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Transforming Immersion Pedagogies in Theological Education

Katharine E. Lassiter¹ & Melinda A. McGarrah Sharp²

It almost seems trite to acknowledge that there is *too much* suffering in this world. For theological educators, there are already plenty of case study materials to learn to craft and test theological commitments in practice in the most difficult of circumstances. Yet, human suffering and attending to the relentless conflicts and tragedies, births and renewals in our shared pasts and present experiences are part of our work. This is in fact the sacred starting point for theological educators, as well as pastoral caregivers. How are we called to teach into and from suffering? How do we learn about the promise of human flourishing? This special guest issue of *Sacred Spaces* takes up these timely questions to reflect on immersion pedagogies in theological education. Contributors from seven different institutions of theological education see immersion pedagogies as teaching and learning practices that dive right into the messiness and longings of human life across time and space. From their vast experiences as students, pastoral leaders, community leaders, and theological educators, contributors address transforming immersion pedagogies for the sake of bearing witness to and sparking deeper responses to suffering, trauma, memory, hope, community, and more.

Immersion pedagogies take many different forms: travel seminars, contextual education, experiential learning outside the classroom, and immersion in the world inside the theological classroom through guest speakers and innovative arrangements. Across many forms, immersion

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teaching and learning is grounded in intercultural experiences and invites participants to cross borders not always navigated in the traditional or online theological classroom. Immersion pedagogies present opportunities for transformation of self, other, and community, whether enacted at the local, domestic, or international ecological level; students and teachers agree that immersion courses are transformative and present opportunities for deep engagement on many fronts. Yet immersion pedagogies also present risks of exploitation and take a toll on participants, leaders, host communities, translators, and guides.

Transformation through a mutually beneficial process for all parties is not a guaranteed outcome of immersion learning. Instead, immersion pedagogies that seek to be truly transformative are often met with tactics of resistance and strategies of domination at multiple levels of scale and from varying parties in response to the threats posed by them. There are as many risks as there are possibilities when teaching immersively. The stakes are high as learners leave their physical, emotional, and spiritual comfort zones, as our contributors note. Immersion pedagogy is a more raw form of learning and teaching. As such, safety is not guaranteed. Contributors to this volume argue that transforming immersion pedagogies requires holding these real risks in tension with incredible opportunities. Thus immersion pedagogies in theological education present a unique invitation to grapple with suffering and flourishing.

Immersion pedagogies grapple with suffering and flourishing at multiple intersections, including intersections of the personal and the systemic. Addressing dehumanizing violence and naming complicity with Empire drives our contributors to teach toward intercultural empathy, radical compassion, solidarity, and beloved community. They show us that every iteration of a course requires innovation, and, every iteration, like immersion pedagogy itself, is provisional and experimental, a thoughtful first word and not the last. Immersion pedagogies, then, can be active
pedagogies of resistance. They can subvert colonizing epistemologies and practices. However, these commitments don’t just flow from the form of immersion, as immersion in other cultures and contexts can just as easily be used as an instrument of violence, historically and today. Therefore, our contributors refuse to remain in silence or paralysis, and instead name grief, anger, confusion, and trauma. They do not pretend to have arrived at the best way, the perfect itinerary, the least complicated way to teach and learn. They wrestle and engage deeply, and train their theological students to do likewise.

Gregory Ellison III, Emory University Candler School of Theology, and Blanches Paula, Universidade Metodista de São Paulo, Brazil, share letters between each other as they reflect on a sustained mutual immersion where each hosted the other in Atlanta, Georgia, and in São Paulo, Brazil. These letters reflect the personal nature of relationships that undergird best practices of immersion pedagogy before, during, and well after any one immersion moment, day, or week. These letters also reveal the beauty and challenge of translation as colleagues across different countries learn to embrace the process of communicating and translating gratitude, hopes, and yearnings.

Shelly L. Rambo, Boston University School of Theology, asks readers to consider the impact of a trauma-informed pedagogy of immersion in “When Traumatic Histories Cross: Rethinking the Pedagogy of Theological Travel Seminars.” Rambo problematizes the meeting of unshared histories and conceptualizes the role of productive memory as students learn about the meaning of 1965 to Indonesians, a year marking mass genocide carried out by both military troops and neighbors indoctrinated into the perceived threat of communism. Describing her partnership with Rev. Dr. Septemmy E. Lakawa, professor at Jakarta Theological Seminary, Indonesia, Rambo offers readers a posture of multidirectionality as pedagogical practice. She challenges readers to
allow uncomfortable traumatic memories to live on as truth is told, trusting that Spirit is also in that work. What lingers through immersion often cannot be spoken aloud, yet.

