

Chapter Six

Embodied Pedagogies: Engaging Racism in Theological Education and Digital Cultures

In the past several chapters I have tried to take up issues of pedagogy in theological education that are particularly pertinent to digital cultures and digital technologies, more specifically. I have suggested ways to think about what we do in theological education—our goals, our epistemologies, our frameworks for learning design, some of the particular issues inherent in digital technologies—and one of the central themes interwoven amongst all of these essays has been the embodied nature of our learning and reflection.

One of the reasons why I find the work of feminist theologians and theologians from marginalized communities so powerful is precisely because they have long been attentive to this element of theological reflection—our embodiment—and particularly sensitive to the ways in which specific embodiment (being female, being “of color”) can be grounds for trivialization or dismissal of presence. Throughout my earlier essays in this book I have repeatedly tried to problematize the notion that digital technologies are somehow essentially “disembodying,” although in some ways they clearly can help us to “get beyond” certain aspects of our bodiliness. We can transcend geography or time, for instance, in asynchronous learning, or we can subvert preconceived interpretations of body language.

There is one particular set of issues, however, associated with our “embodiedness” that deserves an exploration devoted to its specific dynamics, and that is the case of engaging racism in the theological academy, particularly by those of us who carry white skin privilege. There are some profound ways in which digital technologies can invite people into meaning-making in ways they would not otherwise be immediately open to. I can think of several course conversations, for instance, that sprang up when one or another of my students assumed that the whole class was white (a common assumption on the part of

many white people), when in fact it was not. But I think there are many ways in which digital technologies might simply “re-inscribe” such biases as well.

So it is, now, to these issues that I turn. I need to begin in a more personally revealing tone, for I am situated very specifically and must speak from that location. I am a white and middle-class citizen of the United States living in a predominantly white and middle-class neighborhood in the United States and teaching at a predominantly white and middle-class seminary in the United States. Slowly, painfully, I am coming to recognize the stark contradictions and silently violent tolerance present in the communities I grew up within, and within which I still find my home. How is it possible to hear the gospel and at the same time “know” that people of color are “naturally” more poverty-stricken, or “naturally” more violent, or “naturally” less sophisticated in their theologies?

These are the kinds of knowledge I’m slowly beginning to recognize have permeated my worldview. Intellectually I don’t believe any of these statements; I abhor them. And when I see a strong young black man walking down the street toward me, I do an internal calculus—is this someone to be afraid of? My next thought is to recognize that calculus and name it as racist, but it nonetheless happens. Another example: I have heard myself describe an African-American philosopher as “an incredibly brilliant black woman.” When was the last time I described a white philosopher as “an incredibly brilliant white woman”? The institutionalized racism of the United States has seeped into me from birth, it has “formed and transformed” me at a very deep level. This is a very painful example of a “null” curriculum operating.¹

In a U.S. context where the history of the civil rights movement is being rewritten, where we cannot even maintain the most basic and humble of affirmative action programs, where the poverty and degradation facing people of color in this country is growing exponentially every day, people of faith—white people of faith—must act; we must unpack our complicity in the structures of oppression and transform our formation. We must think about how and why and what we know in our very bones about white dominance, and we must reconfigure the destructive, destroying aspects of that epistemology. Given the existing “digital divide” between predominantly white communities and communities of color, is it even possible to promote the use of digital technologies within theological education?²

My primary answer is of course it’s possible, but only if white theological educators consciously bring antiracist pedagogies into our teaching. Indeed, in some ways my answer to this question mirrors my answer to the question of whether or not digital technologies can be used within theological education more generally—yes, of course, but only if we are intentionally reflective about how we do so.

NONFOUNDATIONAL KNOWLEDGE

“Nonfoundational knowledge,” writes Bruffee, is

an alternative to this traditional, cognitive, foundational idea. It assumes that knowledge . . . is a community project. People construct knowledge by working together in groups, interdependently. All knowledge is therefore the “property” not of an individual person but of some community or other, the community that constructed it in the language spoken by the members of that community.³

This is a definition that has much in common with the Palmer ideas I broached in chapters 1 and 2 of this book. It suggests that at any given point any one person is a member of many diverse “knowledge communities.” This description may seem awkward, or even contradictory, at first, but upon reflection it is quite useful for describing contemporary experience. The graduate theological frameworks that use words like “hermeneutics” and “epistemology” are one set of languages for describing contemporary experience that make it possible for me to converse with scholars across the United States about the dynamics of religious experience or the intricacies of popular culture. When I am speaking with my friends about our favorite television show or discussing what hymns to choose for a Sunday liturgy, I use very different words. My most difficult personal struggle is often to make sense of these very different languages. Am I talking about utterly dissimilar things, or is there some kind of narrative thread that ties them together? A framework that describes knowledge creation as social and embedded in knowledge communities is not only descriptive of my personal experience but also suggests some very important questions that need to be asked.

