civil rights while at the same time serving in the U.S.'s controversial war. All the while, the Bronx itself faced heavy economic hardships that were exacerbated by New York City policies, which in turn, led to a rise in gang violence.[18] Eric Schneider points out that soildiers returning from Vietnam found that their warfare experience quickly earned them status in gangs.[19] But over time, the urban decay that had pushed people into gangs was only aggravated by gang life, and eventually gang members began to seek new outlets. Black Benjie, a young adult recruited by the Ghetto Brothers gang to be a peace counselor instead of a warlord, was killed on December 2, 1971, while trying to mediate during a flare-up of violence at a park. Rather than seeking vengeance and escalating a gang war, the Ghetto Brothers responded by setting up the Hoe Avenue Boys Club Peace Meeting the next week, in which over forty gangs agreed on peace. Lorine Padilla, former first lady of the Savage Skulls, says that this peace treaty opened up the Bronx and allowed people to go to parties in any Bronx territory. She said, "Had there been no peace treaty, there'd had been no hip-hop."[20] Gang-related homicides peaked in 1972 and decreased significantly after 1974.[21] Ewoodzie argues that hip hop replaced gangs as the primary way for Bronx teens to find status.[22] On the other hand, many also left or avoided gangs because hip hop was more alluring.[23] Still, remnants of gang culture stayed in the Bronx and left their marks on hip hop. Dance crews would "fly colors" (wear distinguishing clothing to set their crew apart) like gangs, and rocking crews were accompanied by fight crews when they traveled to other territories for battles.[24] B-Boy Ken Swift, who began breaking at the age of twelve in 1978, describes Bronx residents smelling daily fires and seeing the buildings next door in ruins. He says, "What do you got to look forward to? When something comes you just grab it, because you're so vulnerable… And when the hip hop and the stuff

came, it's like, 'Yeah. Yeah! Ok, I'm with this.'"[25]

Regardless of the cultural milieu surrounding hip hop's birth, Schloss offers an important caution not to give the credit for hip hop's origins to a socio-economic environment. The artists deserve their due just like any other artist in history. Schloss highlights that hip hop was created by *people* in the Bronx. It was not created by the *world* of the Bronx.[26] Ken Swift says he loved breaking because he could create a move that was his own, despite the pressures being pushed on him as a kid.[27] Having a unique name attached to one's art is crucial to hip hop. Graffiti writers' lives revolve around where to display their names. DJs and MCs take on names from characteristics or personal histories. Breakers are given a name – usually by a mentor – to match their unique style, and then they maintain their style for the rest of their lives in order to match their name.[28] These names are associated with the unique legacy that each member of the hip hop community leaves within their art forms. Rembrandt was a product of his time, but his name is still remembered for his unique creativity, originality, and mastery of his craft. In the same way, the names of Kool Herc, the Legendary Twins, floor rockers like Batch, MCs like Grandmaster Caz, Taki 145, and all the artists in the 1970s Bronx should be given respect for their artistry.

Perhaps this last point is why these four art forms resonated so strongly with teenagers around the globe as soon as they were exposed to it. The rise of punk rock paralleled that of hip hop, and it was clear that teens were hungry for new edgy and aggressive outlets to express creativity. Media agents put the Dynamic Rockers, the Rock Steady Crew, and the New York City Breakers on international TV, film, and stage. The Fatback Band, the Sugar Hill Gang, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, Kurtis Blow, and others started making music records based on performances at Bronx hip hop parties. Fab Five Freddy, Lee Quiñones, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and other street artists disclosed their identities and found acceptance in the art world. Children of the 80s saw hip hop take over pop culture, and it was larger than life. Kids from around

the world rushed into it – not only as consumers, but as new practitioners learning these four crafts.[29] In the face of adversity, the Bronx artists had the grit and determination to make art, accomplish incredible feats no one ever imagined, and to make their names known. This is what continues to connect with people in completely different worlds. People like me.

Hip hop is constantly evolving because of its competitive nature. This is partly due to the way Bronx residents channeled their grit into art. Ken Swift says that while breaking can be performed on stage and in public arenas like the Olympics, the inherent aggression in the dance is built for the rawness of the Bronx.[30] DJs of the early 1970s competed to throw the best parties. Each graffiti artist (then and now) tried to make their name the most widespread and to place their name in the most difficult locations. The dancers in the Bronx were constantly battling each other throughout the 1970s, seeking to perform the most exciting, memorable, original, musical, and stinging burns. Rap battles awarded clout to MCs that insulted their opponents with the most clever rhymes and wordplays. Competition pushes artists to innovate and showcase their art. A ten-year-old recently told me that he breaks because of his "thirst for greatness." The uniqueness of the Bronx also leveled the playing field. Traditional dances and instruments are usually learned from paid lessons, while underprivileged kids in the Bronx made their own dances and turned their record players into instruments. Within 1970s graffiti culture, it was almost imperative that paint materials were "racked" (stolen) – even by affluent writers.[31] There are legends that the number of DJs expanded after equipment was looted during the great New York City blackout of 1977.[32] Hip hop has always carried the promise that anyone with determination can become great.

While learning hip hop is not expensive, monetary rewards are also hard to come by. This makes prestige, being recognized for one's art, one of the highest values in hip hop culture. Authenticity is important. Those who practice the art forms without caring about

the culture are treated as outsiders. The 1980s is often referred to as the "breaksploitation" era by those within the community. At that time promoters hired breakers to perform around the world, but it was only a passing fad in popular media, stripped of its culture. It went back underground in the 1990s and stayed within a tight, close-knit community of people who appreciated its artistry and were determined to maintain control of its conventions. Breakers train as full-time athletes with no other goal than to impress each other. Ken Swift says:

> Unless you're a B-Boy, you can't understand some rhythmic patterns within movements and combinations if you don't do it. So most people look at it as, "Those kids are just really angry. They just bouncing on their backs…" They don't look at it as a dance, first of all… Everything they've been fed, since the 80s, practically, dealt with feeding someone a physical feat that didn't have relationship to music…. People seeing that will look at it and think "breakdancers are acrobats."… They would never show someone making a connection with a song. Because that isn't dynamic. It's not exciting. But that's the essence of B-Boying.[33]

The breaksploitation era clinched hip hop culture's skepticism about popular success. Like punk culture, hip hop frowns on those who "sell out," that is, those who are willing to misrepresent their culture in exchange for a paycheck.[34] Where to draw the line is a topic of discussion within the community. As breaking was fading from pop culture, rap became entrenched in the music industry and began to repeat the patterns. Much of rap became separated from the rest of hip hop culture as outsiders created new dances, new styles of art, and new forms of music to keep up with the passing trends of pop culture. It was not long before there were famous rappers who could not even name the four elements of hip hop. This has exacerbated frustration and distrust of outsiders among many within the hip hop community.

Any cultural phenomenon that leaks into mainstream society is at risk of taking on too much external influence and becoming

unrecognizable, but the hip hop community developed a way to keep its culture together by naming the four elements. As the culture spreads into new territory, it is always at risk of assimilating to the point of losing its foundation. This is why the four elements are so crucial. While the hip hop pioneers are proud of their Bronx heritage, they do not close it off to just the Bronx. Hip hop itself draws inspiration from a vast array of cultures and welcomes new innovators who stay true to the four elements, understand their history, and remain dedicated to the culture. Since the 1990s, it is the breakers who have held the four elements together. As I studied hip hop history through VHS tapes and primitive websites in the 1990s, I soon learned that my hunger for knowledge was a common aspect of being a breaker. Anyone who teaches breaking also teaches the culture and history of the dance. Part of this is because of lessons learned from the breaksploitation period, but Schloss argues that breakers are the ones transmitting hip hop's oral history because breaking is the element that cannot be learned without a teacher.[35] I have met numerous rappers who could not name the four elements of hip hop, but I rarely meet breakers who cannot. While the launch of YouTube in 2005 might have somewhat dissipated the close relationship between mentor and student, the Internet has also opened new mediums for breakers around the world to pool resources for studying hip hop history and philosophy. Breakers often perform in multiple elements, as well. The four elements may be seen as anachronistic, simplistic, too limiting, or too broad, but these four art forms provide an anchor for the culture's identity. No matter how far away from the Bronx hip hop goes, it will never lose artists in these four categories. If it does, it is no longer hip hop culture.

It is challenging to maintain a distinct identity among external influences, and when terms like "hip hop" or "breakdancing" take on new meanings in mainstream society, it is difficult for the community to reclaim it. Our hip hop names are central to our personal identities, and our communal terms are central to the way we relate to our art forms. Rap is ubiquitous in today's popular culture as part of the music industry, and the word "hip hop" is often

associated with a music genre rather than a culture. This problem is amplified when the music is not representative of the culture.[36] The term “hip hop dance” is applied very loosely today, but there are purists who say that the only true dance of hip hop is breaking.[37] Popping and locking are West Coast dances, often called “funk styles,” that were subsumed into much of the breaking culture early on, and opinions differ on whether they can legitimately be called hip hop styles. In the late 1980s, the term “hip hop dance” was applied when choreographers borrowed aspects from breaking, popping, locking, jazz, and party dances to accompany the growing rap music industry. Purists call this style “street jazz,” but the “hip hop” label has become so pervasive in dance studios and music videos that it is unlikely to change any time soon. Many breakers are offended by the term “breakdancing,” which is generally considered to be coined by exploitative marketers from outside the culture.[38] Breakers have been so insistent on this point that they have had some success in reclaiming their terminology in popular usage. Some mainstream television shows like *America's Best Dance Crew* began using the terms “breaking,” “B-Boy,” and “B-Girl” in the 2000s.[39] Many breakers heralded the official decision of the International Olympic Committee to name the sport “breaking” in 2024, although its own press uses it alongside “breakdancing.” “B-Boy” itself has lost precision at times. In 1993, *The Source* magazine published an article written by Ken Swift and other prominent B-Boys seeking to clarify the term “B-Boy,” pushing back against its popular application to rappers or even a style of dress.[40] The community regularly has open debates about terms for individual moves and how to determine whether a move was inspired by preexisting moves or directly copied (“biting,” or stealing a move, as termed by breakers, is still harshly castigated). Competition has become key for maintaining the dance's purity by enforcing its foundations. Breakers develop and discuss criteria for judging battles, and they carefully delineate dance that falls outside of breaking conventions. I have seen dancers enter a breaking battle after learning “hip hop” dance in a studio, only to realize that they are completely unaware of the basic steps. While

hip hop absorbs influences from other cultures, it has also formed a clear culture of its own. Breaking must always be distinguishable from its influences, including other styles of dance, gymnastics, and martial arts.[41]

By the same token, it is sometimes paradoxical that originality is integral to hip hop. A misunderstanding of this paradox by those outside the community can lead to reluctance in ascribing artistry to hip hop heads. For example, DJs make use of fully formed songs.[42] Schloss paints a full picture of the way DJs slice out breaks from their original context to create something new. He cites Mr. Supreme, who draws attention to small scale between a recording of a single drum hitting a snare, versus an eight count.[43] The standard for the amount of existing material that can be part of a "new" creation varies widely between cultures.[44] Breaking, graffiti, and rap have an emphasis on originality, but only if they conform to strict conventions.[45] To be a B-Boy or a B-Girl is to be a choreographer. The dance is rarely performed in unison with other dancers, and each dancer develops an individual style. Two breakers will look different performing the same steps. Figure skating provides a helpful parallel as it is both a dance and a competitive sport that is judged on musicality, acrobatics, and originality, all within restrictive conventions. Existing breaking moves are called "foundation," while new moves that are invented or borrowed from outside of breaking are "original," and no one is allowed to bite them. However, original moves frequently become foundation once multiple dancers bite them, even in recent decades.[46] Hip hop pushes practitioners to bring something new to their art – something unique to themselves. It invites the influence of new cultures and outside art forms, but it also protects itself from losing its identity and foundation.

Breakers aspire to leave a mark on the dance itself. Hip hop evolved from both party dances and gang dances. Early breakers were inspired by tap dancers like Bill Robinson, Sammy Davis, Jr., the Nicholas Brothers, and Fred Astaire, along with energetic performers like James Brown.[47] Herc's B-Boys impersonated

Hollywood stars like Charlie Chaplin and Groucho Marx. Just as DJs dig for obscure breaks that no other DJ plays, breakers dig for inspiration to create new moves that no other breaker does. Moves like the “Thomas Flare” were taken from gymnastics. The “Latin Step” comes from mambo. The “Baby Love” is a foundational move named for the B-Girl who created it by doing salsa moves down on the floor. “The Russian” is inspired by the Russian Prisiadki style and Ukrainian Hopak style folk dances. Martial arts have been a particularly significant inspiration. Breakers frequented theaters on 42nd Street and Chinatown that regularly showed kung fu films in the 1970s and 1980s, and they watched kung fu films on WNEW on Saturday afternoons in the 1980s.[50] Capoeira, an Afro-Brazilian martial art that is also a dance and a game, was seen in demonstrations in Bronx public schools around 1975, and perhaps Bronx teens had other exposures to it.[51] B-Boy Crazy Legs describes the breaking mindset of that time period as being like an itinerant warrior traveling to other towns to see the style of other masters and to offer the challenge of battle.[52] Within breaking foundations, even before its global spread, pieces from cultures all over the world came together in the Bronx to inspire a new creation.

The music of breaking likewise brings together eclectic traditions. Dance is formed around music, and then music is created for the dance. Many ballet conventions were solidified around the music of Jean-Baptiste Lully in the seventeenth century, and ballet music continues to imitate those rhythms and sounds for dancers. Black dancers in Harlem created lindy-hop to the jazz music of the Savoy Ballroom in the 1920s and 1930s, and new music created for the dance maintains similar patterns, even when it evolved into neo-swing and electro-swing in the 1990s. Breaking today is rarely done to the mainstream rap music that is heard on the radio, as its rhythms are not designed for breaking. Instead, breaking is performed to 70s-style funk, soul, rock, Latin jazz, Afro jazz, and rap that is inspired by these genres. Examples of performers whose music is regularly played at a breaking jam include: James Brown, Dennis Coffey, Curtis Mayfield, Fred Karlin,

Tom Zé, Jun Mayuzumi, Manu Dibango, The Jimmy Castor Bunch, Incredible Bongo Band, British rock band Babe Ruth, Sly and the Family Stone, Dave Cortez & the Moon People, K.I.S.S., Chicago, Fusik, Toploader, Ivano Fossati and Oscar Prudente, The Souljazz Orchestra, Los Tios Queridos, Eric B. & Rakim, Pete Rock, KRS-One, Big Daddy Kane, Tribe Called Quest, and Das EFX, to name a few. Anyone of a certain age is bound to recognize a name or two on this list. "Renegades of Funk" by Afrika Bambaataa is very different from its cover by Rage Against the Machine, but both can be heard at breaking jams. "Killing in the Name" by Israeli funk band The Apples has become a staple breaking song. Only after dancing to it for many years did I learn it was, in turn, a cover of Rage Against the Machine. Remixes of orchestral songs often become popular within the community. DJs continue to dig for new breaks, and no realm of music is off limits.[53] In true hip hop fashion, the music reflects limitless creativity within boundaries that are conducive to the culture.

Debbie Harry and Chris Stein were in a rock band, Blondie, that enjoyed success in the music industry in the 1970s. Their friend, Brooklyn-based graffiti writer Fab 5 Freddy, occasionally took them to Bronx hip hop parties. Harry and Stein were impressed with the entire production, particularly the competitive MCs.[54] In 1981, Blondie released a rap song inspired by what they had seen, calling it "Rapture," with the implication that hip hop can en*rap*ture the listener. By this time, several commercial rap songs had been released, but the music industry, along with MCs and DJs, struggled to reproduce an authentic hip hop party in the form of a record. Blondie did not pretend to be a Bronx MC or DJ, and "Rapture" stays true to the band's style while contributing to the growing collection of hip hop music. Blondie's lyrics describe a late 70s hip hop party in the Bronx: "Toe to toe, dancing very close… and they're stepping lightly, hang each night in rapture." Harry raps about Fab 5 Freddy and Grandmaster Flash. Hip hop's elements are displayed in the music video: Freddy portrays himself writing graffiti; Jean-Michel Basquiat, another friend, portrays DJ Grandmaster Flash. Hip hop was beginning to evolve as it spread

out of the Bronx. Freddy brought several subcultures together, including the Bronx's hip hop community, Brooklyn's graffiti writers, members of Manhattan's art scene like Andy Warhol, and figures within the music industry like Blondie. Of Freddy, Chang says, "The nineteen-year-old found himself moving through two very different worlds, and he had both the charisma and the desire to bring them together."[55]

By 1997, Blondie's description of the four elements coming together at hip hop parties felt like a different world. Rappers had become famous, and many made good music, but it was rare to see connections with the other three elements of hip hop. It was the perfect time for the Bronx's KRS-One to revisit early hip hop with "Step into a World (Rapture's Delight)," a song that challenges rap fans to step into a world where skills are valued more than money and popularity. The title gives homage to the early commercial hip hop releases by Blondie and the Sugarhill Gang. The chorus borrows the tune of Blondie's "Rapture." Running through the song is a classic hip hop break from "The Champ," a song originally performed by British composer Alan Hawkshaw and a session band in 1968. KRS-One's lyrics overtly give honor to each of the four elements. The music video prominently features breakers, including B-Boy Kwik Step, B-Girl Rokafella, and the Breeze Team. Bronx DJ Funkmaster Flex works the turntables, and it features graffiti art. KRS-One declares that he seeks prestige within the hip hop community first and foremost.[56] "Step into a World" invites listeners to enter hip hop *culture*. It shows a world where hip hop is more than a music genre, deeper than popular media could ever convey, and still available for those who are willing to find it. It highlights the many worlds that have come together to form hip hop's past and present: Blondie's fusion of hip hop and rock, Hawkshaw's British production music that has become a staple for breakers, and Sugarhill Gang's first successful use of MCing on a pop record, alongside contemporary breakers, DJs, and graffiti writers. At the same time, it declares that there are boundaries to the world of hip hop and opposes those who would forget its roots.