Michael S. Koppel, Wesley Theological Seminary, writes that immersion learning creates global connections in “Immersion Pedagogy: Connecting the Dots.” Reflecting on his experiences leading immersion travel seminars to China, Koppel describes immersion pedagogy as cultural, affective, and sacramental and gives authority to the experience of connecting the dots. Dot by dot, location by location, immersion by immersion, Koppel shows us how to risk by asking questions about religious freedom and religious repression through immersion in the Chinese context. In taking up these questions, Koppel invites readers to grapple with how to teach “the soul of a place and not just information about it,” and to revel in the joyous surprise of human connection extending across time and space.

Kathleen D. McCallie, Phillips Theological Seminary, takes up questions of pedagogical resources in “Towards a Pedagogy of Privilege.” She constructs a pedagogy of privilege to counter the destructive and dehumanizing practice of poverty tourism and charity models of service-learning in describing the pedagogical practices she deploys during her travel course to Nicaragua. She argues that theological narratives of global citizenship must be accompanied with acknowledgment and development of a counter-narrative of elitism. Insightful and practical, McCallie shows us how to dismantle privilege and call out poverty tourism, uncomfortable question by uncomfortable question, as we plant seeds of hope that fall on good soil, nurtured and tended for justice and peace.

Katharine E. Lassiter, Mount St. Joseph University in Cincinnati, offers readers two complementary articles on an immersion pedagogy which does not travel more than ten miles from the west side of Cincinnati, Ohio. In “Flipping Immersions: Decolonizing Pedagogies of Sacred Spaces: The e-Journal of the American Association of Pastoral Counseling (2018), vol.10
Disability,” Lassiter uses the flipped classroom as a metaphor for the practice of immersion pedagogy, asking readers to consider where and how learning occurs when decolonizing practices are intentionally embodied. Likewise, in “Reflections from Pedagogical Frontlines,” she recounts raw and personal stories that reflect on some of the dangers and rewards of being fully aware and fully immersed. Both pieces disrupt any illusion that teachers, learners, or administrators may have about the stamina required or hard grace needed to teach immersively for justice, personal and social transformation, and spiritual revolution.

Melinda A. McGarrah Sharp, Columbia Theological Seminary, considers immersion pedagogies to offer invitations to deeper, more long-standing practices of solidarity in “Prelude to Decolonizing Immersion Pedagogy: Four Movements.” Sharp uses the metaphor of prelude to indicate the invitational nature of immersion pedagogies. Drawing on historian Amy Lonetree whose work weaves museum practices and legacies of trauma particularly for indigenous communities, Sharp writes about curating an immersion learning environment that awakens to the risks and indeed presence of dehumanization and exploitation. She offers many practices to support the deep awakening that she argues is and should be provoked in immersion learning experiences, moving beyond simple notions of hospitality or intercultural exchange.

Immersion pedagogies break the traditional form of theological education by traveling across borders, bringing border-crossing into the classroom, and shrinking the illusion of disconnection between theological learning and the deepest human longings of the world. Therefore, we’ve attempted to mirror some of the disruption of form within this volume itself where contributors indeed respect and share passionately about the sacred spaces of teaching and learning in deeply embodied and collaborative ways. From letters to narrative to offering the reader a window into their own wrestling, contributors of this volume offer urgent questions, personal
reflections, and penetrating practices culled from navigating teaching and learning in ways that are transforming immersion pedagogies.

This group of theological educators present diverse entry points into immersion pedagogies in theological education. Together, contributors raise significant questions and offer best practices. This special issue of Sacred Spaces arose from noticing that these contributors and peers at other theological schools were grappling with the promises and risks of immersion pedagogy in informal conversations, academic meetings, and individual writing projects. When one of us was asked to guest edit a collective reflection through this special issue, we decided to approach the venture collaboratively, modeling a best practice in immersion pedagogy. When sending invitations to potential contributors, we conducted an informal audit of just who is teaching immersion pedagogies in theological schools accredited by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). We were surprised to find that most, but certainly not all, teachers of record appear to be white women.

It was not difficult to find white-identifying women willing to contribute to the volume. However, it is worth noting that half of our potential white-identifying women contributors who initially planned to write for the volume were not able to do so, and had to instead focus on pressing institutional, community, and personal demands. Similar demands prevented participation of several potential contributors across multiple identities and institutional affiliations. This led us to ask another set of critical questions that are ripe for ongoing engagement around gender and racial justice in the theological workplace. Who is doing this work and why? Who is not doing this work and why? How are faculty and staff doing this work supported and assisted, whether through compensation, course-load considerations, or tenure and promotion policies? We are glad to report that it was also not difficult to find a beautiful diversity of passionate theological educators both
who were engaged in innovative immersion pedagogies and also who were critical of immersion pedagogies for many of the reasons articulated across the articles in this volume. We believe the volume is better for it.