One question we must ask within theological education, a pressing question whether we are talking about media cultures more generally or racism in particular, concerns the centers of power that structure graduate theological education. What are the “discourses” I’m attempting to work within? To which knowledge communities am I drawn, and why? As a professor teaching in a Lutheran seminary, my answers to these questions are many. I want to be able to “speak the language” of religious education—both in the contexts where it is most often practiced and in the academic corridors where it is researched. I want to have a biblical imagination and some degree of theological complexity. I want to be fluent in the languages of higher education. I want to be able to have a voice in the larger professional organizations to which I already belong (APRRE, AAR/SBL, CTSA, and so on). But I also want to hold on to the languages I flourished in prior to my entrance into academe. I need the energy, critique, and vision of the very diverse feminist community that’s nurtured me all these years. I need the ritual, the sacramentality, the global community that

is the Catholic Church. I need to be able to continue to make sense to my extended family, to the base communities I've been involved in over the years, to my longtime friends and partners in activism. And more than anything, I want to be able to give something back to these communities that have nurtured me.

Bruffee eloquently summarizes my dilemma: how am I to value the knowledge communities from which I've come while still gaining fluency in those to which I'm drawn? In considering the differences between the two lists noted above, one characteristic is starkly present to me: the former list privileges one particular kind of knowing, one set of "languages"—and with the possible exception of practitioners of religious education, they all "speak" in academic English—while the latter list is more varied and supportive of ways of knowing that emerge in words of passion, commitment, liberation, love.

Yet even the driest academic English has found ways to speak to Christian commitment. Even the most arcane prose deconstructs patriarchal institutions and attempts to reconstruct a more just community. I have had the opportunity in my academic work to study feminist theology, to speak of "transformative pedagogies," to study the delicate inner dynamics of spirituality. Much of the work I've done, the books and articles I've read, tries to maintain a connection between theory and practice, tries to embody "praxis" in quite sophisticated ways.

Yet what does it mean that in years of work within theological education, while I've read extensive treatments of sexism in theology, I haven't read similarly sophisticated treatments of racism in theology? It is not because they are not available. West, Cone, Eugene, Walker, and many others have offered trenchant critiques from within a Christian and academic context. And I don't think it's because I or my colleagues are trying to deny that racism exists. On the contrary, writers such as Groome cite it as one of a number of unjust dynamics Christians need to encounter and fight against. I think the problem is a more thoroughgoing one: the academy in the United States is fundamentally structured, like most of U.S. culture, in support of white supremacy. The professional context I'm drawn to—research and writing in the area of religious education—is a knowledge community fundamentally structured in support of white supremacy.

Does that mean that it's a community that practices blatant racism? Far from it. Overt racism carries very strong sanctions, particularly within an academic institution. But subtle racism, the kind that supports a knowledge community that is unaware of its "whiteness" and the extent to which its practices and languages support that "whiteness," is pervasive. With thanks to McIntosh, I have started to try to identify the privileges that accrue to me because of the color of my skin. McIntosh writes:

I was taught to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended on her individual moral will. My schooling followed the pattern my colleague Elizabeth Minnich has pointed out: whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work which will allow “them” to be more like “us.”

I decided to try to work on myself at least by identifying some of the daily effects of white privilege in my life. I have chosen these conditions which I think in my case attach somewhat more to skin-color privilege than to class, religion, ethnic status, or geographical location, though of course all these other factors are intricately intertwined. As far as I can see, my African-American co-workers, friends and acquaintances with whom I come into daily or frequent contact in this particular time, place, and line of work cannot count on most of these conditions.⁴

McIntosh’s list is long. I will quote four of her recognitions that struck me as powerfully true in my experience and then add some that I am struggling to articulate in the context of a graduate theological education:

13. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.

14. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.

15. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.