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SOME READERS OF *JOT* MIGHT BENEFIT FROM SOME TERMINOLOGY.

Battling has been a crucial aspect of hip hop since its inception, especially for breaking. In a battle, opponents – whether individuals or crews – take turns attempting to outdo each other in their art form, whether it be dancing, rapping, or another element.

Breaking is a sprint, not a marathon, and it is usually performed in intervals of one minute or less, called "***sets.***" In a battle, a set usually makes up one "***round.***" In "1 vs 1" battles, the only time a breaker can rest is during the opponent's round. While each breaker has specializations and signature moves, each round is expected to *answer* the previous round by finding ways of matching or outdoing the opponent. Battles are scored by round-for-round exchanges; they are not necessarily awarded to the overall best dancer.

A breaker may not repeat memorable moves in a single day. This means that breakers strategize when to use their best moves, and they must develop a large ***arsenal*** of moves that can win many rounds throughout the day.

There are formal tournaments, called "*jams,*" with judges, brackets, and even point systems, like what can be seen at the Olympics. There are also battles that happen spontaneously, with no judges, when a dancer "***calls out***" another dancer. The motivation may be to prove one's level, to engage in a friendly exchange, or to announce a rivalry.

> **Dancers "*get down with*" (join) a *crew* to practice and battle together** like a family unit within the larger hip hop community. Many breaking crews also have members who are primarily DJs, MCs, or graffiti writers. Whenever a dancer is in a battle, all of their crewmates will stand behind them and get involved. Crewmates hype up the dancer and point out key highlights in the battle to influence the crowd, judges, and even opponents. This tradition is an act of solidarity.
>
> **Battling someone is a sign of *respect*.** Experienced breakers rarely battle a beginner; they battle others at the same level or better. Sometimes outsiders misunderstand the aggressiveness in a battle. Our breaking community is a close-knit community worldwide, and we often appear the most hostile when we battle our closest friends. But I've rarely seen a battle that did not end in a hug and a word of admiration.

STEPPING IN

As I got deeper into hip hop culture, it became central to my identity. In just three months, I completed my first successful windmill. Marc still hasn't learned it, and he was amazed at my progress. I had become enthralled by both the art form and the community of breaking. I wanted to learn unreal feats and to create new ones. I was given the name "Loose Goose," because of my fun, lighthearted style. Breaking is aggressive, and most breakers portray an angry character as they dance. I try to make them crack a smile when I battle them. I began to innovate new moves and leave my mark on the art form. I invented the legendary face-nut mills ("legendary" is part of the name, not a description of status. I do hope that one day they will become legendary legendary face-nut mills). I also invented steal-yo-girl mills, where I burn my opponent by pretending to receive a phone call from their mother during battle. Coming from a background totally different than the Bronx, I always had imposter syndrome. I couldn't believe I was part of the rich legacy of hip hop. Yet, given hip hop's roots and origins, it makes sense that it would grab me. I needed something

that gave me freedom to create. I needed the restrictions of an art form that gave me the structure to learn a new craft. I needed something with a rich history that encouraged me to explore the world with academic rigor. I needed to find music that spoke to my soul. I needed to realize my dream of becoming a ninja in order to know the kind of performer I am. I needed to leave my sheltered bubble and meet different kinds of people. Even though my family didn't realize it at the time, these values that found culmination in hip hop were instilled in me by my upbringing.

Breaking offers particularly difficult obstacles for those who wish to become proficient. On several occasions, I have had the honor of giving historical tours of the Bronx with legendary MC Grandmaster Caz. He would ask tourists, "Which element of hip hop is the most difficult?" Once someone responded, "MCing." He gave a look and pointed out that no one ever broke a bone because of an MCing injury. Breakers experience this on the regular. I myself have had four knee surgeries and an ankle surgery from breaking injuries. Breaking requires sacrifice. It takes research and mental energy to learn the foundation, know how to use one's arsenal of moves against opponents, analyze strengths and weaknesses, and design training regimes that make use of an existing arsenal. A breaker must budget time for conditioning, creating new moves, and drilling one's current repertoire. Quick reflexes are essential; a dancer must be able to radically change plans instantly, depending on changes in the music, the moves thrown by an opponent, and even a particular judge's or crowd's expectations. Breakers must portray skilled onstage presence, flourishing creativity, and athletic excellence all at the same time. Breaking is similar to a second language. Both entail memorization and require improvisationally piecing together individual parts. Breakers must build syntax and vocabulary into muscle memory before they can select moves and arrange them properly in order to respond to the person in front of them. Breaking is the best way to enjoy a beat, but it requires hard work, dedication, and sacrifice.

It was hard to become competitive as a B-Boy while I was getting

deeper into formal academics, but I never let go of it. Moving overseas, I made myself put the books away at least once a week to immerse myself in the local hip hop culture. Before social media, it could take a long time to find the local hip hop heads, but I always managed. I find an immediate bond with the hip hop community wherever I travel. When I visit a new city, I immediately take note of the prominent graffiti names that can be found around me. I bleed with other breakers at practice and battle alongside them and against them at jams. I helped found the Holy City Rockers in Jerusalem, where I was the token Christian among Jews and Muslims. I joined the 24-7 Family in Vienna, which remains active in all four elements. I learned to speak modern Hebrew, German, and Spanish from the hip hop community. I started teaching at dance studios for grocery money. Even when I was busy, I found time to remain involved in breaking.

After I was accepted to Princeton Seminary, I spent a year buried in the books without much dance, and I felt like I was suffocating. I decided to make breaking a bigger priority in my life – even if it meant my PhD would take longer. I needed both worlds in my life, and I was willing to make sacrifices to hold them together. I started training more seriously than I ever had. I organized local events and practice spots. I was president of Sympoh, Princeton University's breaking crew, where I'm still remembered for bringing the undergraduates into contact with the larger world of hip hop. I switched social media to my hip hop name because very few of my contacts knew my government name. I joined the organizational board of the Kids Breaking League during its second year and I coached a kids crew to become league champions. Those kids still feel like family. And I was hitting milestones as a dancer. I finally learned flares, something that took me eight years. That's a similar accomplishment to a PhD. I won my first jam in New Jersey while teaming up with a few Austrian friends who had come to visit. Once my PhD funding ran out, I picked up enough dance gigs in commercials, parties, and night clubs to piece together an income. Eventually, I was officially recruited into the Dynamic Rockers. This is something I had only dreamed about as a high schooler studying

hip hop history.

The Dynamic Rockers is one of the most prestigious dance crews in the world. Formed in 1979, we pioneered breaking as an art form, and we are arguably responsible for its acceptance in mainstream society. I am crewmates with Kid Freeze, the inventor of the continuous headspin, and Glyde, who is said to have invented the windmill. The renowned Lincoln Center first recognized hip hop as an art form at a festival in 1981, where a stage was organized for the Dynamic Rockers to battle the Rock Steady Crew. Many still consider that to be the most important battle in hip hop history. The Dynamic Rockers were featured in *Style Wars* in 1983. Since that time, the Dynamic Rockers have traveled the world, battling, performing, and judging jams. We have continued to recruit dancers from each generation since 1979. I have performed on TV and stage with my crewmates. Of the historic crews, Dynamic is the most competitive on the battle circuit today.

When one joins an established crew, the recruit is “battled in.” Profound respect is given to the recruit by this process. One person stands alone, while all the crewmates line up on the other side of the room. The recruit must throw one round after each opposing member until the crew decides to stop. This means that the recruit throws five to ten times as many rounds as anyone else in the room, while resting very little between each one and without repeating moves. I rarely see breakers with the stamina to battle beyond ten rounds in a single battle, and even the highest-level athletes have trouble going above twenty. The Dynamic Rockers require a new recruit to throw one round for each year of their life, plus one more for the future. This meant that I went forty-two rounds when I battled into my crew.

Battling into the crew took months of training on top of my regular dance training, not to mention that it happened two months before my dissertation defense. I didn’t know when or if it would happen, so I had to prepare and maintain my readiness for months. It’s difficult to have an arsenal large enough to have forty-two fresh sets ready to go. I also had to train my mind to remember all my

moves during the battle and keep track of which ones I had already used. A marathon runner coached me on building a regimen for stamina training. One day, during our usual Sunday practice, Kid Glyde called me out. He said that if I wanted to be down with Dynamic, it was time. The other crewmembers who were present went to the side of the room to face me. The crew is made up of top-tier breakers. Kid Glyde is a well-rounded veteran with infinite moves and smart battle strategy. Indio is a master of footwork, with speed, creativity, and musicality. Elite has unique dynamics and originality, with power moves and freezes that leave an impression. Mouse has an intense explosiveness that sucks the air out of the room. Each one knows how to battle and win, and they did not hold back. I got blasted with everything that makes the Dynamic Rockers what they are today, and I took it as a badge of honor. The crew came at me with moves I had never seen them throw. I had to battle each one differently, planning out when to use my moves without repeating or wearing myself out too early. Kid Glyde asked me if I wanted to stop after about twenty rounds, but there was no way I would even consider it. By the end of the battle, one of my opponents was injured, and one had stopped to rest after about twenty rounds. They had a shirt ready to give me with the crew name on the front and my name on the back, in traditional breaking style. Battling into the Dynamic Rockers was one of the greatest accomplishments of my life. Not only was the battle itself a feat, but it was the culmination of two decades of involvement with the hip hop community as a battler, organizer, teacher, event MC, and performer. And it validated a desire that every breaker has: to be a part of history.

THE WORLD OF ACADEMIA

As I entered Stuart Hall to defend my dissertation on that January morning, I saw the legendary Dynamic Rockers already standing in the lobby with their eyes peering over their masks. They had taken the train from New York City to Princeton, and it was pleasantly odd to see them in this environment. The usual meeting spot was our crew's dance studio in Harlem. We'd been on college campuses before for dance battles and performances, but this was the first

time I had mixed them into the other side of my life. They saw me teach dance classes all the time, but now they stood in the building where I taught ancient Hebrew. I was preparing to code-switch – the way I speak to my friends in the hip hop community is different from the way I speak to my professors in the academic community. But my crew quickly identified similarities between the two communities. Most notably, they recognize prestige.

I took notice of the building. It was a grand, stone structure that had broadcasted the Princeton Seminary's self-importance for 131 years. It was an institution with a rich legacy, and I cannot begin to explain how grateful I was to be part of it. The seminary branched off from Princeton University in 1812 in order to offer a graduate degree for students who wanted more theological education. Its founders envisioned graduates to be the most educated ministers in the nation. Past professors are heralded as some of the greatest academics in the past two centuries. The faculty that was about to question me had inherited this academic tradition, being trained at the nation's top-tier academic institutions. Their CVs boasted prestigious publications. This academic world has its own value system. Like hip hop heads, many academics decry monetary advancement in favor of respect and recognition in this world. The currency here is prestige.

I had worked hard to be acknowledged in this world. I had gone from community college to three master's degrees. I had learned numerous languages and had been published in the flagship journal of my field. Still, I had never been able to shake my imposter syndrome. My dad was born to teenagers who dropped out of middle school. He himself barely graduated high school and dropped out of his first year of college. He always said my mom was out of his league, and she had pedigree. Her father graduated from Utah State, where she got her bachelor's degree. My parents never pressured me academically – quite the opposite. When I received a high score on my initial first-grade exam, my father was astounded. He talked about it for days. He kept telling me how

proud he was of me, and how he couldn't relate. I learned that I could get my father's approval through academics, and this set a trajectory for my life. Despite his background, my father deeply valued learning and respected the conventions that academic institutions have established for education.

Compared to others, my family placed little value on money. I have friends whose parents pressured them to get good grades, to get into a highly ranked school, and to become physicians or lawyers. My mother, on the other hand, used to say, "Ryan, if you keep getting grades like this, you can get into… COLLEGE! And then you can be whatever you want to be!" Around the time I was born, my father found a mentor who invited young couples to his San Diego home for Bible study. My dad's career path – and everything else in his life – had been somewhat unpredictable, but he was drawn into the study of the Bible, and it gave his life focus. The next decade saw our family moving across the country several times, and my dad changed jobs numerous times. But somehow, the value he placed on the study of the Bible only grew. When I was in fourth grade, he became a pastor, and I watched my dad teach from the pulpit every week. He somehow made use of extensive historical knowledge to fashion together strong arguments in his sermons.

Academic culture has developed strict conventions to protect itself and determine what is and is not "academic." That word is frequently used in ways that would offend purists within academia. Terms like "pseudoscience" and "misinformation" are designed to establish the boundaries of the culture and prevent academia from being diluted. "Peer review" is a powerful term that is used to mark contributions that fall within these conventions. While modern academics have a more complicated relationship with history than hip hop heads, stalwart institutions continue to pride themselves in the tradition of maintaining precise standards. This includes refusing to cater to demands of the outside world as they fight both to combat misinformation as well as to ensure academic freedom. Researchers can become famous in popular culture,

they are sometimes featured in mainstream movies and TV. But they typically stay within the conventions of academia because they seek respect from their peers first and foremost. Conventions of academia include coherence, strong argumentation, and exhaustive documentation. But there are also artistic conventions, such as creativity and rhetoric.

My father went to college in his forties and completed a two-year associate's degree. Over the next decade, he completed correspondence courses through the mail until he earned a bachelor's – and then a master's – degree. He was not seeking prestige. In fact, he rarely talked about his degree for fear that his parishioners would think of him as uneducated. I don't even know if it was accredited, but his master's degree was something that quietly brought him great pride. Despite their conventions, I'd like to think that most academics would applaud my father's humble hustle the way established breaking crews applaud local B-Boys who work hard to become proficient in the art form. There was an authenticity in his desire to learn. If I'm honest, my father's master's degree has a lot of prestige in my mind. I still find myself wanting my parents to see me as someone prestigious – the way I looked at my father.

My mom coached me on getting into Washington State University for my undergraduate education after my associate's degree. At the end of college, I didn't know what I wanted to be, but I knew that I wanted to learn more. I kept learning until I had three master's degrees. I had very little plans for my life; I simply wanted to study more. Eventually, having written some good papers for my professors, I wanted to find a way to contribute something new to scholarship. Institutions like Princeton Theological Seminary felt out of my league – too much history, too much prestige. But I met a graduate from PTS who encouraged me to apply, and my parents cried when I was accepted. My father bragged about it to anyone who would listen. My father felt like an outsider to academia, but it was different than the foreignness to hip hop. With academia,

he understood its values and the difficulties of gaining prestige in that world. Once again, I had earned my father's approval through academia.

WORLDS COLLIDING

Once everyone had gathered on the second floor of Stuart Hall for my defense, the professors asked me to speak a bit about my project. My dissertation was about the book of Job, which is a rap battle. It contains thirty-nine chapters of performed poetry, nearly all of which are filled with caustic burns and eloquent wordplay. Job was written to a community that was recovering from exile and becoming more and more moralistic in their religion. In order to draw this out, I considered *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), which was written to a moralistic Victorian society that was preaching to children. Like Job, Alice engages opponents in a series of debates marked by constant wordplay. Both Job and Alice learn to find their own voice through their battles.[58] I began the defense by summarizing how I had brought together two seemingly unrelated worlds in my scholarship.

And then my academic battle began.

Choon-Leong Seow challenged my philological arguments, pushing Jenga blocks to see if one might come loose. Alan Cooper questioned the precision of terminology in my literary claims. Elaine James called me out on critical theory. Chip Dobbs-Allsopp pressed my comparative work. Other faculty members joined in. My professors picked apart my dissertation for three hours while my friends, family, and crewmates looked on. I cannot express how much it meant that my crewmates had my back the entire time. After sending everyone out, then calling me to reenter alone, I heard *"Welcome to the community of scholars, Dr. Armstrong."* Not only was this an accomplishment in itself, but it was the culmination of two decades of higher learning as a student, scholar, and teacher.

I had assumed my entourage was utterly bored while they watched

us nerds use esoteric jargon for three hours. I was surprised to learn that they were on the edge of their seats tracking the dynamics of the battle. It turns out that my crewmates related to my dissertation defense in a very personal way. They followed each exchange between me and my professors, later recalling vivid details. Indio explained to my mother that the battle mechanics of the defense paralleled the day I battled into Dynamic Rockers, matching each style round-for-round, making use of foundation while improvising in the moment. My crewmates even understood the respect that came with my professors' aggression. They recognized the look in my eye as I fought for prestige in the world of academia. And they were behind me the whole time.