As guest co-editors, we are delighted to present this edited collection of articles that invite you to grapple with us through the challenges and opportunities of immersive pedagogies that paradoxically reveal many dynamics already yet often less visibly at play in life and learning together. What do you see as the unique opportunities of immersion pedagogies? How do you acknowledge and navigate the risks? What institutional supports are needed and what institutional structures need to be dismantled? What are the deeper and more longstanding implications that exceed any one course of study or intercultural exchange? Thank you for journeying with us into these questions as we seek to participate in transforming immersion pedagogies in theological education, and, indeed, transforming ourselves and our world.
Immersion Affection: Gregory Ellison II and Blanches de Paula Remember the Fearless Power of Intercultural Exchange

Gregory Ellison II³ & Blanches de Paula⁴

Abstract In this scholarly production, Gregory Ellison II and Blanches de Paula embody the epistolary tradition to write to each other about their powerful, shared experiences teaching and learning together in both the Brazilian and United States contexts. Reminiscent of the sacred text “love one another in mutual affection” from Romans 12:10 (NRSV), Greg and Blanches invite the reader to peek into their mutual processes of making sense of their vocation as shaped by a perhaps unlikely mutual immersion. They offer a different form of reflection, showing to readers the affection and friendship that can develop through immersion pedagogy as well as revealing the complexity of translation at every level. Exchanging letters is one of the forms by which Ellison and Paula continue to model the ongoing work of graciousness, hospitality, trust-building, and authenticity required to liberate education vis a vis immersion pedagogy, while also making visible pedagogical, border, and linguistic crossings.

Key words Intercultural exchange; pastoral theology; U.S. – Brazil; Rilke; letters.

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January 27, 2018

Rev. Blanches de Paula, Ph.D.
Academic Dean and Professor of Pastoral Theology
Universidade Metodista de São Paulo
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Dear Blanches,

I pray that this message meets you well and in good health. It is really hard for me to believe that we met nearly four years ago. To me, it feels like we have known each other for ages. Perhaps this kinship comes from our shared calling to care for those who are overlooked, unacknowledged, and underserved. This connection also emerges from our disciplinary interests and research in pastoral theology. However, I think the most profound tie between us is the radical hospitality taught to us a long time ago in our families of origin. We both originate from large families that shared meals together, addressed conflict directly, and utilized faith and perseverance to overcome hardship. Based on our shared passions in ministry and scholarship, and the similarities in our families of origin, it comes as no surprise that I see you as a sister.

Even though I view you as kin, I admit that in the frenzy of life, I have failed to stay in touch in the ways that I should. For this reason, I am grateful for the prompting of our dear friend, Dr. Mindy McGarrah Sharp, to publish this first round of a series of letters about the ways in which our ministry, research, and teaching have intersected and will continue to do so. Mindy knows that in May 2014, I traveled to Universidade Metodista de São Paulo (UMESP) to serve as a visiting professor. She is aware that in just 15 days, I preached five times, offered ten lectures, and led two Fearless Dialogues conversations. What she may not know is how much I learned from you, your colleagues, students, and parishioners. She likely is unaware of our two hour talk in the park, where we outlined a course for students at Emory and UMESP to learn together in a virtual classroom. She probably does not know about the dozens of conversations we brokered between our deans to negotiate your sabbatical visit to Candler in Fall 2016. Mindy would not be aware of the life-changing conversations and the unorthodox pedagogy in the class we designed and co-taught that fall entitled, “Care of Souls, Care of World.” Beyond our inner circle, only a handful know about the book we are working on with a dozen colleagues that remembers the life and legacy of Howard

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Thurman. Through Mindy’s invitation, we are now afforded the opportunity to intentionally document our unfolding journey. For this, I am grateful.

I have always been a fan of the epistolary tradition. As you know, one of my favorite books, one that we read in “Care of Souls, Care of World,” is Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet*. In that text, the two interlocutors engage in conversations about writing and life. It is my hope that in our exchanges we will take the opportunity to reflect not only on our research, teaching, and ministry, but also be mindful of the many ways that these passions are informing our lives. To this end, my proposal is that we take our time, and like Rilke and his young apprentice, we allow our lives to dictate the substance of our messages. At this point, as you know, Fearless Dialogues is occupying a significant amount of my brain and spirit space. Not only has the book “taken on a life of its own,” but I am teaching the first 13-week Fearless Dialogues class at Candler. We are also working with nearly 1000 different people per month. It would be disingenuous of me to not talk about how this ministry, research, and teaching is informing my daily life. So, in our future correspondences I will respond with this in mind.