16. I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world’s majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.⁵

I will add:

- a. When I assign required texts from the central figures in my field, I can assume they share my skin color, unless otherwise noted. (For example, unless I am teaching about “liberation theology” or “black theology.”)
- b. When I sing a hymn or say a prayer, my skin color is equated with “purity” and “goodness” rather than with “evil” and “sin.”
- c. I can assume that liturgies that use the body language and images I grew up with do not need to be “enculturated” to be reflective of people who share my skin color.
- d. I can assume that the research whose theories I use in my work (for example, “stages of faith development”) was done primarily with people who look like me.

These are simply a few of the signs of white supremacy that occur to me as I try to think about this. They are material conditions, ever-present background to my academic context. But I do not cite them to “get myself off the

hook,” to somehow suggest that the problem is too difficult for any one individual to engage. Far from it! As I hope the beginning of this chapter makes clear, I have already begun the painful process of “consciousness raising.” There are always opportunities to work on these issues. And it is possible to make analysis of racism a central focus in settings where it has not been before. All I am recognizing is that I have not done so, at least not in the focused and central way I would like to.

Why not? There are many answers to that question. On a professional level, dismantling racism has not carried the same incentives in my academic socialization as “learning the literature” has. Developing a philosophy of religious education, understanding developmental psychology, mapping the history of educational practices—without specific attention to the social construction of race—these are all content issues I must be responsible for within my seminary and my larger guild of religious education.

Frankenberg, whose qualitative research on the construction of whiteness among women is exemplary, suggests that there are currently three ways in which the white women she studied understand themselves in relation to racism. She identifies them as “essentialist racism,” “color and power evasion,” and “race cognizance.” “Essentialist racism” is the discourse white people most often recognize as racism. It is a framework for understanding difference that assumes a hierarchical, “essential, biological inequality.”⁶ Early in U.S. history, this is the language in which the category of “race” was developed. Yet it is by no means a historical artifact, for it can be found reemerging in the current “bell curve” hypotheses of Murray and Herrnstein and in certain versions of social policy.

The second moment of discourse Frankenberg labels “color and power evasion.” She describes this language for managing difference as one that asserts “we are all the same under the skin . . . culturally we are converging . . . materially we have the same chances in U.S. society . . . any failure to achieve is therefore the fault of people of color themselves.”⁷ This second language for managing differences in skin color suggests that any differences have not been, nor should they be, materially relevant, although they may perhaps provide an interesting texture to our common life. I believe that it is this second language that is most often implied in practices of “liberal tolerance.” This is clearly an improvement over “essentialist racism” in its assertion that organizing life in raced categories is not appropriate, but it ignores the substantial ways in which white people continue to internalize and institutionalize dominance structured by race.

The third way in which the white women whom Frankenberg studies tried to “think through race” was in terms she labels “race cognizance.” That is, these women

insist once again on difference, but in a form very different from that of the first moment. Where the terms of essentialist racism were set by the white dominant culture, in the third moment they are articulated by people of color. Where difference within the terms of essentialist racism alleges the inferiority of people of color, in the third moment difference signals autonomy of culture, values, aesthetic standards, and so on. And, of course, inequality in this third moment refers not to ascribed characteristics, but to the social structure.⁸

The difference between these latter two forms—color and power evasion and race cognizance—helps to elicit the distinctions between “multicultural education” and “antiracist” education. Grinter distinguishes between the two forms of education when she writes that

multicultural education believes in the perfectibility of the existing social structure, and assimilation of its component cultures into a social consensus with shared values. . . .

In contrast, anti-racist education believes in the reality and significance of conflict in a social system that concentrates power in White, middle-class and male hands, and which discriminates against other groups on grounds of their inadequacy or incompetence. . . .

. . . [M]ulticultural education believes in long-term educational policies that persuade individuals to change their attitudes towards other people and their culture. Racism is seen as an unfortunate personal aberration, based on ignorance and misunderstanding which can be countered by accurate information. . . .