An academic colleague once mentioned something about my "hobby." When she saw my confusion, she clarified: "You know. Your dance stuff." I never thought of breaking as a hobby, just as I never thought of academia as a hobby. Both are a way of life and require utter devotion. As academics, we create new works that add beauty to the world while helping it make a little more sense. As hip hop heads, we do the same. Our art forms push the boundaries of current knowledge, dreaming up new movements and determining to make our bodies learn them. While these two worlds may seem vastly different, my crewmates helped me realize that they share strong parallels. My dissertation was about the parallels shared between Alice and Job despite being in different worlds. The Taiwanese-Brazilian girlfriend at my dissertation defense became my wife a few months later, and our toddler son is showing us how cultures can mix together. The more I look around me, the more I see connections between worlds.

My father died six years before I battled into Dynamic Rockers, earned a PhD, and got married. I often think about how he would've reacted to each of those moments. He gave me a clue three years before his death.

He saw a video in which I step out of the world of academia and into the world of hip hop. He called me, in tears, to tell me how proud he was of my accomplishments as a B-Boy. I never thought that would happen. This was a world he couldn't understand, an art form that baffled him, and even a hindrance to my academic progress. But he saw me stick to it for fourteen years, and he realized it was a part of my world. It took time for him to realize the values shared between my upbringing and the world of hip hop. I know he would've loved to meet the Dynamic Rockers at my defense. And he would've loved to see them go off at my wedding, where the New York and New Jersey breaking community came out on the forty-ninth anniversary of hip hop.

After speaking with my crewmates, I now see that much of what drives me to seek excellence in academia is the same motivation that drives me toward excellence in breaking. I love the art form and the community. Often, when two cultures seem different, we simply need to step into another world.

Photo credit: Courtesy of Ryan Armstrong

Notes & Bibliography

[1] See Gonzalez, “Fire Defined the Bronx.”

[2] Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 90. Bambaataa later added a fifth element, “knowledge,” although there have been many attempts to add elements to hip hop culture. See, for example, the song “9 Elements” by KRS-One.

[3] Browning, *Samba*, 9-10; Schloss, *Foundation*, 19-20.

[4] DJs would often keep their records secret, so others couldn’t find their breaks. On the significance of “digging” for unique music in DJ tradition, see Schloss, *Making Beats*,79-100.

[5] See the interviews with Keith and Kevin Smith, the Legendary Twins (Israel, *The Freshest Kids*; Breakin’ Convention BCTV, *Legendary Twins*). See also B-Boy Focus’s interview with Herc’s B-Boy, Dancin’ Doug (B-Boy & B-Girl Dojo, 2021), and Norin Rad’s interview with Clark Kent and Trixie. Trixie’s signature move was “the Trixie Shake,” in which he would vibrate his entire body. There are some floor moves in the accounts of Trixie and Dancin’ Doug. In 1973, Dancin’ Doug was unfamiliar with the terms “toprock” (today applied to a foundational aspect of breaking) and “uprock” (a term often used for a dance that started in the late 1960s). Instead, the style of Herc’s B-Boys entailed theatrical burns like “the Dracula” and “the Superman.” To be sure, burns were essential to rocking, as well.

[6] See Kool Herc’s interview in *The Freshest Kids* (Israel). Undoubtedly, Herc’s opinion is not the only view. There are numerous theories about the origins of the terms “B-Boy” and “B-Girl.”

[7] “B-Boying” was the most common term for the dance throughout the 1990s and 2000s. The more gender-sensitive term “breaking” became more common during the 2010s. See Schloss’s 2009 discussion on the difficulties of talking about the dance in a gender-sensitive way while also maintaining a sensitivity to the community’s own terminology and self-identity (*Foundation*, 15).

[8] See interviews with 70s rockers Bushwick Joe, Pjay71, and Amigo Rock (Superbbeatshow). Most people agree that the dance remembered as “uprock” originated in Brooklyn, although Schloss records Trac 2 as crediting Manhattan with the origins of rocking (*Foundation*, 164, n. 6). It should be noted, however, that ‘rock’ is also English slang for exploding energy. It was common to “rock the mic,” “rock the floor,” or “rock the party.” Herc’s crew took names like MC Coke la Rock and B-Boy Teenie Rock.

[9] See interviews with Batch (The Bronx Boys RockingCrew), and with Trac 2 of Starchild la Rock (Estrada). See also Batch’s account in “The History of ‘The Bronx Boys Rocking Crew’” (Dance Mogul). Batch argues that the dance today should be called “rocking,” not “breaking.” Batch’s strongest evidence is that the competitive dance crews of 1970s Bronx called themselves “rockers,” not “B-Boys,” “B-Girls,” or “breakers.” The term “rocking” is still used for aspects of the dance, such as “toprock” and “downrock,” while “uprock” is reserved only for the older style of rocking. Schloss puts together similar arguments without Batch’s input (*Foundation*, 125-54). Schloss’s argument is based on close connections between uprocking and the dance that is today called “breaking.” Batch is also careful to give credit to Herc, Flash, and Bambaataa for founding hip hop culture, even if they did not develop the dance style that stayed with hip hop culture. Batch would

likely say that rocking in the Bronx was influenced by the DJ crews, just as it was influenced by martial arts, gymnastics, tap, and other styles of movement. Batch's brother, Aby, says that the Bronx style of rocking was influenced by Brooklyn rocking as well as "the Go Off," which seems to come from the tradition of Herc's parties (Norin Rad, "B-Boy Aby").

[10] Israel, *The Freshest Kids*; Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 117; Ewoodzie, *Break Beats*, 133. The debate is frequently framed in terms of the racial identity of hip hop's creators. To say that the dance of hip hop comes from rocking is sometimes taken to imply that Latin Americans created it, as rocking is usually thought to come from Latin-American dancers in Brooklyn. To say that the dance comes from Herc's parties sometimes implies that Blacks created it. Dancin' Doug, however, one of Herc's original B-Boys, is part Black and part Puerto Rican, and he dismisses the entire debate as irrelevant, as all parties agree that both Black and Latin Americans played a part in hip hop's development between 1972 and 1975. He finds it unnecessary to designate only one group as the creators. See Profo Won's interview with Dancin' Doug. There are even those who say that Brooklyn deserves credit for starting hip hop (see Schloss, *Foundation*, 132).

[11] A well-known home for battles was "the Dungeon," which was purchased for one dollar by Joey of SalSoul Crew through a government program. A group of teenagers renovated the Dungeon, furnished it with discarded furniture, and gave it a DJ booth. It became the central hub for breakers who met there daily until it burned down in 1979. The Dungeon even hosted large parties and became a major informal club. Trac 2 says it was like Studio 54 to the Bronx teens. See Norin Rad's interviews with Jojo, Wizard Wiz, and Big Boom, as well as interviews with Trac 2 and Trace in *Mambo to Hip Hop* (Chalfant).

[12] The Rock Steady Crew and the Dynamic Rockers were called "breaking" crews by 1981, and the foundational dance conventions seen in footage during that time period are essentially the same as today's breaking conventions. Even today, breakers routinely talk about "rocking the floor," or "rocking the beat," and it is still far more prevalent to see the word "rockers" in a crew name than "breakers." Since the early 2000s, prominent breakers have insisted that "uprock," a term used exclusively for the older (pre-1975) style of rocking, is a different dance than breaking, and some judges discount uprock moves in breaking battles. But it seems to have been an integral part of breaking as far back as the early 1980s. Doze Green of the Rock Steady Crew made flyers for the 1981 Lincoln Center battle between these two crews that said, "Breaking, or otherwise known as (B.Boy) is a competitive warlike dance, making the opponent look bad…" (@thhmuseum, July 16, 2024). Both crews have "rock" in their names, and both crews performed uprocking as a significant part of the battle. At the previous battle at United Skates of America, the MC called it a "rocking battle." This can be heard in footage appearing in Style Wars (Silver). In a recent collection of interviews about these battles, nearly all involved parties speak of "uprock" as part of the "breaking" battle. See *Breakin' on the One* (JamsBash).

[13] Ewoodzie quotes Grandmaster Caz as saying this (*Break Beats*, 86).

[14] This conversation was well-documented in the film *Style Wars* (Silver).

[15] *Bomb It*, Reiss.

[16] *New York Times*, “Taki 183,” 37.

[17] Ewoodzie calls the south Bronx the “epitome of urban decay” (*Break Beats*, 20-31). Chang latches onto the description “a Necropolis – a city of death” (*Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 16), that he attributes to Dr. Harold Wise, founder of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Health Center in the Bronx in the 1970s. While Wise does not use this phrase, he is interviewed to speak on the hardships of the Bronx in Tolchin’s, “Future Looks Bleak.” Chalfant’s documentary From Mambo to Hip Hop opens with a Parisian speaking about growing up thinking of “Bronx” as French slang for something that “was a mess.”

[18] Ewoodzie (*Break Beats*, 20-31) provides an extensive analysis on the concentration of poverty in the South Bronx and the burdensome effects of city policy. Caro and Ley argue that Robert Moses’s Cross-Bronx Expressway, in particular, increased hardship. See Caro, *The Power Broker*, 877-92; Ley, “Bronx’s Air.”

[19] Schneider, *Youth Gangs in Postwar New York*, 241.

[20] Custodio and Siegel, “The ‘Black Benjie Way.’” Chang argues that the Hoe Avenue Peace Meeting was inconclusive, but a quieter follow-up meeting solidified the peace shortly afterward (*Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 61-62).

[21] Collins, “New York Street Gangs,” 22-32.

[22] Ewoodzie, *Break Beats*, 19.

[23] In an interview in *Mambo to Hip Hop* (Chalfont), Grandmaster Caz says hip hop killed the gangs, because hip hop gave them an outlet that was cool, but also less stressful than having to run from police.

[24] See Aby’s interview with Norin Rad, in which he talks about the “warlord divisions” of the dance crews. Schloss documents numerous ways in which breaking is influenced by gang culture (*Foundation*, 81-82).

[25] See the interview with Ken Swift in the bonus footage of the DVD release of *Style Wars* (Silver).

[26] Schloss, *Making Beats*, 26-27.

[27] Bonus footage in *Style Wars* (Silver).

[28] For an interesting discussion on this, see Schloss, *Foundation*, 92.

[29] In fact, “Rapper’s Delight,” the first rap song to make it to the top forty charts, was produced by fans who were excited to do their own version of what they saw in Bronx MCs. See Chang’s analysis of the Sugarhill Gang (*Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 132). Big Bank Hank went to school with B-Boy Trixie, one of the first hip hop dancers. He was involved in the hip hop community as a bouncer and music manager, but he was not a regular performer with the major DJ production crews. See also Skinner and Stanley’s interview with B-Boy Trixie (The For What Movement).

[30] Ken said, “That’s not for the Olympics. That’s not for Broadway” (Silver, *Style Wars*). Ken’s insights were prophetic. Breakers face penalties for doing burns in the Olympic games. Aggressive burns were the centerpiece in the earliest forms of the dance. This raises the question within the hip hop community about whether or not it is even the dance of hip hop. Watching the early Olympics battles, it seems that breakers and judges ignore the rule in most cases, although the burns are more mild than usual.

[31] See interviews with writers in *Style Wars* (Silver) and *Break Beats in the Bronx* (Ewoodzie, 35). To be sure, a white writer in *Style Wars* says that his skin color helps him steal spray cans, because store owners assume writers are black. Graffiti writer Connor McCann talks about how stores started locking up common graffiti materials by the 1990s, and how his affluent friend used his appearance to help with racking (@braindrainpod, "San Francisco Graffiti in the 90s: Racking Paint," Video, June 13, 2023). Racking is still an important part of the culture, as seen in the numerous entries that offer tips for racking in the discussion forums of *Bombing Science*, for example.

[32] Ewoodzie follows Grandmaster Caz in making this argument (*Break Beats*, 128). Also see Hall, "New York City Blackout."

[33] Silver, *Style Wars*.

[34] This is not to say that breaking cannot be done for those outside the community, or even that breakers cannot train in a way that performs for outsiders. There is a tradition called "hitting," which refers to hitting the streets for money, i.e. performing street shows and asking for tips. Hitters dance differently for outsiders than they do when they are battling or cyphering with other breakers. Hitting is its own subculture within the breaking community, but hitters tend to remain involved in hip hop. I personally think of any performance for outsiders as hitting.

[35] Schloss, *Foundation*, 41.

[36] On the changing role of the MC from exhorting dancers at a party to rhyming in a studio, see Schloss, *Making Beats*, 2; Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 129-31.

[37] Ewoodzie (*Break Beats*, 129) argues that the term "hip hop" itself began as a derogatory term. An MC named Cowboy talked about someone joining the army and lining up to march: "hip hop hip hop hip hop." Other MCs started saying it at parties, but no one referred to themselves or their community as "hip hop." The older crowd, who preferred disco, spoke disparagingly of the young "hip hoppers." Over time, the name stuck. Here, the very name of the culture was given by outsiders and later used by the community itself.

[38] See Schloss, *Foundation*, 60-63. Schloss points out the difficulties of scraping away the myths and uncovering the true origins of these terms. He is careful to include the thoughts of Michael Holman, an early promoter, who says that "breakdancing" was one of the original terms, but it was retroactively associated with media exploitation by key leaders within the community. Hip hop terminology can be esoteric, and the community struggles to understand its own terms. It has constantly struggled to maintain the names designated by members within the community against mass media and popular culture.

[39] These shows produced robust debates within the culture for several reasons. Some questioned whether the style was even breaking, as it was not done with burns or within typical breaking conventions (I personally associate it with the "hitting" tradition of breaking). Another controversy was the effect on mainstream perception of our culture. Breakers think of these shows as cheap imitations of real breaking competitions, but non-breakers frequently assume they are pinnacle showcases.

[40] Gabbert [Ken Swift] and Pabon [Pop Master Fabel], "To B-Boy or Not to B-Boy,"

6. See also Schloss's analysis of the watering-down of the term "B-Boy" that prompted the publication in *Foundation*, 63.

[41] I once heard B-Boy Storm offer a philosophical solution to the conundrum of encouraging creativity and seeking to remain within breaking conventions. He said that it's fine to innovate beyond the conventions of breaking outside of competitions. Breakers often point to Don "Campbell-Lock" Campbell, who invented locking by doing his own version of the funky chicken.

[42] To be sure, I've seen creative DJs like Franco de Leon pull out a guitar and play along with tracks during breaking battles.

[43] Schloss, *Making Beats*, 1.

[44] A clear analogy can be found in my field, as biblical scholars frequently attempt to delineate the point at which a book of the Bible becomes a finished product, or a "canonical" work, as biblical authors frequently used large swaths of earlier material.

[45] A debate has grown within the MC community about whether rap battles can be performed pre-written and acapella, as they traditionally involve the challenges of freestyling and keeping the beat.

[46] There are numerous examples of original moves that are now breaking foundation, such as the multiple airflare invented by Pablo Flores from Climax Soul Control Crew.

[47] See Skinner and Stanley's interview with B-Boy Trixie (The For What Movement), and B-Boy Spaghetti's interview with early 70s dancer Willie Marine Boy (Rezvani). Both describe precise moves that they borrowed from well-known tap dancers. The Legendary Twins also cite James Brown and the Nicholas Brothers as inspirations (Breakin' Convention BCTV).

[48] See Norin Rad's interviews with Dancin' Doug and the Legendary Twins.

[49] See the interview with Baby Love (Top 2000 a gogo).

[50] See the extensive research of a New York B-Boy who was born in 1975, in Pellerin, "Kung Fu Movies," and Pellerin, "Kung Fu Fandom," 97-115. Schloss also talks at length about this topic (*Foundation*, 42, 52).

[51] While some of the connections between capoeira and breaking may be overstated, there is a blog dedicated to finding them.

[52] See the interview with Crazy Legs in *The Freshest Kids* (Israel).

[53] During the past decade, music copyright has been a challenge for dancers who wish to share their work online. More and more breaks DJs produce new music to overcome this hurdle. The earliest instance that I know in which a DJ produced entirely new music for a jam to post footage was DJ Fleg playing his own music for Red Bull BC One in 2018.

[54] Myers, "Rap in Blondie's 'Rapture.'"

[55] Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 148.

[56] KRS-One actively attempts to keep hip hop culture together. He performs with breakers and a DJ on stage, even inviting breakers to come from the audience. He publicly rejected an invitation to perform for the Grammys 50th Anniversary of Hip Hop in 2023, saying that the Grammys will feature rap, but not hip hop. As one

of the most prominent members of the hip hop community, he does not want to associate himself with an institution that has consistently neglected the four elements of hip hop.

[57] For a full treatment of the 1981 Lincoln Center battle, see JamsBash's recent documentary, *Breakin' on the One*.

[58] This work is now available in Ryan M. Armstrong, *The Book of Job in Wonderland: Making (Non)Sense of Job's Mediators* (Oxford University Press, 2024).

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Ryan M. Armstrong,
Oklahoma State University

i. can. teach.