Finally, from all of the letters I have read from Rilke, Thurman, and my mentor Mari Evans, I believe it is most important that we speak in our most truthful and authentic voice. To this end, I would encourage you to consider writing your responses in Portuguese. I am certain that our friends Revs. Lucas, Carlos, or Nelson would be open to translating your letters from Portuguese to English. I believe that this work of letter-writing will be informative for both of us and generations of students and educators, who take the effort to traverse cultural boundaries to create shared understandings about culture and life.

I am excited about the journey ahead and the learning that lies before us.

I love you, Sis.

Greg

Gregory C. Ellison II, Ph.D.
Emory University’s Candler School of Theology
Associate Professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling
January 31, 2018

Rev. Gregory C. Ellison II, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling
Emory University
Candler School of Theology

Dear Greg,

I was very glad to receive your letter. It has brought to my memory our times of deep reflection on how we offer pastoral care alongside people close to us and those who are far away. I am thankful for Dr. Mindy McGarrah Sharp's invitation to share our journey of liberating education. These letters will serve as living memories of our process of mutual and liberating learning that touched our lives and provided unforgettable encounters that will continue to teach us.

Yes, I remember that it was 2014 when Professor Paulo Garcia made me responsible for hosting you and preparing your stay in Brazil. I confess that my heart and mind were restless with the responsibility of welcoming you. I was unsure of how our different methodologies and cultures would interact in an educational environment. At that point in my pedagogical journey, I was reflecting on the paths of mutual learning. I frequently questioned:

- What have I learned in these years of teaching and learning with students?
- Are the gaps, hopes, joys, and frustrations that they share with me similar to those I once lived?

Today, I better understand these questions as I contemplate the famous Socratic philosophy, "I know that I know nothing." Faced with the humility of not knowing, I also gain encouragement as an educator from Barbara Brown Taylor's Learning to Walk in the Dark. In retrospect, I wonder, if our first meeting was simply academic would we have gotten to know each other the way we did? In your first few days in Brazil, we had to walk in the dark of cultural differences and teaching styles, and know that we didn't know.

It was then, in the midst of our conversations about liberating education, that we were freed to teach and learn. In time, we gained enough trust to show vulnerability and discuss existential dimensions of being with and in front of each other. From these conversations, we were able to make further connections in the classroom. These fearless dialogues filled our days during your first stay in Brazil. Now, we have become colleagues, friends and, in a special and true way, siblings.

Our informal conversations, our sharing at many tables, our dreams of seeking to integrate our journey with the trajectory of our students are all fearless dialogues. Together, we have built a risky pedagogical walk to expose ourselves and fear less, so that we might live into something new. I believe that our face-to-face

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5 This letter was translated from Brazilian Portuguese to American English by Marli Paupitz.
meeting in 2014 was the first step of a daring pilgrimage. This journey continued in our distance learning “real time” course in 2015, when our classrooms met virtually and then face-to-face when you brought five students to Brazil for a week.

Our journey of friendship and mutual learning moved forward even more when you and your colleagues in Atlanta invited me to take a sabbatical and teach at Candler for five months in 2016. After nearly fifteen years of teaching in Brazil, this first sabbatical of my career was like a “postdoc” that allowed me to breathe and reflect on my vocation as a pastoral theologian. After years of pursuing academic excellence, I slowed down. And I felt lost. I spent nearly five months asking myself and God:

- Who am I when I teach?
- What must I teach?
- When I teach, do I make sense to others? To myself? To God?

The “Care of Souls, Care of World,” course that we co-taught helped me to put these questions into greater context. Howard Thurman’s “Sound of the Genuine” continues to touch me as I wrestle with these questions. I still do not have answers to those questions, Greg. But I have reflected deeply on my place in this world, my vocation as an educator, and the abundant life proclaimed by the Gospel. Our mutual learning over the past several years reverberates in me and brings me into the deep words of Rilke, when he said, “to be devoted to the writing of life, we need to delve into ourselves.”

My appreciation, respect, and affection for your vocation and person.

Your sister,

Blanches

Blanches de Paula, Ph.D.

Academic Dean and Professor of Pastoral Theology

Universidade Metodista de São Paulo
When Traumatic Histories Cross: Rethinking the Pedagogy of Theological Travel Seminars

Shelly L. Rambo

Abstract When theology students from the United States participate in travel seminars, they do not simply learn about the history of other countries; they enter that history in a particular way. Trauma studies indicate that these histories live on in the present. This article explores Michael Rothberg’s concept of multidirectional memory and turns to it to think about theological pedagogy through reflections on a 2017 Jakarta-Boston travel seminar. It proposes that this memory work, rooted within a theological framework, can be productive and can be uniquely facilitated in the context of travel seminars.