Anti-racist education, in contrast, sees racism as an organizing principle of the social and political structure, closely linked to a system of class and other forms of discrimination that deny human rights: an artificial construct designed to facilitate and perpetuate inequalities. . . .”⁹

I believe my professional socialization has been structured most intently by the second mode suggested by Frankenberg, that of color and power evasion. It has far more often tried to be multicultural instead of being antiracist. Although Frankenberg and Grinter were writing at the dawn of the Web, before it was widespread in use, similar dynamics persist among digital cultures. L. Nakamura, who has written extensively on the social construction of race in digitally mediated environments, labels color and power evasion in cyberspace as “cosmetic multiculturalism” that promotes “a false sense of racial equality—or post racial cybermeritocracy—that actively works to conceal ‘the entrenched racial problems of black and white America.’”¹⁰ Yet she, like Frankenberg, also identifies a form of engagement with race that has the potential to be antiracist. Such engagement she labels a “vexed multiculturalism” that appears in a variety of places, including the film *The Matrix*, where Nakamura identifies a future world that is “emphatically multiracial; rather

than a place where race has been ‘transcended’ . . . a world in which race is not only visible but necessary for human liberation.”¹¹ I think she is working with a concept very similar to Frankenberg’s “race cognizance,” and indeed she argues for similar kinds of self-reflection and critical engagement across a variety of boundaries.

Although there was early euphoria about the possibility of the Web transcending race, careful cultural studies scholars are concluding that such optimism remains more akin to the multiculturalism Grinter identifies rather than the antiracism she urges we must pursue. Is this distinction important? Is it even possible for an already marginal academic environment such as theological education to confront the deeply entrenched power dynamics of academic practice? To speak very personally, can an institution such as mine, an interdisciplinary graduate program straddling the “divide” between theology and religious practice, afford to critique the very ground upon which it is struggling to assert that it has a right to exist? In a context in which specific areas of focus (worship, homiletics, education, pastoral care, for instance) are already criticized for being “too practical” and not “analytical” enough, wouldn’t it be dangerous to threaten our standing even further by taking on such a conflicted issue?

It is in answering this question that a nonfoundational understanding of knowledge becomes most useful. In fact, it is in considering the ramifications of a question even formulated in this way that it is possible to begin to catch a glimpse of white supremacy in action. As Frankenberg illuminates, within a context structured by white supremacy, there is no language for paying attention to it. It feels awkward, for example, every time I write “white supremacy” in the context of my own theological work. That phrase has always conjured up images of the KKK, “skinheads,” and other “Others” from whom I can distinguish myself. The languages, the practices, the methods and pedagogies of graduate theological education in the contexts I’m familiar with have been the “norm,” the standard to which I can (as a white person) reasonably aspire. “Mastering” a discipline is considered a reasonable outcome; in fact, it is the achievement for which the credential of a “master’s degree” is awarded. Yet what has it meant to be a “master” in past U.S. history? Do we (that is, white people) ever hear the past echoes of that word in celebrations in which such degrees are awarded? Let alone question the implicit assumptions of a “master of divinity” degree?

What are the underlying assumptions of a knowledge community that scorns “practice” and privileges “analysis”? In fact, what are the definitions of “practice” and “analysis” implied here? Most often “practice” refers to the embodied experiences of “Others,” while “analysis” refers to the languages, experiences, and tools deemed useful by “Us”—that is, by white, middle-class, male, classically trained academics.

I am painting the picture in stark colors to en flesh Frankenberg's observation that "whiteness, as a set of normative cultural practices, is visible most clearly to those it definitively excludes and those to whom it does violence. Those who are securely housed within its borders usually do not examine it."¹² Thus, we white people don't question what it is that is making us shy away from putting dismantling racism at the heart of our work. Accepting the assumption that if we (that is, white people) "hew" to the straight and narrow we can flourish is itself indicative of conferred dominance, because there are many people for whom no matter what they did, their very presence is questioned. There is no "straight and narrow" in a context that denies existence from the outset.

The answer to the larger question posed above—whether it is possible to ask these questions in an academic environment that is already marginalized—has to be "yes." Not only is it possible, but it is vital, inescapable, crucial. It may even be our existence on the margins of graduate education that is the precondition to allowing such questions to emerge. In order to be able to ask them, let alone think through and act through responses to them, white people must make the epistemological shift away from foundational knowledge and into the framework of an epistemology that is conscious of how socially constructed any kind of knowledge is.

By deconstructing the omnipotent authority of an Enlightenment "subject" whose disembodied, universal eye/I could author knowledge that refused to recognize its thoroughgoing racism, these epistemologies give us new space within which to problematize knowing, within which to recognize not only the partial nature of our knowledge, but the oppressive ways in which it structures our lives. This is the same space in which I assert that theological education must take mediated digital cultures seriously.