Jeong, Dong Hyeon,
Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary

i[1]

(can)[2]

teach[3]

[1] Who am i/I? And what is with the capitalization of i/I? Jione Havea did say that this is driven by Western/colonial ego that centers upon the self above un-capitalized others. To start this writing journey with self-aggrandizement buttressed by MS Word's "red squiggly lines" fumigates my anathemized quest for organic relationality with the other.

But I digress….

I am a Korean from the Philippines. I grew up in the Philippines because my parents are missionaries. I grew up in a Christian environment before I could even remember who I am. I have read the Bible and even taught it to many students. I am not sure how much more I should be saying about myself because

I am concerned that I and my writing will not be perceived as professional and academic.

But I digress….

I am supposed to write about teaching, or at least perform it with excellence and intellectual rigor. Ah, yes, intellectual rigor or hyper-capitalism's stranglehold on the academia. One way to go about making myself look professional and academic is to have an enormous amount of footnote references. Yes, I understand that it is about acknowledging the contributions other persons have already done. It is about intellectual property rights. Yes, it is about recognizing the communities that have sustained the conversations and ideas. So, please see the following academic references: John White, *The Ultimate Book on Pedagogy: The Guide for Teaching* (Oxford: Ivy Press, 1960); Robert F. G. Dunne, *The Seven Lessons on Teaching for All Contexts* (Cambridge: Another Ivy Press, 1971); Yvette Stormborn, *How to Write Like a Man* (Oregon: Fancy Publishing, 1982); A. Fitzgerald LeBlanc, *Teaching the Pedagogy to the Rest: How to be the Best Teacher* (Atlanta: Plantation Publishing, 1945); and, Dong Hyuk Jeong, *Imitating My Teachers: Learning the Ways of the West* (Seoul: Neocolonial Press, 2020). I have included Jeong's publication in order to acknowledge the importance of diversity. We can learn something, I think, from non-Western teachers who have learned from the best Western pedagogues.

[2] Word choice. "Can" is a weak word. Explain yourself. Better yet, erase this modal verb. If you are going to use one, then use something that is more convincing, such as "must," "shall," or anything that resonates with the phallic "I" based on intellectual rigor of the elitist academia.

Also,

Going back to teaching, teaching must be assertive. It should manifest mastery of the subject. Here, the subject is no other than you. Subjectivity. Ontology. Phenomenology. Here, I will

define all of these academic words in order to prove that I know what I am talking about. Mastering the self is a manifestation of my superiority over others. If I can know myself, control myself, and determine my path by myself, then I am the captain of my own destiny. Descartes said something like that (add Descartes's reference here). So, to teach requires the mastery of the self (and of course it goes without saying that I must master the other).

Also,

Teaching requires conquering one's emotions, and teaching the subject matter with pure objectivity and science! See below for excellent resources on teaching: James Powers, *Mastering the Teacher Within: Like the Confidence of a Mediocre Man* (Chicago: Beta-Dan-U Press, 2002); Phil O. Sheath, *The Pinnacle of Teaching: Self-Control and Other Manifestations of Alpha Creatures* (Charlotte: Excellence Academic Publishing, 1987); and, of course we have diversity here, Richard Kim, *I Have Mastered It Too: The Joys of Being Accepted* (Los Angeles: Wantabiwaithe Press, 1999).

Also,

For those who have not mastered their humanity, haste is required because you do not want to be relegated with the brutes, the animals. Teaching requires intellect, something that differentiates us from the animals.

[3] (Explain here the etymology of teaching, [no write pedagogy], in Latin, French, German, and other superior languages) because this will make you look like a knowing subject, human of humans, accepted by the main stream, academic, professional. Not a brute, not an animal.

Then,

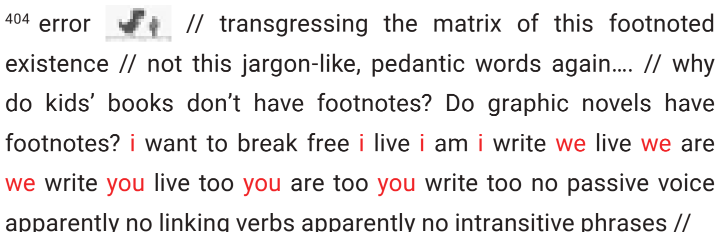
(Write here the history of teaching – the real one from the West. You have to show that you know the history or else…)

(….)

this this the bristling

[137] (My voice doesn't matter. I am parenthesized. I am footnote 138. I am partially human. I don't know myself. I don't have a voice. Not like those guys. They don't have to write about themselves….)

[139] What is with this footnoted existence? Who am i? Who am I becoming? Who am i? who am I, who am i (no, MS Word auto-correct), I do not want it capitalized I I I I I I I ii iii I I I ii i – like Jesus's words, red red red red red

[404] error  // transgressing the matrix of this footnoted existence // not this jargon-like, pedantic words again…. // why do kids' books don't have footnotes? Do graphic novels have footnotes? i want to break free i live i am i write we live we are we write you live too you are too you write too no passive voice apparently no linking verbs apparently no intransitive phrases //

i want to be human not as i was told i don't want to master things because i do want to decolonize my mind and my soul… (Christine Hong, thank you for the wisdom – 고마워 누나!)

yes i love animals 나는 동물을 사랑한다 dong hyeon feels alive with them mahal ko ang mga hamalan i feel my full self when I am with them i write well because of them they nourish me they inspire me they enchant me they cannot be footnoted no matter how much humans have tried and if i find solace self-fulfillment with the plants and the animals then what is holding me back from footnoting (with) the animals and the plants i learn so much from them i cannot live without them i am indebted to them yes humans your lives matter too (i will quote you)

a vegetal emergence here sprouting once more

yes the rhizomes footnotes are rhizomatic until/while/after they are transgressed i want my body and my mind become like the rhizomes that breathes under the earth and with the vegetal knobs i want to break free from this textual enclosure word by word inputted and deleted but inputted again by each stroke of the letter such hyper-masculine penetrative insertion of thoughts (but I/i digress)

Ayan, sige, kaya natin to makawala na tayo sa mga pahinang ito

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is section is where nonhumans barking
not footnote the section are cawing
the nonhuman chirping

…soiled, awakening, squirming, inbreaking, rooted, manured, whittered crisp, random trash, muddy, clay, peaty, granular, sandy, silty, feathers, pawprints, footprints, trowel, smothered…

|

vegetal

|

rhythms

|

freckled by

|

seasonal vicissitudes

|

no ideological pesticides allowed here
(i see you formatting scissors)

….so that i may learn from the nonhuman | | | and become a teacher who embraces the other

to learn again from their cold winter slumber | | | | | and be reborn with their joys of spring eternal

embraced by the branches of my ancestors | | | | | | | and composted with residues of the decolonial

this writing must end so that others may live. . . .

@ vegetal colors courtesy of Yuri Jeong
the childist hermeneutics expert
(Summer 2024)

Dong Hyeon Jeong is the Assistant Professor of New Testament Interpretation and the director of the Center for Asian/Asian American Ministry at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. He is the author of Embracing the Nonhuman in the Gospel of Mark.

Dong Hyeon Jeong,
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(Re)membering the Ecology of the Self

Amber M. Neal-Stanley,
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> I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self.
> — Audre Lorde (1984)

> There are systems in this world that have everything to gain from your disembodiment. Because emptied bodies are easier to use.
> Stay whole.
> — Cole Arthur Riley (2024)

CHAPTER 1: ACTS OF FAITH

I spent five years in elementary and middle school classrooms as a teacher of reading, language arts, and social studies. Because my school was located in a refugee resettlement area, I taught and engaged with students from across the globe – from Tanzania, Iran, and Mexico, among many other places. In this space, my students also served as my teacher, instructing me in the ways of their worlds.

Beyond the teaching of standardized content, I had a chance to teach my public school students about God, not through explicit instruction, but through my embodiment of my Christian faith. This shaped my approach, values, and interactions with students and families, so much so that students often asked why I did not curse at them. They frequently mentioned that there was something "different" about me, although they did not have the language for exactly what it was. Yet, they knew that they were welcomed and embraced in our homeplace of the classroom, knowing that their minds, bodies, and spirits were free to be.

Photo credit: Photo by Lisa Anna on Unsplash

For me, being an educator was much deeper than the mere transmission of knowledge or taking up a noble vocation. It was deeply inspired by my faith. It was this deep sense of purpose and calling that actually relocated me away from my family, friends,

and familiarity in Georgia to Texas, where I knew only a few people. On June 9th, 2013, I wrote the following in my journal:

> I moved to Houston, Texas yesterday, as a result of me being accepted into the Teach for America program here. I was initially accepted into this program in January of 2013, and was initially very excited. I had prayed and asked for God's will to be done in my life and with my application. I told God that if I got accepted into the program, wherever He decides to send me, I would go. My first choice was Atlanta, Houston was second, and Dallas was third. So, Houston it was...

Photo credit: Photo by Rome Wilkerson on Unsplash

> Yet, I wrestled with this decision for MONTHS, knowing that I didn't necessarily want to leave Georgia, but the circumstances at home weren't getting any better… I remember going to a church conference in January 2013, and hearing the spirit of the

> Lord so clearly during prayer saying, “I’m sending you to Houston for a reason, trust me.” So, now I’m here, and I’m trying to trust.

My move to Texas to take up teaching as a career was an act of faith. It was my faith that kept me in the classroom when I wanted to leave. It was my faith that influenced my pedagogical decision making and educational advocacy when administrators often reduced students to test scores and grades. It was my understanding of communion, fellowship, and the inherent worth of each student that inspired me to cultivate a nurturing classroom climate where all students were treated with dignity, humanity, and respect. It was my personal experience with the unmerited grace of God that enabled me to engage with students in a way that was restorative, understanding, and forgiving, helping students to not only thrive academically, but emotionally, interpersonally, and spiritually.

CHAPTER 2: EXPECTATION OF FRAGMENTATION

During the first year of my doctoral program, I took a women’s studies course. In conversation about Black feminist pedagogies, I mentioned my Christian faith. I perked up in my chair, eager to share this experiential and embodied knowledge. I spoke about how my ways of knowing, being, and believing showed up in my teaching practice and how I hoped to delve deeper into this understanding. Instead, I heard the instructor’s voice get stern and watched her face grow grim as she firmly dismissed my claim. She made it explicitly clear to me, and to the audience of my classmates who bore witness, that discussions of faith, religion and/or spirituality were inappropriate in the classroom, and across academic spaces. According to her, teaching was objective and neutral, and had nothing to do with spiritual matters. In response, I sat back quietly in my chair, and refused to speak for the remainder of the class period. While my pride and ego were bruised, it felt deeper than public humiliation.

I had noticed the silence of my classmates when I brought up spirituality in other spaces. I took notes from seasoned scholars

who warned me against proselytizing in my research and teaching endeavors. I noted the caveats of well-meaning folks who enthusiastically supported my research but warned me that Christianity was a touchy subject in education. Yet I wondered why topics of race, gender, class, nationality, and other criteria of meaning and identity were safe to discuss in the classroom, while faith was essentially expelled. I didn't realize it at the time, but these moments were slowly indoctrinating me into the academy's *expectation of fragmentation*.

The positivist and post-positivist paradigms that root academic institutions suggest that in order to achieve objectivity, neutrality, and the "objective" singular truth, spiritual fragmentation is necessary. The expectation of fragmentation, then, refers to the violent tendency of Western academic institutions to demand that the whole self be disconnected or dismembered, in order to fit into often oppressive, harmful, hegemonic structures. Staples defined the fragmented self as "iterations of one's *collective* identity".[1] The expectation of fragmentation and the culture of academia permitted only select parts of my intersectional identities to project, while my spiritual ways of knowing and being were suppressed and compartmentalized. My experience of the expectation of fragmentation inside and outside the classroom would take me on a journey to make sense of the intertwined histories of religion and education in the United States.

CHAPTER 3: ACADEMIC APOLOGETICS

I was a young, emerging scholar with seemingly little to gain, and much more to give up if I didn't acquiesce to the seductions of the academy. So I found myself watering down and defending my theologies and onto-epistemologies from academic critiques about rational thought, logic, reason, and empirical evidence. Academic apologetics refers to my process of trying to defend my faith by making it more legible, palatable, secular, and academic for broader audiences. I heeded the suggestions of folks who reminded me that the discourse of new age spirituality was more accepted in educational research literature. However, that

language did not capture, or explicitly name, who I was or what I was referring to. Importantly, in my research about the inner worlds and spiritual lives of historical Black women teachers, the language of spirituality was not what they marshaled. Instead, they called forth a radical Christianity and liberatory theology that held their experiences as Black women. And for me, that specificity was critical.

Yet, in writing and presentations, I would use the terms "spiritual" or "spirituality" when I actually meant "Black Christianity," or even use "Black faith" when I explicitly meant "the Black Church." I would spend hours at my laptop typing, erasing, backspacing, redacting, trying to bring all of myself onto the page. Until I was completely erased. And that's what the expectation of fragmentation did to me. It effectively seduced me into erasure. As Gordon and Meroe argue,

> We often wonder if the socially adapted human being, who happens to be a scholar, is truly capable of discarding her or his individual frame of reference when it comes to the study of a subject to which she or he has chosen to commit her or his life's work. This is a precarious and dangerous situation because too many times "objectivity" has served as a mask for the political agenda of the status quo, thus marginalizing and labeling the concerns of less empowered groups as "special interests."[2]

The harm of my apologetic, as a seductive tactic of the expectation of fragmentation, was that it effectively secularized my ways of knowing, being, and believing into something that did not reflect who I was, at all.

I began to understand that while the academy only cared for my mind and intellectual prowess, my embodied Black womanhood and Christianity could not be separated from the processes of teaching and learning. The expectation of fragmentation seduced me into protecting and advancing the status quo in academia, specifically, by advancing the idea of the racial-religious-gendered other. It reinforced that I did not belong and that my fragmentation

was necessary. The danger of the expectation of fragmentation is that when we are split into pieces, cut off from one another and from our source of strength and power, it makes the temptation to forget the spiritual nature of the work, and our world, inevitable.[3]

Yet, there is something more insidious and dangerous here as well. Beyond preventing someone from being their fully integrated self and from being a person of spiritual integrity, fragmentation can also lead to a loss of meaning and purpose in life, making it difficult for individuals to find fulfillment and satisfaction. It can also lead to a person having a crisis of faith or of spiritual identity, and to feelings of being disconnected from their beliefs. Fragmentation cuts people off from all of the possibilities that are around them to support their flourishing. In this way, it's not just forgetting spiritual power and centeredness – it's the inability to access this power and being unable to invite others to access this power as well.

CHAPTER 4: CONTOURS

That moment in class haunted me. When I went back the next week, I could feel the heaviness in the air so thick. I kept thinking, what would make this professor so vehemently refuse to even engage in the conversation? I recognized there might be a number of reasons for the lack of engagement in topics around religion and faith in the secular education classroom. These might include the instructor's lack of interest in the topic, a nonreligious world sense, or fear of the consequences. Another reason for such hesitancy may be found in McKittrick's articulation of the unknowable, which suggests that certain aspects of Black life, history, and experience cannot be fully understood or represented within traditional academic frameworks.[4] Yet, I needed to understand, beyond that moment and beyond the professor of the course, why religion, faith, and spirituality were such taboo subjects in the classroom space.

Over the course of my doctoral program, I wracked my mind, and the literature, trying to make sense of these questions. And I grew to understand the deep and complex history of education and religion in the U.S. It is more than debates over prayer in schools;

it is the ways in which Christianity remains entangled in U.S. education. Burke and Segall suggest,

> Unless we acknowledge that all of education is theological in character (if only by dint of its own organization, language, and practices and in how it organizes student bodies) then talk of religion in (or out of) school is limited to surface and perhaps by comparison, unimportant discussions about prayer in school. Which in turn severely hamstrings the possibility of fruitful discussions of what role religion ought to (or does already) play in the schooling of and for children.[5]

It was the “possibility of fruitful discussions” that I was after.

In my continued search for the ways that religion and education intersect, I also kept bumping up against white Christian nationalism. I began to see the ways in which white supremacist values mixed with nationalism and distorted readings of the Bible shaped and continue to shape the educational experiences of

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students from preschool through graduate school. From mission schools and Native American boarding schools, to criminalizing literacy for enslaved Black people, to private white segregation academies in slavery's afterlives, each of these moments in the history of American education were rooted in white Christian nationalist values. In coming to this understanding, I could see how the intertwined histories of education and religion were even more present than I thought.

Recently the state superintendent announced that all schools in Oklahoma must incorporate the Bible and the Ten Commandments in their curriculums, effectively requiring public school teachers to teach the Bible in the classroom. I wanted to consider matters of faith and spirituality in the classroom, not support a theocracy. I believe, even as a Christian, that God gives free will and wants all to come to know Him of their own volition. Thus, forcing and subjecting all students to Bible lessons was not what I was advocating for. At the same time, states across the nation began proposing bills prohibiting instruction or training around "divisive subjects" such as race, white supremacy, chattel slavery, and genocide. I wondered how this curriculum silencing was similar to, or different from, my experience in the classroom when spiritual matters were prohibited. I needed to untangle what exactly I was advocating for, and how it was different from these problematic integrations of Christianity and pedagogy.