Key words Multidirectional memory; traumatic histories; pedagogy; Indonesia 1965; spirit

Introduction

1965. Indonesians know this date. On September 30, 1965, General Suharto, leader of the military, took political control of the country after six leading generals were killed by left-wing communists. This was the story that he told: Communism was an increasing threat to the country, and the murder of the generals represented this threat. Suharto’s quick accession instituted a series of mass killings targeting those affiliated with the Communist Party (PKI). Suharto and his New Order regime fortified a narrative of communist threat that allowed Indonesians to carry out tremendous acts of violence on each other. People

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were pulled from their houses after neighbors outed their party affiliations. According to the Yale University Genocide Studies Program, the mass killings are recognized as one of the worst mass murders of the 20th century (Yale, 2018).

The New Order regime used “1965” as a trope “symbolizing threat, betrayal, and anti-nationalism” (Zurbuchen, 2002, p. 567). In 1984, Suharto commissioned the film, “Pengkhianatan G30s/PKI” (“Treachery of the September 30th Movement/PKI”), which depicted the PKI as savage anti-nationalists. For decades, Indonesian children were taught to remember these events through annual viewings of the docudrama in public schools. Public memory about the events was shaped. The film sealed the political narrative until 1998. Propaganda, political power, and decades of education supporting a particular narrative of what happened, rendered the killings as acts of protection, necessary for ensuring stability. And yet the ‘cleansing’ of Indonesian civilians at the hand of Indonesians remains “indigestible” (Zurbuchen, 2005, p. 14). This official version of 1965 has remained remarkably intact, and Indonesians find themselves “living in the shadow of New Order authorized history” (Zurbuchen, 2005, p. 16).

Five decades later, multiple narratives of 1965 are coming to the surface. Many attempts within Indonesia to expose Suharto’s propaganda were suppressed, especially those before 1998, when Suharto was still in power. In 2003, American filmmaker Joshua Oppenheimer began interviewing survivors of the 1965 killings. Survivors were telling very different stories. The films, The Act of Killing and The Look of Silence brought international attention to 1965, focusing on those who carried out the killing and those seeking explanations about those who had been killed (Oppenheimer, 2012, 2014). Oppenheimer decided initially not to release the films in Indonesia, but the international release was perhaps even more scandalous. His films shed light on Indonesian politics that threatened those in power, many of whom could still be tied to Suharto’s regime. One of the strong messages coming from the films is that Indonesia had not reckoned with what happened in 1965. The truth of the events lives on within the Indonesians.

Attention to the ways that such histories live on is the arena of trauma studies. One of the fundamental insights of trauma is that the past is not simply in the past. It lives on in the present in ways
that are often not registered or recognized. The violence can distort memories to such a degree that survivors often carry knowledge of the event in their bodies without an accompanying narrative. The body is a site of memory and, in Bessel van der Kolk’s words, it “keeps the score” of events that may not be narrated in words (van der Kolk, 2014). The degree to which these events can be accessed and recovered is debated by scholars of trauma. A central concern has always been what happens when the event comes into public consciousness. When memories surface, the context into which they surface matters. With events of such national scope, the narrative formed by political and national leaders often serves purposes that are contrary to individual healing. The public narratives often breed dissonance. They often belie individual experiences of suffering. When truths surface, they are often pushed below the surface again.

1965 does not simply go away. For Dr. Septemmy Lakawa, a professor at Jakarta Theological Seminary, the ways in which 1965 lives on is a matter of theological concern. Church leaders in Indonesia, according to her, need to be able to register the continuing impact of 1965, especially the ways in which the events are still narrated. With the end of Suharto’s government in 1998, the legacy of the New Order government is still being deciphered. Zurbuchen asks: “What does it mean to be Indonesian now, situated in the aftermath of the New Order and enduring economic downturns, political uncertainty, intergroup conflict, separation, and religious extremism?” (Zurbuchen, 2005, p. 13). For Lakawa, Indonesian identity is haunted by this “ever-present past” of 1965 (Cho, 2018). Witnessing to this more complex “now” presents religious leaders with a unique task. Jakarta Seminary has responded to Lakawa’s urging, and the training of religious leaders has expanded to include more focused attention to ministry in the aftermath of violence.

If that history lives on for Indonesians, what is my relationship to 1965, as a theological educator located in the United States? How am I, and students traveling to Indonesia, positioned in respect to these events? Reflecting on a recent partnership between Jakarta Theological Seminary and Boston University School of Theology, my home institution, I aim to give texture to these questions and to argue that it is a central question for theological educators leading cross-cultural short-term immersion experiences, i.e.
travel seminars. If we take into account the ways in which such dates live on, we position ourselves and our students in a particular relationship to historical suffering that is not our own.