There are many differing ways in which feminists deconstruct/reconstruct epistemology. Hankinson Nelson's description of "epistemological community" is one such framework that is very useful. Hankinson Nelson uses "epistemological community" to describe a way of viewing evidence that "construes evidence as communal," that "accepts coherence (and with it explanatory power) as a measure of reasonableness," and that "holds that communities, not individuals, are the primary loci of knowledge."¹³ In this framework, an epistemological community discerns "what can be known" as well as the specific criteria for distinguishing between "truth and error." Yet in the broader framework that grounds an assertion of "epistemological community," there is a recognition of the partiality of any knowledge claim alongside an equal recognition that "beliefs and knowledge claims have consequences."¹⁴ These are claims that are deeply embedded in any number of theological communities as well, whether one speaks of the ways in which

discernment operates amongst a particular religious congregation or of “foundational theology,” to use Francis Schüssler Fiorenza’s term.¹⁵

Earlier in this chapter I suggested that there were many “knowledge communities” to which I am drawn. Each of these could be described as an epistemological community. The dilemma I face in finding ways to translate amongst these communities is that their ways of knowing may be in direct conflict with each other. I could respond to these conflicts in several ways: I could deny that they exist by rooting myself in those communities that construe knowledge similarly and eschewing the rest; I could move back and forth between them using the appropriate language in each and being only partly myself at any one time; or I could try to develop a new language, a “border community,” that could translate among them and articulate a different understanding of “knowing.” Here is a key adaptive challenge, central to the descriptions of theological education I raised in the first chapter of this book.

U.S. culture is thoroughly shaped by a “knowledge community,” an “epistemological community,” that I am labeling “white supremacy.” It is a discourse, a language, marked more by its invisibility to white people than its presence. But absence, as the French philosophers tell us, is as remarkable as presence. The dominating discourse of white supremacy plays a crucial role in shaping the experience of everyone who lives in the United States and beyond. As a white person I can exist within it by denying it, a position comfortably supported by hegemonic apparatuses. I could attempt to be aware of it in contexts where it is obvious—primarily those where white folk are not in control, are in a “minority” position—and thus live in schizophrenia (a point well made by Terry).¹⁶ Or I could attempt to make its language visible, confront its practices, and collaborate on new languages.

Many people have argued that racism is mitigated by digital technologies—not only do they “not know I’m a dog!” but no one “has” to make her or his race obvious. What this argument misses, however, is the underlying, deep, systemic presence of white supremacy that my argument has been tracing. As Nakamura notes:

The study of racial cybertypes brings together the cultural layer and the computer layer; that is to say, cybertyping is the process by which computer/human interfaces, the dynamics and economics of access, and the means by which users are able to express themselves online interacts with the “cultural layer” or ideologies regarding race that they bring with them into cyberspace.¹⁷

I believe that white theological educators in the Christian tradition, if we are to be fully authentic and responsive to the Christian faith we espouse, must be at the leading edge of creating a “border community,” of seeking a trans-

lation that allows us to affirm the call we feel, the gospel we believe in, by deconstructing white supremacy, by constantly, continually, and consistently critiquing our own practices, assumptions, and languages. Sustained contact with communities that do not benefit from the language of white supremacy is crucial in this journey. The Web provides an enormous opportunity to enter into such contact—to “make accessible” to people a variety of epistemological communities. But it also holds the risk of reifying stereotypes from other settings in this emerging culture, creating “cybertypes.”

I can’t be strong enough in my assertion of this statement: there is no real way to dismantle racism without learning about its effects on people whom it seeks to denigrate, deny, destroy. Yet white supremacy, an institution that uses racism as its means of effective power, is an institution created by white people in support of white dominance. Therefore it is up to white people to dismantle it, and much of that work we need to do amidst ourselves. It is not the responsibility of people of color to “teach” us how not to be racist. Whenever a person does reach out to us to do so—I am reminded here of close friends who have shared their pain with me, or the courageous writing of women like Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Lisa Nakamura—we need to value that gift in all of its preciousness and accept it with great humility.