Considering these questions, I began to see the contours of my classroom experiences, as both a teacher and a student, and began to realize that it was more nuanced than a professor's refusal to permit matters of spirituality in the classroom. I recognized the long and insidious history of Christianity being connected to projects of anti-intellectualism and to other forms of oppression and white supremacy in the U.S. Overall, this necessitated that I confront normative constructs perpetuated by white Christian nationalism in U.S. schools across history and the present while also exploring more humanizing possibilities.

Deeper than religion, I wondered if there was a more expansive and humanizing way to invite the "spirit of our work"[6] into our pedagogical practice that was wholly untethered from white Christian nationalism. A way to bring the fullness of the human being – mind, body, and spirit – to the classroom. Black feminist writer Toni Morrison explained that Black people have always had a depth of understanding of the supernatural and the material reality. She explains,

> [In *Song of Solomon*] I could blend the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time with neither taking precedence over the other. It is indicative of the cosmology, the way in which Black people looked at the world. We are very practical people, very down-to-earth, even shrewd people. But within that practicality we also accepted what I supposed could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things. But to blend those two worlds together at the same time was enhancing, not limiting. And some of those things were "discredited knowledge" that Black people had; discredited only because Black people were discredited therefore what they knew was "discredited." And also because the press toward upward social mobility would mean to get as far away from that kind of knowledge as possible. That kind of knowledge has a very strong place in my work.[7]

What Morrison describes here is not only a particular worldview, but a distinctive way of knowing that disrupts the Western canon and its socially constructed dichotomies between the sacred and the secular, personal and political, and in my case, the spiritual and educational. As Morrison explains, rather than distancing herself from the distinctive yet discredited knowledge that is often derided by Eurocentric paradigms, she validates and embraces it.

Black feminist scholar and activist bell hooks framed spirituality as both the rationale for her political activities, as well as a

resource for surviving, and thriving, in the midst of oppression. In *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, she identifies her spiritual practices as essential to her work as a liberationist educator, stating,

> I began to use the vision of spiritual self-recovery in relationship to the political self-recovery of colonized and oppressed peoples. I did this to see the points of convergence between the effort to *live in the spirit* and the effort of oppressed peoples to *renew their spirits* – to find themselves again in suffering and in resistance.[8]

Teaching, hooks envisioned, is a moral, communal, ethical, and spiritual endeavor, incorporating humanistic pedagogical approaches. Engaged pedagogy, she proposed, is transgressive and alternative in that it refuses fragmentation and conformity to the status quo, and instead emphasizes wholeness through the communion of mind, body, and spirit.[9] She upholds education as a holistic experience and necessitates spirituality in the art and practice of teaching, with the belief that our practice is inherently sacred and life-giving, and central to the work of critical social justice education.

Hyperaware of the expectation of fragmentation in academic classrooms, hooks found that “honestly naming spirituality as a force strengthen[ed] my capacity to resist and enabled me to stand within centers of dominator culture and courageously offer alternatives.”[10] Essential to hooks’ spiritually engaged pedagogy – and central to Black feminist theories – is the power of naming.[11]

Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher, was most renowned for championing critical pedagogy. Yet, few education scholars have seriously considered the influence of his faith on his practice and philosophy.[13] In *Letters to Christina* (1996), published a year before his death, he commented on the importance of his faith, stating, “Something else explains my political beliefs,… something that cannot be underestimated, much less rejected… my Christian upbringing.”[14] In *Pedagogy of the Heart*, published

posthumously, he reiterates this worldview,

> I do want to mention, however, the fundamental importance of my faith in my struggle for overcoming an oppressive reality and for building a less ugly society, one that is less evil and more humane. All arguments in favour of the legitimacy of my struggle for a more people-oriented society have their deepest roots in my faith.[15]

Freire's background as a Christian undoubtedly influenced his spiritual development, as well as his lifelong commitment to a vision of humanization through dialogue and praxis.[16] This is evidenced in educational philosophies centered on community service, teaching as a higher calling, and justice for the oppressed. Freire utilized his faith as a resource to sustain, give hope, and energize his critical, liberationist pedagogy, as well as his political activities.

Yet, Freire expressed hesitancy in explicitly naming the spirituality laden in his work. In a posthumous publication he professed, "I do not feel very comfortable speaking about my faith. At least, I do not feel as comfortable as I do when speaking about my political choice, my utopia, and my pedagogical dreams."[17] Despite the spiritual worldviews engrained in his words and works, it seems that even renowned educator Paulo Freire experienced cognitive dissonance and the pressure of fragmentation.

In his work on education and spirituality, Parker Palmer theorizes about what he calls the pain of disconnection.[18] This refers to the emotional, psychological, and spiritual suffering that arises when individuals or communities experience a lack of meaningful connection with themselves, others, or their surroundings. In the context of schools, this can occur when teachers and students are disconnected from the subjects they teach and learn, from each other, from their inner lives, and from their spiritual selves. This can deeply affect one's sense of identity and purpose, as well as lead to a fragmented and dehumanizing educational experience.

In various ways, each of these theorists, scholars, and pedagogues have offered "pedagogies of possibility" for understanding and seeing people through more holistic and expansive lenses.[19] Pedagogies of possibility revolve around teaching and learning methods that empower individuals, particularly those from marginalized communities, to envision and realize new possibilities for their lives and societies. This pedagogical approach emphasizes liberation, critical thinking, and the potential for social transformation. It is critical to note, however, that these scholars were each talking about spirituality and faith in varied ways, not necessarily confined to a religious orientation. What unifies their stances, however, is the enactment and embodiment of a spiritually centered paradigm[20] that has the power and possibility to impact the teacher, students, and broader society.

CHAPTER 6: ECOLOGY OF THE SELF

Schools, from K-12 settings to post-secondary institutions, and the culture embedded therein, have created the conditions where fragmentation is expected and required. Miller went as far as saying that "modern schooling is a *spiritually* devastating form of engineering that is hostile to human values and democratic ideals."[21] As bell hooks argues,

> [It] teaches us that disconnection is organic to being.... In actuality, it is the failure to achieve harmony of mind, body, and spirit that has furthered anti-intellectualism in our culture and made our schools mere factories.[22]

In essence, to refuse to see human beings in their fullness of being, mind, body, and spirit, is to reduce them to mere flesh.[23] Denying the existence of someone's spirit and their spiritual world sense moves beyond religious affiliation, doctrines, or denomination. It is a form of spiritual violence. Yet, there are other possibilities for integrating the mind, body, and spirit in the classroom and beyond.

Black feminist writer, Audre Lorde described the expectation of fragmentation, or what she named the encouragement to

compartmentalize the different parts of her identity, particularly in her efforts toward racial justice and freedom from all forms of oppression.[24] Yet, she offers a way forward stating,

> I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live. My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition. Only then can I bring myself and my energies as a whole to the service of those struggles which I embrace as part of my living.[25]

It is the integration of all the parts of oneself, operating in tandem with each other, that enables Audre Lorde to holistically embrace herself, and invites others to do the same.

What Lorde is gesturing to here is what I consider an integrated *ecology of the self*. While ecology typically refers to the branch of biology that deals with the relations of organisms to one another and to their physical surroundings, the ecology of the self refers to the dynamic relationship and interaction between the mind, body, and spirit. It emphasizes the importance of social, cultural, emotional, psychological, physical, and spiritual contexts in shaping

Cover of The Cancer Journals by Audre Lorde

an individual's experiences and identity. The ecology of the self is a holistic perspective that helps lead to self-integration and wholeness and is rooted in culturally and spiritually situated ways of knowing and being, as highlighted briefly below.

ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY

Developed by psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner, the ecological systems theory is a framework for understanding human development by considering the multiple layers of environment that influence an individual's growth. It outlines how multiple systems interact and impact a person's development from childhood through adulthood. These systems include:

1. Microsystem, which refers to the immediate environment in which a person lives.
2. Mesosystem, or the interactions between a person's various microsystems.
3. Exosystem, which is the largest social system that influences a person, but on an indirect level.
4. Macrosystem, the broader cultural context that shapes and influences an individual.
5. Chronosystem, which refers to the dimensions of time, and reflects how life transitions and environmental events can impact a person's life.[26]

The ecological systems theory is important for understanding how these different systems interact and influence an individual's development by highlighting the complex interplay between the individual and their environment. However, this theory does have limitations, particularly as it relates to the experiences of marginalized and historically oppressed people. Ecological systems theory applies as a universal framework, and does not adequately capture the unique, nuanced, and cultural experiences and values of Black communities. It also underestimates the role of systemic racism and structural inequality, and how it permeates all levels of the ecological systems; overlooks intersectionality;

offers one-size-fits-all solutions and interventions. Importantly, it does not examine how individuals embody systems *within* themselves, systems consisting of the mind, body, and spirit. The "ecology" of the self, on the other hand, emphasizes the integration, interconnectedness, and interdependence of the mind-body-spirit. In this way, the connection or fragmentation of the mind, body, and spirit also influences how an individual interacts with and responds to the various systems, as highlighted by Bronfenbrenner.

CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Though there exists a wide range of doctrines and denominations under the umbrella of Christianity, on a very surface level, my Christian cosmology stands on certain things:

1. I believe in a transcendent, sovereign, omnipresent, omniscient God who created the heavens, earth, and everything else in between. As a result, every single person has value and purpose in God's eyes.

2. I believe in a triune God, also known as the Trinity, consisting of God the Father, God the Son, and God as Holy Spirit. Each of these three distinct entities are co-equal, co-eternal, and consubstantial, yet united in divinity.

3. I believe in the *imago dei*: that all people, regardless of their race, ethnicity, age, ability, and so forth, were created in the image and likeness of God and are called to be in perfect and intimate communion with Him.

4. Another part of the *imago dei* is that as Christians, we demonstrate God's likeness on earth so that others may see Him personified and glorified in and through our lives.

5. God cares deeply about the human condition, and doesn't desire that anyone should perish, but enjoy eternal life with Him. This means that no person is disposable, no sin above His grace, and no mistakes unworthy of redemption.

6. I believe that in a world that is often filled with tragedy, heartbreak, disappointment, oppression, and hatred, God is good. This is not in the cliché sense that God simply provides stuff and things, but that His very nature is goodness. This idea makes plain that societal ills like slavery, anti-Blackness, poverty, hunger, and so forth are not in accordance with God's very nature, but are the product of inhumanity.

In my current understanding of Christian theology, I believe that as the nature and being of God is tripartite, we were also created as such. The mind, body, and spirit are distinct but interconnected aspects of a human being and created by God to function in harmony. This perspective emphasizes the unity of the whole person, reflecting the image of God. By contrast, the objectification of another, the denial of their subjectivity and spirituality, is an act of violence against that image of God's self.

In this way, the mind is associated with thoughts, intellect, understandings, decision-making, will, and emotions. Romans 12:2 encourages believers to renew their minds through the word of God, aligning their thoughts with God's. The body is considered the physical temple of the Holy Spirit and also houses the mind. It is the vessel through which we serve God and others. In this way, the physical body of a person is integral to God's redemptive plan. Finally, the spirit. The spirit of a person connects with God. It is through the spirit that individuals experience communion with the Holy Spirit, nurturing spiritual growth and maturity. The spirit is the means through which believers are empowered, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit leads, guides, comforts, directs, and enables us to become more like Jesus Christ. In summary, the concept of the ecology of the self aligns with Christian theology as it emphasizes that harmony of the mind, body, and spirit are essential for holistic well-being.

AFRICAN COSMOLOGY

The expectation of fragmentation operates in polarities and "either-or" thinking. It elevates rational thought processes over

cultural, spiritual, embodied, and other ways of knowing. It chooses individualism over collectivism and community. It marks the Black body invisible (while simultaneously hyper visible), and promotes facts over feelings, and mind over matter.[27] In contrast, African cosmology affirms and legitimates Indigenous knowledges as important sources of cultural and embodied knowledge. As Mbiti suggests, traditional African religions

> permeate all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and the non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life. Where the African is, there is his religion: He carries it to the fields, where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party to attend the funeral ceremony; if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician he takes it to the house of parliament.[28]

The expectation of fragmentation works in direct contrast to African cosmology which emphasizes a holistic view of the mind, body, and spirit connection. African cosmology suggests that the differing dimensions of a person are ultimately indistinguishable, indivisible from each other. Further, while Western thought attempts to neatly demarcate and separate, it sees the dimensions of the ecology of the self as inseparable, and essential for maintaining harmony with the individual and their community.

As a ten-year-old girl, I began to deepen my knowledge and understanding of Black history. But I experienced cognitive dissonance in my identities of being both Black and Christian. In my innocence, I attempted to tease out the perceived contradictions of being both an enslaved people and “a chosen people” (1 Peter 2:9). However, my subsequent learning of Black history and later visit to Ghana, West Africa, revealed the notion of syncretism: combining elements of African spirituality and Christianity. According to Raboteau, syncretism was a natural occurrence among enslaved Africans who converted to Western religions while also embodying

an African cosmology.[29] Still, syncretism is a highly contested idea because it presumes that there is some "pure" Christianity or "pure" African traditional religion – instead of all religions reflecting cultural influences and inflections. However, my study of syncretism through African cosmology facilitated my self-actualization and understanding of the inseparability of my Black Christian womanhood. They are not in contradiction, competition, or opposition. It also facilitated a deeper understanding of the indivisibility of the three dimensions of the ecology of the self, as well as the violence of the expectation of fragmentation.

CHAPTER 7: WHOLENESS

Bettina Love argued that spirit murder occurs when educational environments fail to recognize and nurture the *full humanity* of their students.[30] Spirit murder happens when schools subject students to harsh punishment, low expectations, and a curriculum that disregards their cultural identities and histories. To combat spirit murder, Love advocates for abolitionist teaching, a reimagining of education that dismantles oppressive structures while radically building something new. If we are to take spirit murder in the context of schools seriously, it necessitates an awareness of what comprises full humanity, and that is an understanding of the ecology of the self.

Cynthia Dillard's work on (re)*membering*[31] is a critical framework for understanding and theorizing an ecology of the self, and importantly, how we might remedy fragmentation. She suggests that African ascendants have been seduced into forgetting our cultural memories and histories, which directly impacts our identity and work in the world. She emphasizes the importance of reclaiming, or (re)membering, ancestral knowledge, traditions, and histories that have been marginalized, delegitimated, or silenced by dominant structures, both inside and outside of schools. In her work, she advances (re)membering as more than just a recalling of events, but as an intentional process of bringing together fragmented parts of history, culture, and identity. It likewise involves a commitment to (re)membering the spiritual nature of

the work of teaching, learning, and research.

Drawing on Dillard's work, Jamila Lyiscott developed racial-spiritual re-membering as a way of reconciling her racial and spiritual identities, within the context of schools and the academy.[32] She suggests that racial-spiritual re-membering involves acknowledging the historical and contemporary ways in which Christianity has operated as an instrument of colonization, enslavement, and dehumanization. Yet, this re-membering can also serve as a powerful tool for resistance. In the context of schools, racial-spiritual re-membering can support schools in becoming more inclusive by supporting the holistic need of their students, families, and communities. Taken together, these radical understandings of re-membering serve as the basis for disrupting, dismantling, and resisting the expectation of fragmentation within the academy, and beyond.

An awareness of the ecology of the self facilitates (re)membering and embracing one's whole self. To (re)member the ecology of the self is to immediately recognize that God made human beings as an integrated whole of mind, body, and spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:23), and that denying this radical subjectivity and spirituality is an act of violence. (Re)membering the ecology of the self also means embracing culturally- and spiritually-situated bodies of knowledge. African cosmology, for example, puts forth the idea of the inseparability of the mind, body, and spirit. Operating with this understanding of these interconnections impacts the ways in which one shows up in the world. Refusal is another mechanism for (re)membering the ecology of the self. This involves righteous indignation and the refusal to being fragmented, dismembered, or disconnected in order to fit into oppressive systems of white supremacy and antiblackness. (Re)membering the ecology of the self, then, must become a way of being, a mechanism for self-integration of the mind-body-spirit. Importantly, operating from a place of wholeness is one of our best ways of not only disrupting structural oppression, but living the full and abundant lives that God intends for us.

AFTERWORD

In the end, I welcomed the effect of standing fully in my faith. I felt it would be a disservice to myself, as well as a distortion of my wholeness, if I surrendered to the expectation of fragmentation and did not acknowledge my faith. Yet, it is the very expectancy that adversely affects the experiences of many marginalized folks in the academy, and beyond. The phenomenon of fragmentation, I learned, was not exclusive to academia or education more broadly, but is part and parcel of living and existing in an imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. This system of operation reinforces the idea that there is an inherent contradiction between what we feel, what we know, what we do, and who we are in the world. Alexander suggests that fragmentation is a societal issue, stating,

> To this process of fragmentation we gave the name colonization, usually understood as a set of exploitative practices in political, ideological, and aesthetic terms, but also linked in minute ways to dualistic and hierarchical thinking: divisions among mind, body, spirit; between sacred and secular, male and female, heterosexual and homosexual; in class divisions; and in divisions between the erotic and the Divine. We saw its operation, as well, in creating singular thinking: the mistaken notion that only one kind of justice work could lead to freedom... Such thinking always premised in negation, often translated into singular explanations for oppression. Breaking down these divisions and hierarchies, indeed making ourselves whole again, became the work that occupied us throughout our entire journey. Since colonization has produced fragmentation and dismemberment at both the material and psychic levels, the work of decolonization has to make room for the deep yearning for wholeness, often expressed as a yearning to belong, a yearning that is both material and existential, both psychic and physical, and which, when satisfied, can subvert and ultimately displace the pain of dismemberment.[33]

If fragmentation was part and parcel of the project of colonization, then radically embracing wholeness through understanding,

belonging, embodiment, and (re)membering the ecology of the self is an act of decolonization, empowerment, and healing. It also connects with how one acts and navigates in the world. While self-integration is a goal, in and of itself, there is an underlying ethical component that necessitates right action in the world as well.