Highlighting moments in the Jakarta-Boston travel seminar, this article examines what happens when histories meet within the context of a travel seminar and what theologically and traumatically-informed practices might contribute to productive memory work. A trauma-informed pedagogy brings students into a particular relationship with these histories. Through pedagogical insights informed by literatures in postcolonial studies and critical theory, participants become attuned to the challenges of remembering, of narrating one’s experience, and to the mechanisms and structures that are invested in not having difficult truths brought to the surface (Spivak, 2012). Reflecting on certain "moments" in Indonesia, I want to examine how 1965 might be witnessed in productive ways by those for who do not share this history, but, instead, bring their own histories to meet it. I want to begin to articulate a multidirectional posture that can be cultivated in the immersive experience, perhaps even uniquely so.

In this issue’s exploration of immersive pedagogy, the editors inquire about practices and dispositions that are required for immersion pedagogy. They ask: “What kinds of practices, virtues, dispositions, and/or skills does immersion pedagogy require? . . . What kind of theoretical underpinnings—decolonizing, democratizing, psychological, pastoral, theological—inform immersion pedagogy?” Drawing on the work of Michael Rothberg, I aim to highlight moments of "multidirectional crossing," in which students begin to develop skills for cutting across what he identifies as competitive models of memory (Rothberg, 2009). Rothberg develops the notion of multidirectional memory as a decolonizing modality. I begin to explore, here, a “multidirectional” posture that those engaged in immersion pedagogy might exercise, from which a set of unique practices of reflection and action might arise. The phenomenon of “competitive memory” that Rothberg describes can often be enacted within a course immersion setting. And yet such experiences might yield pedagogical practices of multidirectional memory, a counter-proposal outlined by Rothberg. For theological educators involved in international partnerships, this witness to
histories crossing can also be rendered in terms of the work of the Spirit. In closing, I reflect on the theological dimension of multidirectional crossings.

**Multidirectional memory**

When different histories come together, they often clash or cancel each other out. This is Rothberg’s concern. A scholar whose work focuses on Holocaust representation, Rothberg begins to raise questions about how the Holocaust is positioned in relationship to other histories of suffering. He coins the term multidirectional memory to examine the possibility that events of historical suffering can brought into a productive, rather than a competitive, relationship. He outlines the operations of public memory that elevate one context of historical suffering at the expense of others. This marketplace of memory puts histories of suffering into competition with each other, each vying for recognition. Of direct concern to Rothberg are the ways in which genocidal histories are being positioned in relationship to the Holocaust. Rothberg observes that while the Holocaust and subsequent studies of it defined the field of trauma studies, its status as both the singular and yet universalizing event of historical suffering is problematic. The relationship of other histories to it is strained, revealing a complex set of dynamics that comprise what Rothberg calls the competitive marketplace of public memory. If remembrance of Jewish suffering is at the forefront of public attention, are other histories minimized? Does this remembrance entail, for example, the minimization of the history of chattel slavery in the U.S.? He suggests that public memory operates according to an economy of scarcity. There is only so much room in the public marketplace of memory. Rothberg outlines this economy. The recognition of one history requires discounting another.

This came to life when I was leading a seminary group to Israel/Palestine. After visiting the Holocaust Museum in Israel (Yad Vashem), one of the students expressed visible rage in the group’s evening debriefing that U.S. money was flooding in to support the museum. Why was Jewish suffering more important to remember—more worthy of funding—than a memorial to the violence enacted against Sacred Spaces: The e-Journal of the American Association of Pastoral Counseling (2018), vol.10
African-Americans? He was obstructed from entering into the space of Jewish suffering, because memory operated according to a zero-sum game. This was no fault of the student. It reflected an attunement to the dynamics governing public memory. If each context is vying for recognition, then potential allies become, instead, competitors.

Warding against the competitive framework in which these histories are often placed, Rothberg imagines how to counter this competition. How might “different groups’ histories of victimization” be repositioned (Rothberg, 2009, p. 2)? He writes: “I suggest that we consider memory as multidirectional, as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing: as productive and not privative” (Rothberg, 2009, p. 3). Speaking specifically about Holocaust memory in relationship to American slave history, he says that in the case of multidirectional memory one would “actually use the presence of widespread Holocaust consciousness as a platform to articulate a vision of American racism past and present. This interaction of different historical memories illustrates the productive, intercultural dynamics that I call multidirectional memory” (Rothberg, 2009, p. 3). Instead of histories canceling each other out, Rothberg suggests that memories might meet, mix, and cross. Multidirectional memory appeals to modes of engagement in which the truths of multiple histories can be brought into a productive relationship.

In the case of travel seminars, something could come about by bringing students from different contexts together that could not be achieved by having each study within their own setting. We could think in terms of a multidirectional wager—that something unique is made possible by bringing together very different histories. Rothberg is imagining a site of crossing histories that does not rank one above the other. With an eye on agents and sites of memory (referring to Pierre Nora), Rothberg pursues a “productive, intercultural dynamic” (Rothberg, 2009, p. 5). It is this generative aspect of multidirectional memory that makes it possible to reframe the experience of the student at Yad Vashem. Thinking with Rothberg, how might the experiences of Jewish suffering narrated in the museum inform this student’s understanding of black suffering without discounting the well-warranted anger at the erasure of black suffering in the U.S.? In a competitive model, the student could, in turn, dismiss Jewish suffering because it is not his own. When
the zero-sum game is replaced with a multidirectional frame, this student might experience Yad Vashem differently.