Will the border language(s) we create have to be utterly relativist? Will it be possible to learn/create/enjoin a language that shapes a knowledge community that is both actively antiracist and yet also affirming of the global relatedness, the universality that is so often claimed for Christian knowing? This is not a question that I can answer. A notion of “epistemological community” suggests that within the dominant paradigms white people currently inhabit, such universality makes little sense. Yet the Christian community has been affirming for centuries that it carries a truth that exists for all peoples in all times. Historically that faith has been a resource both for oppression and for resistance to oppression. The search for a universal language is not the one to which I am called right now. As a white person living in the United States, I have benefited from the assumption of such a language and the powers and practices used to enforce it. Instead, I must stand on its borders, working to deconstruct such power and authority and having faith that Christian global relationship can and will continue.

LEARNING TO DISMANTLE RACISM

What do these reflections mean for the practice of theological education right now? What consequences and opportunities exist for white graduate students, faculty, and academic institutions coming to an awareness of these issues,

particularly in digital cultures? We can begin by acknowledging our complicity in this system. Rather than arguing back and forth over who is racist, we (that is, white people) need to acknowledge that we are implicated in white supremacy. I am racist. I benefit from racism. Coming to that recognition, far from absolving me, in fact necessitates active conversion. Reconciliation requires active engagement in unlearning racism.

Internalized dominance, precisely because of its internalization, is difficult to recognize, let alone uproot. The work of antiracist educators points to some of the steps necessary in doing this work. The first and most important aspect that these educators share is their commitment to understanding racism as a practice created by, and used in the support of, white supremacy, with all that that term implies in the practices of power. A second crucial component these educators share is a recognition of the difficulty white people have of seeing themselves as white. As I noted earlier in this chapter, this inability is directly linked to racism's insidious practices of power: "whiteness, as a set of normative cultural practices, is visible most clearly to those it definitively excludes and those to whom it does violence. Those who are securely housed within its borders usually do not examine it."¹⁸ Yet it is precisely the ways in which racism defines whiteness that make it crucial for white folk to understand its effect on our identities. By not scrutinizing how we are socially constructed as white, how our identities are formed and deformed by the institutionalized practices of racism, we cannot experience ourselves as fully authentic human beings.

By the same token, the possibility of growing into that kind of authentic experience makes fighting racism a journey that is directly in our own self-interest. Terry makes this point well when he writes that

human beings are resources to each other. Racism clouds our capacity to make accurate judgements. Thus Whites end up being stupid, inept, socially incompetent, and fearful. We cannot be with and for ourselves or each other if we do not know who we are and what we are about. Thus racism forces us into inauthenticity and denies humanity to ourselves and to those we touch.¹⁹

It is important for me to clarify here that while I believe that fighting racism is in white people's best interests, it is also clear that we benefit from racism. So confronting it will inevitably require us to engage in the hard work of refusing the material and cultural benefits that derive from it. The way in which racism is intimately entangled in our identities as white folk makes the problem of unlearning it one of having to transform a central aspect of our identities, and having to do so while remaining enmeshed in institutions that themselves form and deform us through institutionalized racism.

Far from being shy about the ways in which our graduate programs in religious education engage “practice,” we need to celebrate and learn from this engagement. We need to be very consciously and consistently active in ensuring that that practice reflects the breadth and depth of varied religious communities. In my own most immediate and personal context, there is not one “Catholic knowledge community.” The advent of digital technologies makes the opportunity to work *with* other diverse Catholic communities more possible within theological education. Within a Christian context—within a wider interreligious context—we (white people) need to be ever vigilant about ensuring the widest possible conversations that take place on the most even ground. This will require a deeply spiritual practice of humility for white people. As in so many other contemplative practices, we need to learn to let go of control, we need to open ourselves up to the unsettling of the frameworks from which we’ve benefited. We (white people) need to place ourselves on uneven ground, on lower ground, on uncertain ground. We might even begin to have some empathy for such a position as we struggle to use digital technologies in which our students are already fluent.

To put it in very concrete terms: how in my daily life am I formed as “white” in a raced society? How do the images, the music, the rituals of liturgy, contribute to solidifying this identity, or resisting it? How does my engagement online shape my identity? Here the work of religious educators concerned with formation and catechesis may be helpful if it can turn their ideas and tools into a focus on how we are socialized into racism. Here the work of asynchronous online educators is also illustrative, because they are finding creative ways to engage students in holistic, embodied reflection that questions the “taken for granted” assumptions of learning.