Still, there are moments in which I am seduced into forgetting the spiritual nature of the work or expected to fragment my mind-body-spirit. As long as systems of oppression exist and continue to deny one's full humanity, (re)membering will always exist as a radical way of being and knowing. This also means that (re)membering will always be consequential and risky. The persuasiveness of the academy in convincing one to dismember and fragment the mind, body, and spirit is incessant, and is part of the colonial project. In this way, we must resolve that our efforts toward wholeness do not

Photo Illustration by Mike Meulstee

automatically guarantee understanding, safety, or that the mind-body-spirit will always function in perfect balance. And we may still succumb to the seductions.

At the same time, one must be very strategic about the battles one picks and consider the nuances in the process. Indeed, there is something seductive even about the neatness of wholeness. The very act of (re)membering, though, is ongoing, messy, and iterative, so that even when integrated, it's still not perfect. White supremacist logic suggests that when we are integrated and operating in our full ecology, this absolves the invitation to fragment. The reality is that sometimes we may *need* to fragment for our survival. Further, because some spaces are so harmful and hostile to humanity that to bring one's full self is to risk injury or harm.

It is my hope that this paper serves as an invitation for people to stand fully in the integration and wholeness of mind, body, and spirit. (Re)membering the ecology of the self provides a means through which to operate and navigate in systems and structures that would fragment us into devourable pieces. The work I suggest, then, is to (re)*member*, or bring oneself back to a place of wholeness by centering humanizing, holistic, and wholeness-centered life praxis that prioritizes the ecology of the self: mind-body-spirit.

I am...

Alive

Sitting in a chair smelling perfume

Gaidenia and vanilla

I am hearing

Listening

Voices

Speech

Silences

I feel heat

Sweaty palms

Heartbeat

I taste

Gum at the roof of my mouth

Hunger

Thirst

I see

Through gold glasses

technology

keys

Papers

Wood

Desks

Lights

I am...

Human

Breath

body

Water

Skin

Blood

Bone

Organs

I am a system madeup of systems

Respiratory system

Circulatory system

Nervious system

Skeletal system

Immune system

Reproductive system

I am a system within a system

I am spirit

Soul

body

I am...

Black

Woman

Christian

WIfe

Mother

Daughter

Sister

Friend

I am student

Teacher

professor

I am a system within systems

that demand my fragmentation

yet

I am

An ecosystem

Of one

Independant

Dependant

Interdependant

Wholly

holy

interconnected

I am ...

whole

ecology

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[7] Morrison, “Rootedness,” 342.

[8] hooks, *Teaching Community,* 161–162.

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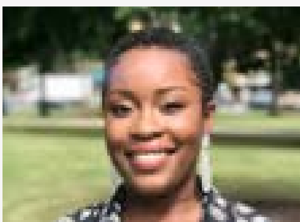

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War and Water:

An Ecowomanist Perspective on Expanding Casualties of War in Gaza

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INTRODUCTION

A time comes when silence is betrayal.

War is the enemy of the poor.

Social change comes most meaningfully
through nonviolent action.

…the greatest purveyor of violence in the
world today – my own government.

They must see Americans as strange liberators.

They know they must move or be destroyed by our bombs.

So they go – primarily women and children and the aged.

They watch as we poison their water,
as we kill a million acres of their crops…

as the bulldozers roar through their areas
preparing to destroy the precious trees.

We have destroyed their land and their crops.[1]

The above statements were spoken initially on April 4, 1967, by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his famous speech, "A Time to Break Silence." As a response to the Vietnam War, King's prophetic words still ring true today as we witness the United States government's involvement in the War in Palestine. As Israel continues to murder thousands of innocent women, men, children, and the elderly in response to a terrorist attack (Hamas), we also witness ongoing U.S. support through propaganda, policy, and praise for Israeli militarism. As the U.S. chose to involve itself in a war eight thousand miles away from its coast, today we see the U.S. engaged in a war over six thousand miles away. King spoke these words within one year of being assassinated. Given during a Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam meeting at Riverside Church in New York City, this speech marked the first time King formally addressed the Vietnam War. This conflict had poisoned America's soul, with the autopsy report partially reading "Vietnam."[2]

On October 7, 2023, Hamas – a Palestinian Sunni Islamist group – began surprise attacks upon Israel from the Gaza Strip. While declared by the U.S. to be a foreign terrorist organization (FTO), many argue that Hamas is a direct response to the apartheid experienced by Palestinians since 1948 – the year Israel was established as a nation-state. With vocal and financial support from countries like the United States, Israel maintains a stronghold in Palestine, resulting in the compounding devastation of an over eighty-year-long discussion of who will control the land. Any support of Palestinian land sovereignty is met with oppression kept in place through militarism reminiscent of apartheid. We

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know from history that apartheid is a tactic used by colonizers to systemically institute injustice against a people native to a coveted landscape and is regularly used in reference to the experience of Africans in South Africa. If we observe the response of Hamas, where do clergy and academics align themselves without compromising their calling to critical dialogue that holds humanity accountable for its actions?

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The obligatory question of "When is war necessary?" is not new to the discussion of America's thirst for declaring democracy to be the best system of government that is most respectful of human rights and fundamental freedoms. In his "Break Silence" speech, King challenges the moral authority of interfaith leaders and concerned laity to "move beyond the prophesying of smooth patriotism to the high grounds of a firm dissent based upon the mandates of conscience and the reading of history." Moving beyond this involves[3] breaking the silence; we are meant to accept and realize that silence is the greatest enemy. King's call to action is especially fitting for academics teaching the next generation of clergy, chaplains, leaders, and professors. The outcome of war is tied to the death of innocent women and children. Who will continue to decide if the use of force is overwhelming or necessary?

Once champions of free speech, since October 2023 college campuses have become an unwelcoming space for students protesting the Israel-Hamas war. Professors who support students for their bravery in combining theoretical analysis with mobilization and actualization of justice themes have experienced police action authorized by their employers. In May 2024, the presidents of universities like Rutgers, UCLA, and Northwest University defended their process and support of student rights to protest peacefully. Fitting with propaganda usage during the clash of First Amendment rights and allegiance to Israel, in one of many congressional hearings, Rep. Lloyd Kenneth Smucker, a Republican from Pennsylvania, criticized Rutgers University President Jonathan Holloway for allegedly negotiating with the "mob" in a protest encampment while neglecting the concerns of Jewish faculty, staff, and administrators on campus.[4] In support of students exercising their First Amendment right, Holloway replied, "The first thing I'll say is that I was not negotiating with the mob. I was talking with students."[5]

While supporting student bravery and peaceful mass protests on some university campuses should be commended, many institutions challenged student and faculty jobs, degrees, and lives. Student and faculty protestors demanded that their institutions divest from any business ties to Israel. Historically, divestment has proven to be one of the strongest revolutionary tactics for seeking total social justice. Protest was an early method of praxis during the Civil Rights Movement and extended to college campuses with the support of organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee, led by Ella Baker (1903-1986). At the time of these congressional hearings, in May 2024, the reported number of those killed in Israel was 1,410 versus 34,844 Palestinians. This number is steadily increasing. With the vast majority being killed in the Gaza Strip, over 70 percent of those killed are women and minors. It is not surprising that students are calling out Israel's war crimes as inhumane and are protesting for protection and peace in Palestine.

More is required of educators than avoiding propaganda in the classroom. As with other wars, many significant topics of interest must be explored as attention is focused on the war in Gaza. As the Israel-Hamas war is deeply rooted in the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict and territorial disputes, I ponder how the impacts of war extend far beyond what we realize and are prepared to confront. We are conscious of the fact that the war in Gaza has resulted in significant loss of life and is a humanitarian crisis, particularly affecting civilians in the densely populated Gaza Strip. While international efforts to broker peace continue to yield limited success and the conflict remains a crucial point of instability in the Middle East, continuing with the *Wabash Center Journal on Teaching* focus on "Ecology," I posit that there is another muted voice and missed teaching moment involving environmental concerns. Whether as a historian, theologian, biblical scholar, or ethicist, how does an analysis of the environmental effects of war align with your review of the war and student protests within your respective field? The environmental effects of war are greatly overlooked and extend beyond the current discussions on the topic. With intention, now is the time to reflect on the environmental impact of war, and specifically on its incredible impact on water supply, greatly affecting the availability and quality of water for affected populations, the oppressed people of Gaza. This war's direct and indirect effects continue to involve immediate and long-term issues that are often ignored but will be explored in this article.

EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF WAR ON THE ENVIRONMENT THROUGH A WOMANIST PERSPECTIVE

As a scholar, my journey into research and teaching environmental theology and ethics is rooted in womanist thought. In 2004, Dr. Alton Pollard assigned Cheryl Townsend Gilkes's book *If It Wasn't for the Women: Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community*[6] to our Intro to Black Church Studies class. This book challenged me deeply, leaving me with no other option but to confront the patriarchy embedded in my family's church tradition. This text compelled me to grapple with the systemic

oppression often ignored or denied. Initially, I sought to defend the Church of God in Christ (the subject of Gilkes's research) and advocate for its values, unaware of the entrenched patriarchal norms that persist in the refusal to ordain women, including individuals like myself with advanced theological education – dual Master's degrees and a PhD in theology and ethics. Beyond ordination, women maintain a type of modified power rooted in an interpretation of the Judeo-Christian text weighing heavily on select Pauline readings instead of the theology and praxis of Jesus Christ. Gilkes's book and this course introduced me to womanist principles and how womanist principles bring attention to environments that protect marginalized freedom.

Womanist thought was introduced as four principles in the 1980s by author Alice Walker and later constructed into a philosophy and social theory centering the experiences, concerns, and perspectives of Black women by four Black Women scholars at Union Theological Seminary in New York – Katie Geneva Canon (1950-2018), Delores Williams (1937-2022), Jacquelyn Grant, and Kelly Brown Douglas. As students of James Hal Cone (1938-2018) and Beverly Harrison (1932-2012), these four women adapted Walker's principles of womanism into their work in theology, ethics, and biblical scholarship. The core principles are as follows:

1. *Radical Subjectivity*: Emphasizes the whole person despite the stereotypes of the hegemonic system of white supremacy. It promotes spiritual, emotional, and physical healing, recognizing and honoring the interconnectedness of all aspects of a person's life without omitting cultural, spiritual, and social dimensions.
2. *Communal Praxis*: Prioritizes building and nurturing the entire community, especially within Black culture. Black women understand that freedom is not individual; it's communal.
3. *Redemptive Self-Love*: Intentionally advocates for social justice through all areas of life – music, folk, the moon, Spirit, and roundness – and thus loves oneself regardless.

4. *Critical Engagement*: Acknowledges and celebrates the contributions of Black women outside, yet alongside the work of feminist thought.

Over the years, womanist thought cultivated a profound interest in understanding the spiritual and ethical dimensions of our relationship with the natural world. Throughout seminary, I was mentored by professors who challenged me to think critically, and I always did so with a passion for being a voice for the marginalized. I began a plant-based diet and thus further expanded my understanding and advocacy for the liberation of all of God's Creation. In the same year, I chose to go "vegan" and came across a podcast called "Food for Thought" by Colleen Patrick-Goudreau. This experience illuminated the tremendous potential for enriching my teaching and research as I embrace interdisciplinary approaches and many faith traditions to understand better what it means to advocate for the oppressed. It is when we, as educators, venture beyond conventional curriculum boundaries that we are empowered to create dynamic learning environments that nurture future change agents. This pedagogical approach equips our students to become driving forces for positive societal change, simultaneously benefiting the global community (land, human animals, and non-human animals) and aligning more closely with our fundamental role in Creation.

Thus, my inspiration comes from two unexpected sources: the work of a Black sociologist and the perspective of a white vegan activist. They both helped me realize that liberation is not always extended to every being in God's Creation. What would it look like if the natural world responded violently as a form of revolutionary resistance to those trying to manipulate, destroy, and ignore its existence?[9] Furthermore, how are we working to best represent the marginalized voices within a marginalized society created by a capitalist world order that thrives off an "artificial" just economy and theoretical practices labeled as "sustainable living"?[10] As this essay concludes, I aspire to illuminate for each reader the critical value of embracing unconventional interdisciplinary approaches.

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I demonstrate how these diverse methodologies can significantly broaden our academic horizons, enrich our pedagogical practices, and deepen our capacity for critical reflection. By exploring these multifaceted possibilities, we open doors to innovative scholarship that transcends traditional boundaries and fosters a more holistic understanding of complex issues like the war in Gaza and its impact on the land, specifically on its water resources. I aim to redirect global attention from solely human-centered social justice responses to war toward a thorough and more truthful evaluation of social justice initiatives prioritizing the natural world. Specifically, this article counters anthropocentric worldviews that posit humanity at the center of the phenomena of Creation by highlighting the often overlooked discussion of "water," its intrinsic value, and its continued manipulation by colonizing powers.

THE IMPACT OF WAR ON WATER SUPPLY

About 90 percent of Gaza's water supply is sourced from the Coastal Aquifer Basin that runs along the eastern Mediterranean coast from Egypt through Gaza and into Israel. There are four ways in which the war continues to affect the water supply in Gaza:

1. *Destruction and Infrastructure*: After repeated bombings, the critical water supply has been damaged. Pipelines and treatment facilities destroyed by bombings directly disrupt the distribution of water to the citizens of Gaza. The people of Gaza require access to water for personal reasons, including washing their bodies and sanitation during cooking.
2. *Pollution and Contamination*: In Gaza, 97 percent of the water supply is undrinkable, and hazardous materials have an increasing number of ways of being ingested by humans and non-human animals. The result is death and long-term effects on the quality of life.
3. *Access Restrictions*: With 97 percent of the water undrinkable, there is limited access to water resources due to physical and logistical barriers created by the destruction of water resources – chemical infiltration, seawater intrusion, and over extraction.[11] The fewer the sites where uncontaminated water exists, the more likely that overcrowding at these locations will increase the spread of waterborne illnesses.
4. *Resource Scarcity*: As physical and logistical access to water is limited, tensions will rise as citizens of Gaza are not just searching for clean water for personal use; some people rely on clean water for agriculture and industry. This limits access to food and diminishes the growth of the economy.
5. *Increased Demand and Strain*: As people travel to locations where there is likely to be clean water, they are displaced, which affects culture and adds additional strains on limited infrastructure.
6. *Health Risks*: With 97 percent of drinking water contaminated, waterborne diseases spread quickly, especially in areas where medical care and sanitation are already compromised.
7. *Long-term Environmental Damage*: War leads to long-term environmental damage, including water source degradation. The Israel-Hamas war has weaponized the rain during the wet months in Gaza (between November and March) as chemicals

from bombings are washed throughout the cities and into the ecosystem of the land.

8. *Disrupted Governance and Maintenance*: The war continues to disrupt the already fractured governance and maintenance of water systems for the citizens of Gaza.

The points outlined above underscore the multifaceted impact of armed conflicts on water resources, economic stability, and human welfare. Crucially, this reveals a pervasive failure to recognize and respect water's inherent worth and essential role in sustaining life. By focusing solely on human-centered concerns, we often overlook the intrinsic value of water as a vital component of Earth's ecosystems, independent of its utility to humankind. Let us move forward by examining several interfaith examples that collectively affirm water as fundamental to the origin of life and acknowledge it as a sacred gift from the Divine.

INTRINSIC VALUE OF WATER

Job 38:22-23

> *Have you entered the storehouses of the snow, or have you seen the storehouses of the hail, which I have reserved for the time of trouble, for the day of battle and war? (ESV)*

In Job 38, often read in conjunction with Genesis 1:1-10, God addresses Job about the natural world by giving special attention to water's purpose and intrinsic value, *independent* of its utility to humanity. The intrinsic value of water is mentioned three times in this chapter, thus intentionally urging the reader to reconsider the human-centered perspective typically applied to discussions about the natural world, particularly regarding water.