In Rothberg’s chapter on W.E.B. Du Bois’ visit to the Warsaw Ghetto, he probes whether Du Bois’ analysis of the problem of the color line offers something to the understanding of Jewish suffering and whether his experience of the ruins of the Warsaw ghetto transform his understanding of the problem of race in America. DuBois “rethought the color line from the ruins of Warsaw” (Rothberg, 2009, p. 114). Via a reading of Du Bois, Rothberg offers a lesson about how those histories might be related. Standing in the ruins, Du Bois witnesses two histories crossing; it is this dislocation that yields a “methodological innovation” (Rothberg, 2009, p.114). Du Bois casts this experience in terms of resurrection. The image of rising from the ashes, the image of resurrection, is also part of how Du Bois speaks about this crossing of historical problems.

What happens for, and even through, Du Bois is what concerns us here, when thinking in terms of immersive teaching experiences. What facilitates this unique pedagogical position, in which truths can be held as unique and yet generative, yielding insights from one that can turn one differently to the other? For the student physically trembling with anger, what comfort is Du Bois’ posture? How might a multidirectional orientation enable me to facilitate that evening discussion differently, to enable a productive crossing? What precisely happens when histories cross without crossing each other out? It strikes me that those deeply engaged in intercultural education are best positioned to give texture to this multidirectional dynamism of memory.

**Jakarta and Boston**

Septemmy Lakawa and I began to work together when she was a doctoral student at Boston University School of Theology. At the time, I was teaching a course on “Theology and Trauma” and preparing my manuscript, *Spirit and Trauma*, for publication (Rambo, 2010). Lakawa began to weave the insights of Sacred Spaces: The e-Journal of the American Association of Pastoral Counseling (2018), vol.10
trauma studies into her dissertation research focused on the Indonesian context. The context of the aftermath became a starting point for thinking about the mission of church leaders in Indonesia. During her doctoral program, Lakawa reclaimed her dance practice. Her own struggle to hold the memory of her country’s trauma were manifesting physically, both in terms of bodily pain and aesthetic transformation of that pain. After completing her studies, she returned to Jakarta Theological Seminary and began to teach a course focused on theology and trauma.

Both of us believe that the persistence of traumatic histories is a contextual reality shaping theological education. For future religious leaders in Indonesia and in the United States, attention to the ways in which trauma informs not just individual life but collective, and even national life, is critical. To know something about trauma is simply part of what it means to do contextually informed theology. If religious leaders are attuned to the ways in which communities are impacted, to the ways in which they bear something of this traumatic history, then the theological furniture begins to shift.

A shared framework of trauma and theology began to shape our respective pedagogy. The somatic breakthroughs in neurobiology and trauma indicate that trauma lives on in bodies. I incorporated more breath and bodywork into the classroom, at points accompanying the class sessions with an optional yoga practice. For Lakawa, dance became a vehicle for teaching. She began to explore aesthetics as a medium for interreligious healing. If the body is a productive site for healing trauma, could it also be a comparative site for Christian-Muslim encounter? But beyond this, both of us reclaimed theological concepts of witness and Spirit central to the Christian tradition and repositioned them in relationship to interdisciplinary literatures in trauma studies. It was essential for us to name the distinctively theological dimensions of their work. While knowledge of trauma was important, it could not remain separate from the theological task, what was at the core of theological education. I will return to this later.

Lakawa and I began to imagine a collaborative teaching venture in 2015 when she returned to the U.S. on a research leave. In January 2017, Jakarta Theological Seminary and Boston University School of Theology partnered to offer a two-week immersion course in Indonesia. Using the framework of trauma as
a basis for studying the effects of 1965 in Indonesia, we introduced students to the study of historical trauma. Through lecture and discussion, we attuned them to the dynamics of how violence lives on and the ways in which theology is both entangled in the violence and employed as a means of healing. Truth-telling was a way of calling theology to tell truths about its complicity and compliance in political aims. Reading unauthorized narratives, often provided by women, would also place individual efforts to remember and heal alongside authorized political narratives. At various points, we met with religious leaders who were engaged in on-the-ground practices of remembrance and healing. They enacted the different missional stance, proposed by Lakawa. We visited sites of memory and public loss. Attentive to space and bodies, we took the landscape of Indonesia to be a vital partner in our studies.