How do the demands of our graduate programs form or resist white supremacy? If we can begin to uncover how the formation occurs, we can provide alternatives. I’ve already noted the extent to which actively dismantling racism is not a valued component of the knowledge I need to acquire for my professional credentials, but it is crucial for my ability to function authentically and non-oppressively in the communities to which I am drawn and to which I will return. I can work to ensure that every course I teach, every paper I write, contributes to this effort in some way. How does the theologian I’m reading engage racism? Is it a non-issue? Why? What consequences does such silence create? Does the developmental theory I’m tracing account for the differing demands placed upon white people and people of color? Are “higher” stages of development more readily achievable by white people? Warning bells should ring. Does the history I’m tracing engage the material differences present between white people and people of color? When I’m planning liturgy do the images present in the texts and songs I

choose support white supremacy, or unlearning racism? How diverse are the faculty I interact with? How diverse are the graduate students? How diverse are the staff? In what ways do the technologies we're using privilege certain kinds of access? Who is involved in making policy choices about teaching and learning, about digital technologies? These are only a few of the questions that occur to me, and I am certain that there are far more that I have not yet begun to recognize.

Again: why is this important? I could clearly make a theological argument, inviting us to ponder the wisdom of Galatians 3:28, or invoking the claim that "we are many parts, but we are all one Body." But even in narrower terms, the richer the diversity, the deeper the opportunity to learn and to know.

As I have from the beginning of this chapter, I am arguing that racism is a central determining characteristic of life in the United States. If we are to confront it adequately, we white people need to confront our own formation as "white" in a raced society. What are the practices and pedagogies necessary for dismantling racism? I mentioned earlier some of the shared characteristics that antiracist educators bring to the task. I'd like to conclude by lifting up a process that is particularly appropriate in this context.

Katie Cannon has developed a process called "the dance of redemption" that provides a way to approach a specific problem while yet engaging diverse resources and ensuring connections to community(ies) (see fig. 6.1).²⁰ This process has seven steps, envisioned as cyclical and ongoing. There is no

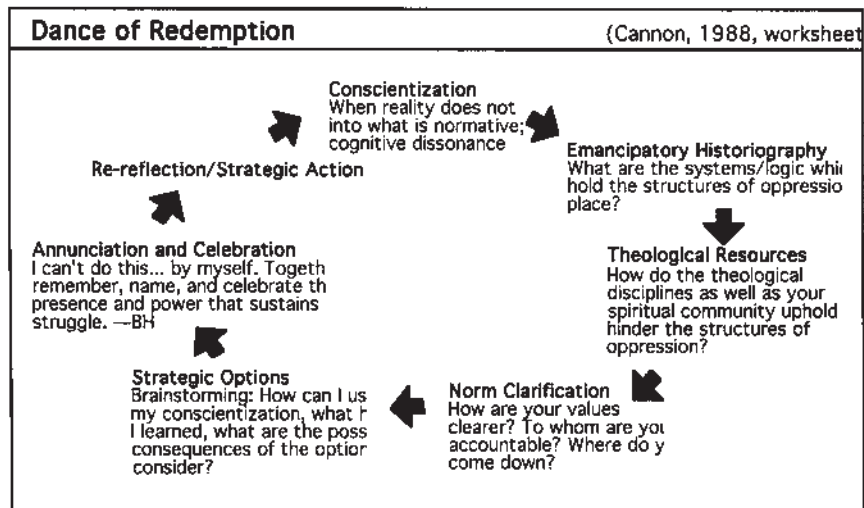


Figure 6.1. Dance of Redemption

way to “finish” this process; one can only move through it with various questions and from various standpoints. Yet it is explicitly designed to provide ways to assess and celebrate progress, thus nourishing one’s continued journey in the “dance.”

The “dance of redemption” strikes me as a rich resource for many reasons, not the least of which is that it provides clear and direct evidence of the need to understand how one is enmeshed in various communities. In addition, the process recommends that conscientization does not proceed directly to action, but is only the beginning point from which a more sustained and comprehensive analysis proceeds. It is also a process that very clearly embodies a belief that no one can undertake the work of building transformative community by themselves. Doing such work is by definition a collective struggle, even while one’s own work has individual components to it.

Cannon’s dance requires the development of strategic action as well as celebration of the process in which we are engaged. Perhaps even more crucially, by making annunciation/celebration a core part of her process, she provides a way to celebrate each step of the journey, to recognize movement and growth, and to remain aware of the progress being made in what is a very long, very difficult journey. Hers is a powerful metaphor for the relational journey that is transformative learning.