(Photo credit: Photo by DILIP KUMAR on Unsplash)

John 7: 37-39

> *Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water." (NRSVUE)*

The Gospel writers often incorporate water[12] into their testimonies of the ministry and life of Jesus. As a preacher, miracle worker, and leader, Jesus emphasizes the importance of water for human health, intertwining it with his divine mission to bring healing to a world of sin and corruption. However, there is a deeper discussion regarding Jesus signifying himself as the source of living water. In this Gospel passage, Jesus speaks during the Feast of Tabernacles – a Jewish festival celebrating the harvest and God's provision during the Israelites' time in the wilderness. During the festival, a water-pouring ceremony represents God's provision even in the desert spaces in life. As noted in Charles Long's[13] exploration of the multifaceted ways humanity creates and interprets religious meaning through signs, symbols, and images, Jesus is signifying that his assignment as "the Anointed One" is to be the vehicle that helps materialize God's provision for believers. Continuing Long's exploration of "signification," as a historical figure, Jesus is presented to the oppressed as the accommodation to resist colonial power structures. Aligned with the allegorical writing of John, Jesus declares that God is capable and will provide believers with the source for their eternal victory despite their current reality. With this message, Jesus also emphasizes that falsehoods cannot compare to the "living water" he offers. Ultimately, the intrinsic value of water lies in Christ's designation of facilitating miraculous experiences of renewal, even in seemingly hopeless circumstances.

Quran 21:30

> *Do the disbelievers not realize that the heavens and earth were [once] one mass then We split them apart? And We created from water every living thing. Will they not then believe?*[14]

This verse emphasizes the interconnectedness of all living beings throughout the universe and highlights water's fundamental role

as the source of life. This declaration also supports scientific assertions that water's intrinsic value lies in its capacity to both initiate and sustain life.[15]

The sacred texts above reveal that water is more than a resource for human use; it holds an intrinsic value deeply connected to human physical and spiritual existence on Earth. What are the consequences when war devastates this crucial element of human survival and undermines the divine purpose of the natural world? My lived experiences as an African American woman, mother, and scholar have proven that practices of injustice through violence affect generations that follow. This is realized in my examination of how gender personification of the Earth is appropriated by Western economic imperialism.

THE GENDERED PERSONIFICATION OF EARTH: AN ECOWOMANIST ANALYSIS

In examining the use of the term "Mother Earth," we encounter a complex interplay of linguistic, cultural, and sociopolitical factors. Though deeply woven into many indigenous cosmologies, this anthropomorphic designation by western society deserves critical scrutiny, particularly through the lens of ecowomanist theory.

1. *Patriarchal Influences on Environmental Discourse*: Usage of "Mother Earth" as a metaphor becomes a reflection of entrenched patriarchal control as the land is consistently extracted, extorted, and raped for government value.
2. *Socialization and Gender Roles*: From a sociological perspective, the common usage of "Mother Earth" limits femininity towards societal norms of nurturing and fertility, while simultaneously promoting notions of passivity and subordination.
3. *Implications for Gender-Based Violence and Oppression*: When the earth is gendered as female, it increases ease in exploitative practices towards both women and natural resources, such as water, that manifests in various forms of violence, dehumanization, and marginalization.

Beyond appropriation and semantic shift, the linguistic framing of assigning gender to the land necessitates an examination of who benefits from and perpetuates such metaphors as we see a continued success in reinforcing power through the gendered personification of Earth that does not align with Indigenous cosmologies nor sacred texts' respect for the land and water.

These realizations led me to contemplate how the impacts of war's violence against humanity similarly permeate the lived experience of the land, particularly concerning water as a resource. It is important to teach the vast repercussions of war beyond human suffering and extend advocacy to the natural world, which is also experiencing oppression. I will not outline further educational strategies for instructors to broaden students' understanding of warfare's far-reaching consequences. As King reminded his audience to no longer remain silent about the Vietnam War, may this article encourage you to no longer endorse wrongdoings by remaining silent about the environmental crisis caused by the war in Gaza within your classroom syllabi and research.

WATER: THE OVERLOOKED VICTIM OF WAR (AN ENGAGED ECOWOMANISM)

As discussed above, traditionally, human war casualties are the primary focus. However, in Indigenous cosmology one learns the importance of treating water as a living entity with inherent rights and values rather than merely as a resource to exploit. Thus, the indigenous concept of water's personhood is essential to the argument being made in this essay.

Historically, laws have been passed to uphold the exploitation of humanity, let alone the environment. For example, the Fourteenth Amendment, Section 2, Clause 3 relied on the Three-Fifths Compromise of 1788, giving slaveholding states disproportionate influence on the presidency, Supreme Court, and House of Representatives before the Civil War. The Three-Fifths Compromise counted enslaved populations as three-fifths of a person for taxation, representation, and presidential electors.

Abolitionists argued for the personhood of African Americans in the face of an established white supremacist political system. The only way in which African Americans could achieve and experience any liberty and protection was after the Thirteenth Amendment's declaration that slavery was illegal, thus acknowledging an end to the exploitation of black bodies through enslavement. Despite this, with the "election" of Donald Trump in 2016, the application of immunity by the Supreme Court Justice towards Trump despite being found guilty of thirty-four counts of criminal activity and also leading a mob to take over the United States capital buildings, African Americans are still living the lyrics to Nina Simone's classic, "Mr. Backlash."

Photo credit: Jamie Street on Unsplash

Mr. Backlash, Mr. Backlash

Just who do you think I am?

You raise my taxes, freeze my wages

And send my son to Vietnam

You give me second class houses

And second class schools

Do you think that all colored folks

Are just second class fools?

Oh, Mr. Backlash, I'm gonna leave you

With the backlash blues

When I try to find a job

To earn a little cash

All you got to offer

Is your mean old white backlash

But the world is big

Big and bright and round

And it's full of folks like me

Who are black, yellow, beige, and brown

You're the one who'll have the blues

Not me, just wait and see[16]

Over the past thirty years, a significant movement has occurred towards recognizing and affirming Indigenous relationships with nature. The shift has manifested in various ways, with Indigenous peoples actively championing the intrinsic rights of the natural world in the face of white supremacy. These efforts not only defend nature but also continue to challenge and dismantle the structure

of white supremacy that has long dominated our understanding and treatment of Creation. Included in this acknowledgment of the intrinsic rights of the natural world is the recognition of the personhood of water, which is both a sacred and living entity to be respected and protected by humanity. Thus, paralleling the human experience, nature too falls victim to the ravages of war. In this context, the natural world is often perceived as powerless, susceptible to conquest, and ripe for exploitation.

Within the first principle of womanism – *radical subjectivity* – we access indigenous methodology uniquely representing environmental justice by advocating for the protection of nature. Following the inception of the Environmental Justice Movement in the United States, indigenous groups around the world began demanding the protection of nature by reclaiming its identity – acknowledging nature's connection with identity and ancestors. In 2014, the Māori people of New Zealand won their battle with a parliament full of colonizers, resulting in the establishment of full "legal personhood" being given to the Whanganui River. Other countries followed, such as Colombia (2016), India (2017), Australia (2017), and Bangladesh (2019). Affirming that rivers have the right to flow and exist transforms the legislative approach and reverses the trajectory of the earth's description. Establishing the legal personhood of water areas resolves relationships between humanity and nature, current culture and spirit, and the intentional efforts of technological advancement and the state of the environment.

What occurs when, as educators, we expand our advocacy to include speaking for the environment? Given war's impact on the integrity of water, we can outline and model how students should understand that teaching subjects such as history, theology, ethics, and the Bible goes beyond simply focusing on the straightforward consequences of war's effects on people's lives. These war-driven economic impacts directly disrupt the longstanding cosmology that existed on Earth well before humanity's arrival. The various ways war directly compromises the quality of water include:

4. *Disrespecting Sacredness and Integrity*: Indigenous cosmology incorporates a sacredness to water that is integral to the spiritual and physical well-being of the community. Water acts as a conduit between the physical and spiritual for indigenous people. Destroying water sources disrespects the sacredness and integrity of water.
5. *Exploitation and Abuse*: Withholding water supply is often done for strategic or tactical purposes, gaining a military advantage. This violates the inherent right of water to flow freely.
6. *Ecological Damage*: Rivers, lakes, and wetlands are polluted by military activities, unexploded ordinance, and damaged infrastructure, thus violating water's inherent right to flow cleanly and unpolluted.
7. *Loss of Biodiversity*: War damages aquatic life and biodiversity through pollution, habitat destruction, and changes in water flow. These changes undermine the inherent value of water.
8. *Social and Cultural Impact*: War's impact on water systems damages the environment, affecting cultural and social ties among communities. These ties are often deeply rooted in cultural practices, traditions, and beliefs that support water's inherent power as a source of interdependence.

War profoundly impacts the personhood of water by disrupting its natural state, causing ecological harm, and challenging the legal and ethical frameworks that recognize its rights. As a theological ethicist, I call out war's impact on the water. As human beings and as educators entrusted to be good stewards of Creation (Judeo-Christian), and to cherish the Earth as a balanced gift to humanity (Qu'ran), the lasting harm war inflicts on the relationship between humanity and water should prompt us to explore war's profound impact on the environment and specifically on water – a living, sacred entity. We can further demonstrate a commitment to meaningful scholarship by engaging in this analysis. This approach transcends the traditional input/output teaching model, offering a

more holistic and nuanced methodology and understanding.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, I've employed an ecowomanist analysis to restore water's identity through recognition of Indigenous cosmology and sacred texts as a more vital theological and ethical perspective

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much needed in understanding student protests as support for global justice. Let us *unremember* that humanity is the only casualty of war and reclaim the cosmologies teaching that Creation deserves our equal attention. We must intentionally consider the Earth in the context of war by emphasizing the interconnectedness of human and ecological well-being, recognizing that the degradation caused by conflict extends beyond human suffering to the land and water. Rooted in black feminist thought and spirituality, ecowomanism provides the rooted experience of speaking on behalf of the

marginalized. This article posits that a more authentic social justice is present beyond the human experience and fully embraces the environmental impact of our societal behaviors. While intersecting oppressions with environmental harm, ecowomanism identifies war as an exacerbation of existing injustices faced by marginalized members of God's Creation. Ecowomanism identifies how war disrupts these connections, further causing both physical and spiritual harm. Once these crucial topics are considered through an ecowomanist lens of redemptive self-love, I propose these final steps of healing:

1. *Resilience and Resistance:* Despite war, we can always find ways to be resilient and resist evil. Resilience and revolutionary tactics are solutions to evil, but where are the voices of those who disagree with the evils causing death to humanity, animals, and the natural world? The time has come to voice our support for reclamation and restoration, for replanting native species, protecting water sources, and demanding the assertion of rights to land and water resources.

Photo credit: LOGAN WEAVER on Unsplash

2. *Ethical Responsibility*: Earth care conversations during and after war involve recognizing the ethical responsibility to protect and restore natural resources damaged by violence. These conversations should be prioritized as they address war's long-term impacts, such as pollution, land

degradation, and displacement of communities.

3. *Holistic Healing*: An honest acknowledgment of the trauma inflicted on water involves working toward restorative justice that benefits both the environment and marginalized communities.
4. *Transformative Action*: An ecowomanist approach supports the transformative action of challenging the systems of oppression that began the war. This includes advocating for peace-building efforts, sustainable resource management, and equitable access to natural resources, like water.

By embracing these ecowomanist principles of redemptive self-love, we foster a deeper connection with ourselves and, more importantly, begin bringing awareness and giving attention to the Earth's experienced injustices. These solutions are meant to encourage teachers to cultivate a holistic sense of scholarship, giving a continued holistic sense of well-being that honors the intrinsic value and sacredness of the natural world across our unique disciplines. As we move forward, let us commit to contributing to a most just and compassionate world for the restoration of the land. Just as King risked criticism by speaking out against the Vietnam War, we must also continue to actively address interconnected issues of racial justice, economic equality, and environmental stewardship. The impact of this work extends far beyond the confines of academia, proving invaluable to grassroots organizations as well. This approach dismantles the artificial divide between scholarly pursuits and real-world applications, challenging the notion that we must choose between finding value in the classroom and effecting societal change. Instead, this work demonstrates how the knowledge we cultivate and share can seamlessly bridge these realms, fostering a dynamic interplay between academic insights and practical, community-driven solutions. In doing so, I hope we can continue to honor Martin Luther King, Jr.'s legacy and contribute to the ongoing struggle for a more just and peaceful world.

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Can We Breathe?

Exploring a Pedagogy of Breath for Theological Education

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It was the fifth week of the fall semester, and I was teaching my Womanist/Feminist Spirituality and Worship course. A student walked into our Wednesday afternoon class a few minutes early, plopped down into her chair, and let out a deep sigh – "Hhhaaa!" She then said, "Now I can feel human" to the classmate seated beside her. This stopped me! And for the next ten minutes before class began, I listened to the conversations in the room hoping to glean a bit more information on this student's experience. While she did not provide much more for me after that initial declaration, I sat with the occurrence for many weeks following; it was less the statement of "being human" that arrested my attention, and more the act of the sigh – her deep release of breath – that captured my thoughts. This was the viscerally embodied expression of how she felt in that moment – like she had finally reached a place to breathe and be. Had she been holding her breath in other classes (literally and metaphorically)? Had she been pieces of herself in other spaces of learning, and now met a place to re-member her very being in the process of learning?

During the remainder of the semester I paid attention to the experiences of the students in a different way. I watched as their bodies and their minds engaged the course material. I asked pointed questions about how they felt when they read something that was jarring or new as it related to liturgy and sacred ritual. I took time to slow down and revisit spaces of tension with the students more carefully, with attention to embodied reactions. This was the start of a journey to imagine a different way and pace of teaching, particularly when teaching a worship course that engages content that is close to the heart and very personal for students to approach with a deepened level of openness. More questions arose. What is happening in classrooms that makes students feel less than human? What is the aim of theological education if students struggle to be their full selves in the classrooms? Exactly what was different in my class (and classes like it) that allowed the student to exhale? This was the core of what needed to be explored.

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Since that late fall afternoon class, I have been on a journey of imagining a learning environment that is breath, and that allows room for breathing to happen. This goes slightly beyond the practice of intentional breathing, although that does happen often as a means for centering and connecting with the self in the learning process. However, my focus has been on how to shape the learning experience in a rhythm of breath. How can I imagine a rhythm of breath in my teaching? What is the impact on the community and the academic exercise when you move through a breath-shaped course? How do we let this experience of learning breathe? These were the questions that rested at the heart of my intentions as I started to reimagine this Womanist/Feminist Worship and Spirituality course more intentionally as a humanizing engagement of learning.

In my search for answers I went on a yearlong journey with a breath coach (who happened to also have theological education experience) to learn more about the practice and the theory behind the practice. We engaged in monthly two-hour-long breathwork sessions, practicing a circular breath pattern and discussing the meaning behind the method and theory of breathwork. I sat with literature on breath, breathwork, and principles of breathing and pedagogy in music studies. I reflected critically on my experiences as a classically trained dancer and the role of breath and breathing in dance practice and performance. I emerged from this year of experimentation and investigation with insight that reshaped my rhythm of teaching – from course design to implementation – having rediscovered my own connection to breath in new and interesting ways. As we journey through my reflection on breath and learning, we will breathe together to allow us a moment to sit with what we have read, to allow thoughts and feelings to settle before we move forward, and to experiment with a new pace in information exchange. To begin, let us pause and center ourselves…

and I invite you take a deep breath in…
and exhale.

THE PROCESS OF BREATHING: DEVELOPING A RHYTHM OF BREATH IN TEACHING

Why breath?

As I launched into this exploration of breath, I realized that my interest in it stemmed from the fact that some of the most formative parts of my life and how I know myself are centered around breath – dance and giving birth. I am a classically trained ballet and modern dancer, and my dance training is grounded in an understanding of how to use breath to sustain activity. However, I only applied this knowledge in the action of dance or exercising; I cannot say it was an active thought in my everyday life. In fact, in this context, I had a more utilitarian relationship with my breath, using it to get me through a performance or to the end of a workout.

While the connections between breath and dance were about use and function, I became more closely aware of my breath when I practiced prenatal yoga. During this season of my life, not only was my body going through physical change, but my identity was changing as well – I was becoming a mom. The lessons on breathing provided in these particular classes were shaped to be much more somatic, and taught me how to use breath not only to aid in the birthing process (the utilitarian function), but also how to use breath to connect with myself and the child growing inside of me. This concept and practice deepened my curiosity about the power of the intentional awareness of our breath. This is where my interest to learn more about breath was formed, and where I developed a new relationship with breathing.

In thinking about breath, it is interesting to recognize how much we don't think about it. Our relationship with our breath is often unconscious and underappreciated, despite it being the most fundamental aspect of our existence. Breathing is an automatic process that sustains life, yet many of us only engage in shallow, surface-level breathing, especially during stress or when we are preoccupied. This shallow breathing limits the oxygen that reaches our cells and affects our overall vitality, leading to

increased tension, reduced energy, and even compromised mental clarity. By not fully engaging our breath – by not breathing deeply and fully into our lungs – we miss out on the profound benefits of this simple act. Deep, mindful breathing can help us connect more deeply with our bodies, calm our nervous systems, and enhance our well-being. In essence, reclaiming control and intention in our breathing allows us to harness its full potential, turning it into a powerful tool for physical, emotional, and spiritual health.

If there is this much power in the actual practice of breath for our physical bodies, I wondered how the idea of breath, a theoretical and pedagogical approach to breath, might enliven and empower my work in the classroom. You see, the student's deep breath that day was a different kind of breathing. It was a connectional breath; one that connected her to herself in a meaningful way. She used her breath in the most intentional way to proclaim and even reclaim her humanity. This made me wonder how we can teach theological education in a way that connects us to ourselves and to one another during the learning process. After all, my own spirituality of teaching is centered on values of wholeness that seek to integrate mind, body, and spirit in the learning process. So this student's breath and the connection to her humanity was intriguing and inspired me to investigate my relationship with my own breath and the way I was approaching the class, for the remainder of the semester.