It is also a process white people need to engage if we are ever to be capable of authentic religious education of ourselves, let alone anyone else. It is time that graduate programs, graduate students, and faculty take this dance seriously, particularly as we enter new teaching environments such as cyberspace. As Nakamura notes, “the internet is a place where race happens”—and it can also be a place in which we begin to deconstruct and reconstruct our social relationships.

On more than one occasion I have found that engaging issues of racism directly can be managed constructively in online discussions. Discussions that were caught up in emotion in a typical classroom, making it difficult for some students to participate, grew more analytical when the discussion was continued online. It has also been relatively easier for me to develop courses that engage a host of oppressive dynamics in online formats—not because the format necessarily lends itself to the discussion any more than a typical classroom does, but rather because some of the institutions where I have taught were so eager to have classes put into online distributed formats that I was able to negotiate for courses that engaged such content more directly and systematically than so-called core courses typically did. This room for experimentation and exploration is precious and likely to be short-lived. Yet that is all the more reason for theological educators to move into it as fully

and substantively as we can. We must, at the same time, retain the humility and self-criticism that allow us to learn. To return to the passage from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians that I reflected upon in the first chapter of this book:

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh.²¹

As I have argued throughout this book, and in particular in this chapter, our flesh is made visible in so many more ways than simply when we are in each other's physical presence. We are truly embodied people, and using digital technologies to communicate does not erase that embodiment. Given the sheer reach and increasing ubiquity of digital technologies, our embodiment requires ever more thoughtful reflection.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

Books

- Adams, Maurianne, Lee Anne Bell, and Pat Griffin, eds. *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Conley, Dalton. *Being Black, Living in the Red: Race, Wealth, and Social Policy in America*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999.
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- Lipsitz, George. *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998.
- Volf, Miroslav. *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.

Media

- American History X*. DVD. Directed by Tony Kaye. New Line Home Video, 1998.
- Changing Lanes*. DVD. Directed by Roger Michell. Paramount Home Video, 2002.
- Race: The Power of an Illusion*. Executive producer Larry Adelman. California Newsreel, 2003. More information is available on a PBS companion Web site, http://www.pbs.org/race/000_General/000_00-Home.htm (accessed on May 13, 2004).

NOTES

1. See chap. 3 for a discussion of the “null” curriculum.
2. Some of the best information available on the “digital divide” can be found at DigitalDivide.org, a site supported by the Benton Foundation (<http://www.digitaldividenetwork.org/content/sections/index.cfm>) (accessed on May 13, 2004). The Pew Project on the Internet and American Life (<http://www.pewinternet.org/index.asp>) (accessed on May 13, 2004) also hosts a number of important studies, including several that deal with digital issues and communities of faith in the United States.
3. Kenneth Bruffee, *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority of Knowledge* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 222.
4. Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” *Peace and Freedom* (July/August, 1989), 10.
5. McIntosh, “Unpacking,” 11.
6. Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) 14.
7. Frankenberg, *White Women*, 14.
8. Frankenberg, *White Women*, 14.
9. Robyn Grinter, “Multicultural or Anti-racist Education? The Need to Choose.” In *Cultural Diversity and the Schools: Education for Cultural Diversity, Convergence, and Divergence*, ed. J. Lynch, C. Modgil, and S. Modgil (London: Falmer Press, 1992), 101–2.
10. Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 21.
11. Nakamura, *Cybertypes*, 73.
12. Frankenberg, *White Women*, 228–29.
13. Lynn Hankinson Nelson, “Epistemological Communities,” in *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993), 131.
14. Nelson, “Epistemological Communities,” 151.
15. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, *Foundational Theology: Jesus and the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1984).
16. Robert Terry, “The Negative Impact on White Values,” in *Impacts of Racism on White Americans*, ed. Benjamin Bowser and Raymond Hunt (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1981).
17. Nakamura, *Cybertypes*, 3.
18. Frankenberg, *White Women*, 228–29.
19. Terry, “Negative Impact,” 149.
20. Katie Cannon, “The Dance of Redemption.” Lecture given at a Grailville Workshop done jointly with Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, December 1–3, 1989, Grailville, Loveland, OH. The image is taken from the worksheet that was handed out as part of Cannon’s presentation.
21. 2 Cor. 4:8–10, NRSV.