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Breath lessons

In my yearlong work with the breath coach there were several lessons that informed my pedagogical shifts. The science behind breathwork, which is rooted in its effects on the autonomic nervous system, brain function, and overall physiological health, became a conversation partner for my process. Breathwork, especially practices like diaphragmatic breathing, slow breathing, and rhythmic breathing, had direct influence on my body's rest and digestive functions, and guided me to practices used to lower my heart rate and promote relaxation and emotional regulation. Through the work, I became more acutely aware of the interconnection of breath and the nervous system and its relation to better emotional resilience, improved stress response, and overall well-being. I even found that deep, controlled breathing helped improve my focus, which aligned with scientific research showing that deep breathing can enhance cognitive performance.

All of this was happening during the COVID-19 global pandemic. While I was focusing on breath, I was surrounded by the reality that breathing in public could literally end someone's life, could at the very least infect you with a virus so detrimental that you'd be isolated for weeks and possibly suffer long-term health consequences. This stark contrast between the healing potential of breathwork and the deadly implications of a virus that attacks the respiratory system profoundly shaped my understanding of breath as both fragile and sacred. The pandemic heightened the urgency of mindfulness in teaching and learning, as anxiety and isolation grew widespread. Breathwork, in this context, became not only a tool for personal well-being but also a collective pedagogical framework that could help students navigate uncertainty, fear, and the emotional toll of global crisis. It underscored the interconnectedness of our physical and spiritual health, reminding us that breath – something as simple and fundamental as breathing – could be a powerful anchor in a world turned upside down. This duality, where breath is both a symbol of life and a vector of danger, deepened my commitment to integrating a rhythm of breath and actual

breath practices into the classroom, offering a space for healing, reflection, and resilience in the learning journey.

The process and the practice of my journey in this work was filled with the rich potential of breath as a pedagogical framework. As I delved deeper into the significance of breath, I realized that just as breathing has its own rhythm and flow, so too does effective

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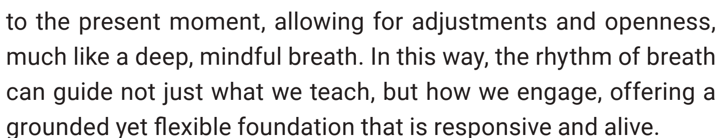
teaching. Breathwork grounded me in ways that reminded me that teaching is not just about delivering content but about facilitating a dynamic, living process. Teaching invites flexibility – much like breath – which adapts moment by moment to the body's needs; this approach to teaching also requires the ability to adapt to the rhythms of the classroom and the unique energies and needs of the students. This fosters a space where both facilitator and learner can "teach in the spirit," moving intuitively with the flow of the learning process. It emphasizes the importance of being attuned



to the present moment, allowing for adjustments and openness, much like a deep, mindful breath. In this way, the rhythm of breath can guide not just what we teach, but how we engage, offering a grounded yet flexible foundation that is responsive and alive.

Breathwork also taught me the value of using breath as a point of transition. My breath coach and I spent a lot of time exploring how breath can help facilitate creativity, clarity, and inspiration at pivotal transitions points in one's life. Applying this concept to teaching allowed for a more intentional use of breath as points of transition throughout the course, offering natural pauses that created space for reflection and emotional processing. By integrating breath into the flow of teaching, I was able to consciously use moments of breathing to signal the end of one topic and the beginning of another, encouraging students to pause, gather their thoughts, and center themselves before moving forward. Incorporating dedicated "breath weeks" – which are not a week off from class but rather class sessions shaped in a very slow and reflective rhythm – at significant points in the course further enriched this practice, giving students a structured opportunity to step back, reflect on the material covered, and process their own emotional and intellectual responses. This practice has become particularly valuable when addressing highly sensitive or emotionally charged topics in the classroom, where students may need time to digest difficult content. It has also become a welcomed rhythm for students who are burning out earlier and faster in the semester than I have ever seen before. A breath week not only allows for deeper contemplation but also cultivates a sense of care, giving students permission to take a breath – both literally and figuratively – before re-engaging with the complexities of new content. It provides an opportunity to ask questions in community, and to work through theological histories that come into conversation with new concepts and ideas. This reflective rhythm enhances students' capacity to engage meaningfully with the material while maintaining emotional well-being.

Another impactful discovery in this process was the use of breath

as a liberating practice. While a more implicit, or personally experiential lesson, this idea of breath as liberation took on a profound meaning in the context of systemic oppression and violence against Black bodies in America. As a Black woman, the haunting cry of Eric Garner – "I can't breathe" – resonates deeply and is embedded in my subconscious, so naturally when I started to really explore breath and breathing, I couldn't help but carry Garner's cry with me in the process, reflecting the literal and metaphorical suffocation of Black lives in a country shaped by racial injustice. Breath, something so essential yet so often denied to marginalized communities, became a lens through which I viewed the classroom. The act of teaching in the rhythm of breath, then, becomes subversive – an act of resistance against the forces that seek to silence and oppress. For me, it affirms the right to breathe, to be present, to exist fully, particularly for students from marginalized backgrounds whose voices and lives are often stifled.

Breath also connects to broader environmental realities that further complicate this conversation. During this process I read headlines about wildfires, pollution, and COVID-19 (as expressed earlier), all of which threaten our ability to breathe freely. The air we depend on is becoming increasingly toxic, yet in the classroom, we speak of breath as a tool for healing and learning. This contradiction brings the intentional act of breathing as a liberating practice to the forefront for those whose breath is constrained, figuratively and literally. By incorporating breath into pedagogy, we not only acknowledge the deep systemic inequalities tied to air and life itself but also offer students a practice that restores autonomy and presence. Teaching through breath challenges us to reclaim the sacredness of breath in the midst of oppression and environmental crises, reminding students that the simple act of breathing can be an act of resistance, resilience, and liberation.

I have shared a lot from my breath lessons; this is a good point to pause as we transition. I invite you to take a moment, maybe even put this article down for a few minutes and sit with what has

resonated with you thus far. What questions do you have? As you take this brief time to reflect, I invite you take a deep breath in… and *exhale*.

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THE POWER OF BREATH: A CLASSROOM ECOLOGY

Breathe out everything you have…
so the next breath is the biggest you've taken in a while.

At the start of each class students lead a centering moment. During three years of teaching in the rhythm of breath, I have noticed these centering moments moving from reading scripture and prayer to more creative engagement with poetry, music, and breathing. Students have stepped out on a limb and invited their classmates into some of their most personal practices of mediation. At the

end of her assigned centering moment one student commented, "I was so nervous, because I don't share this with anyone." While the practice she used to open the class seemed to me to be a familiar practice of breath and centering around specific affirmations, for her it was a very vulnerable act – sharing her personal practice in public. Her confession was followed by immediate affirmation from her peers and specific insight on what was most meaningful to everyone. The classroom, in that moment, became a safe space for vulnerability that allowed this student to be her full self in her leadership and her learning.

Breath as a pedagogical framework creates a classroom ecology that invites all participants to bring their full selves into the experience, and this invitation is a fundamental force for fostering holistic learning environments. This ecology recognizes that breath is not merely a biological necessity but a symbol of life, presence, and spiritual vitality. This recognition honors the vital connection between breath and the learning process – in practice and in pedagogy – and fosters an environment where students can fully embody their humanity, both their physicality and their spirituality. This embodiment affirms the students' wholeness, grounding them in the present and encouraging a sense of self-awareness. Integrating breathing exercises, pauses, and mindfulness practices into the classroom creates a space where students feel grounded and connected to themselves, which opens the door to deeper engagement with theological concepts. This allows all participants in the classroom to become attuned to their physical and emotional states, which establishes a basis for transparency and honest exchange. I found this most noticeable during weekly check-ins at the start of each class session; students became acutely aware of and honest about their personal well-being. They quickly grew comfortable asking questions of themselves and one another, admitting what they didn't know, and resting in the experience of not having to have all the answers. They were given the opportunity to slow down, reflect, and engage with the class material on a deeper level that invited an awareness of the personal impact of the process. This created a shift from the fast-

paced, often stressful nature of traditional learning environments to one where students could process information in conversation with their inherited assumptions and experiences with clarity and calmness.

This enhanced self-awareness allows joy to enter the learning process. While the classroom experience often centers on heavy discussions around complex topics of faith and reimagining God through a new lens, integrating a process of mindfulness and a rhythm that brings us back to the core foundation of the class can introduce moments of joy and release. These moments remind students of the lightness that can coexist with rigorous learning, encouraging them to approach the content and coursework with a sense of balance. Joy, in this context, becomes an integral part of the classroom ecology, a practice that opens space for gratitude and wonder amidst academic challenges.

Moreover, a pedagogy of breath helps create spaces of vulnerability within the classroom. Including the act of intentional breathing at various points and introducing breath weeks during which students engage an intentional process of reflection on course material in a more contemplative rhythm requires them to slow down and become more attuned to their inner lives. When students breathe deeply and intentionally, they may find themselves more willing to share personal experiences, theological struggles, or uncertainties about the subject matter. Breath, in this instance, becomes a grounding force that invites vulnerability amid cultural, social, and personal differences. It has the potential to cultivate a sense of community and belonging, reducing feelings of isolation or alienation, and when held within a supportive environment, invites authentic dialogue and richer reflection. This collective practice can help to dismantle hierarchies within the classroom, as everyone, regardless of their background, participates in the same embodied practice. Students feel comfortable expressing themselves and engaging in difficult conversations, knowing they are supported in a compassionate environment. Breath, therefore, is a practice that centers the individual and fosters collective openness.

Risk-taking and mutual exchange are also facilitated through the mindful integration of a rhythm of breath. At the heart of the breath pedagogy is the value for learning that encourages students to take risks – both in terms of intellectual exploration and personal growth. This sometimes requires a slower pace in the dissemination of information and space to reflect in order to venture into the risk taking. This approach challenges the dominant paradigms of control and productivity that often shape educational systems and shifts the focus from rigid structures of learning and outcomes to a more fluid and responsive learning experience. This takes place when students are allowed to center themselves in meditative and reflective ways as they bring their full selves into the room. In doing this, students may feel more equipped to challenge preconceived notions or explore uncomfortable theological ideas. Moreover, when this practice is viewed as a shared experience, it cultivates mutual exchange between students, creating a rhythm of give-and-take in conversations and interactions. This openness leads to a more dynamic and fluid learning environment.

Photo by Susan Wilkinson

In this atmosphere of mutual

exchange, imagination and creativity are also empowered. Breath has long been associated with the divine act of creation, and in the classroom, it can serve as a reminder of the boundless possibilities inherent in theological study. When students are encouraged to think creatively and bring questions, they are freed. This dispels competitive assumptions and performances in the class, and invites them to dream, imagine, and cocreate new theological insights. This act of creation, inspired by the sacred nature of breath, can unlock new ways of understanding the divine, human relationships, and the world around them, thus fostering a deep sense of community in which they are drawn into a collective experience of learning. This shared breath of learning becomes a metaphor for the shared life of the classroom, where each participant contributes to the whole, and they build a sense of solidarity and mutual care, understanding that their individual contributions are part of a larger, interconnected ecosystem.

Moreover, a pedagogy of breath emphasizes the holistic nature of learning, acknowledging that students are not just intellectual beings but emotional and spiritual ones as well. Traditional classroom settings often prioritize cognitive development, leaving little room for the emotional or spiritual aspects of a student's experience. However, by incorporating breathing practices and shaping a course in the rhythm of breath with intentional concern for the whole being in the learning process, we can validate the full spectrum of human experience. This approach recognizes that students' well-being is integral to their success and that fostering an environment where they feel fully human is just as important as the academic content being delivered. This validation allows students to bring their whole selves into the classroom, encouraging a deeper connection to the material and to each other. When students are given the space to breathe they are also given the space to feel, which enhances their ability to engage in critical thinking and creative expression. In this work, breath serves as both a spiritual and pedagogical tool, making room for divine presence to move through the classroom in ways that are life-giving, transformative, and deeply connective.

CONCLUSION: LIVING ON THE OTHER SIDE OF EXHALE

I want to revisit my student's experience from fall 2019. She entered the classroom, took a seat, and exhaled; and for at least the next 180 minutes, she experienced the other side of that exhale – the side that connected her to her humanity and enabled her to embrace it as the place of pursuit. In that moment, the exhale became more than just a release of breath; it became a grounding

Figure 2. Ekene Ijeoma, Black Forest: Melvindale, 2022. *(Photo by Anthony Eggert. Courtesy of Ekene Ijeoma.)*

force that opened space for vulnerability, authenticity, and deep learning. What happens when our learning and our living privilege our humanity and all that it brings – messiness, chaos, confusion, joy, laughter, flaws, and brilliance found in the cracks of the veneer? Learning becomes transformative. The classroom shifts from being a space of rigid performance to one of genuine connection,

where students can bring their whole selves, unpolished and raw, into the process.

When we privilege our humanity, we create room for the imperfections and complexities that make us who we are. Instead of demanding polished answers or perfect comprehension, we allow space for questions, doubts, and explorations that are often more meaningful than any tidy conclusion. The joy and laughter that arise from shared experiences, the confusion that leads to deeper understanding, the flaws that reveal untapped brilliance – all of these become integral to the learning journey. In this environment learning is no longer a performance but a process of becoming, where students are invited to explore not just the content at hand, but their own evolving identities. By embracing humanity in its fullness, we affirm that learning is not just about the acquisition of knowledge, but about the cultivation of wisdom, empathy, and personal growth. In doing so, we acknowledge that the journey of learning, like the breath itself, is cyclical, messy, and deeply connected to the essence of being human.

What does it look like to live on the other side of exhale? In the realm of theological education, I believe it encapsulates a pedagogical approach that embraces the fluidity and resilience of both professor and students. It recognizes the classroom as a dynamic space where the breath, often a metaphor for life's cyclical challenges and reprieves, plays a crucial role in shaping the learning experience. This pedagogy acknowledges that education is not a linear journey but a series of inhalations – moments of intense focus and effort – and exhalations – moments of reflection, rest, and integration. By living on the other side of exhale, facilitators commit to fostering an environment where the pressures of learning are balanced with the necessity of pause, encouraging students to not only acquire knowledge but also to internalize and personalize their growth. This approach underscores the importance of patience, mindfulness, and the understanding that true learning often occurs in the spaces between action and reflection.

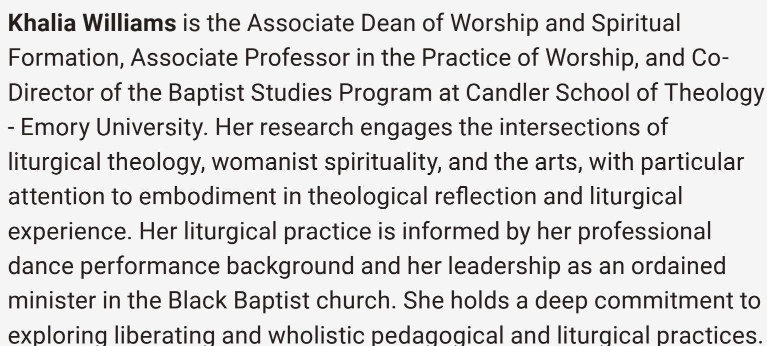
By embracing breath as a pedagogical tool, we not only enhance student learning but also contribute to the creation of more humane and just educational spaces, where every student can thrive. Breath, in the context of education, has the power to connect us to our inner selves and to one another in ways that conventional methods often neglect. The simple act of mindful breathing can foster a deeper sense of presence, helping students center themselves amidst the complexities of academic life. Shaping our teaching in a rhythm of breath encourages reflective practices that honor the whole self – body, mind, and spirit – allowing for a learning experience that goes beyond the transmission of knowledge to one that nurtures personal and communal transformation. A pedagogy of breath is not merely about adding breathing exercises to the curriculum, but about fundamentally reshaping how we approach teaching and learning. It challenges the relentless pace and pressure of traditional education, offering an alternative rhythm that values pause, reflection, and the nurturing of the whole person. Can we breathe? With intentionality, care, and a commitment to justice in education, the answer can be yes; yes, we can breathe, and in doing so, we can build spaces where every student can thrive and flourish.

In the pursuit of a pedagogy of breath, we are invited to reimagine the classroom as a space not merely for intellectual growth but for holistic flourishing. Breath, in its simplicity, holds the potential to connect us to ourselves, each other, and the larger world, creating opportunities for empathy, creativity, and justice to emerge in the learning process. As we become more attuned to the rhythms of our own breath, we can better understand the varied and complex lives of our students, meeting them where they are with compassion and care. The question, “Can we breathe?” becomes not only a call to acknowledge our humanity, but also a challenge to cultivate spaces where all can breathe freely – where education is a liberating force that honors the dignity of every

student. In this vision, breathing is not just a personal act but a radical gesture toward equity and shared learning. In the spirit of this pedagogy, let us conclude with a deep, cleansing breath…

take a deep breath in through your nose…
and exhale through your mouth.

Amen.



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