Given our location, Indonesia was the context under consideration, which required students from the U.S. to learn about Indonesian history, particularly about the events of 1965. For Indonesian students, it involved studying the multiple narratives around 1965. Because of the cultural disparities and physical distance between the regions, the JTS students received different narrative accounts of 1965. The students of Chinese descent reflected on the ongoing tensions of being Chinese, an identity that is literally inscribed on personal ID cards, used for everyday transactions. One student spoke about the experience of discovering that his mother was a member of Gerwani, a women’s organization that came under specific attack by Suharto. For U.S. students, they were learning about another nation’s history for the first time. For Indonesian students, they were learning about the processes by which they came to know this highly politicized narrative.

Although Lakawa and I taught versions of this course within our institutions, this joint course provided an opening to experience the important work that short-term educational partnerships might achieve. In Indonesia, Rothberg’s concept of multidirectional memory was operationalized. The experiences presented us with points that could, if facilitated, becomes multidirectional crossings. The concept of multi-directional memory has gained traction, but it has not been articulated in terms of pedagogy. What could be put in place to facilitate a multidirectional crossing of memory? How could the
convergence of histories of suffering be positive, even productive? In many travel destinations identified by U.S. seminaries, the countries have experienced collective trauma and students are entering spaces of contested memories in which narratives are crossing, and often operating competitively. It is clear that learning about another culture and even its traumatic history has been central to many of these courses. There are also many literatures reflecting on the responsibilities and liabilities of ‘outsiders’ entering into another cultural space. But multidirectional crossings entail productive work at the intersection of histories of suffering.

When histories of suffering are moved out of a competitive relationship, other possibilities arise. One of the biggest yields of the study of 1965 was that the sharing of memories, however partial and incomplete, created pathways for self-reflection and reckoning. This was certainly true for the Indonesians. But the BU students also experienced something unique by their proximate relationship to 1965. Indonesian history is not American history. And yet a particular way of telling stories of 1965 brought those of us at BU into the proximity of the aftermath of 1965. Outside of the U.S. context, students were brought into a different relationship with their own history. By studying the ways in which 1965 lives on in the Indonesian context, they returned to think about how narratives within their own communities were buried, unacknowledged, and sources of truths untold. The Indonesian students were also able to process narratives of the impact of 1965, knowing that this group did not expect their stories to be complete or definitive.

The concept of bearing witness, as both Lakawa and I develop it, suggests that students take in these histories, either consciously or unconsciously. How students understand themselves positioned in relationship to these histories is important. To attune researchers, educators, and students to track the impact of histories with an eye to mobilizing their effects outside of the competitive frameworks (driven by neoliberal interests) is the arena of multidirectional memory pedagogy. The students were challenged to reflect productively at the site of histories of suffering that were not their own. Beyond respectful listening, multidirectional crossings require more investment. It involves grappling with one’s own situation, asking questions like: Are there histories of suffering that live on in my communities? The danger, here, is a kind
of false identification, in which the U.S. students quickly seek equivalence, by reaching for what is familiar. And yet without such seeking, student remain merely outside observers. September 30, 1965 evokes September 11, 2001, but not with equivalency. The ostracizing of the Chinese in Indonesia prompt reflections on Jim Crow, but they are not identical. Neither are they unrelated.

Rather, the dynamics of trauma provide some touchpoints for exploring histories. The first is that traumatic histories live on, impacting the present. Second, these effects are often conveyed through bodily sensations and not through words alone. Witnessing its effects in another requires different capacities of listening for what is unspoken and acknowledging what is often not visible. A witness position is unique in that the reference points that we often use to understand events are not available. Attunement to traumatic realities means developing ways of perceiving pain that has not been brought to the surface.

For those of us from the U.S., the relationship to 1965 is indirect. It is not necessarily competitive, in the sense that Rothberg outlines. And yet geographical relocation and attention to ways in which the history of suffering surface for the Indonesian students attuned students in the U.S. to aspects of historical suffering in their own context. Although it is an admirable aim to have students in the U.S. learn about Indonesian history and even learn about the U.S.’s role in supporting Suharto’s anti-communist agenda, I discovered that the BU students were engaging in another set of reflections. The highly contextualized study (Indonesia) made possible contextual insights that may not have surfaced in a study of trauma at home. They were examining and interpreting history attuned to the dynamics of trauma. But it was their own history that came under scrutiny.

Crossings

SMP Negeri 9 is a grade school in Ambon, the capital of the province of Maluku, the islands far to the east of Jakarta. Between 1999 and 2004, the city experienced violent clashes between Muslim and Christians. After the conflicts in Ambon, public schools were separated according to religious identity. This school is...
an exception. SMP Negeri 9 partners with SMP Negeri 4, a Muslim school, and they host joint programs that bring Christian and Muslim students together (Junaidi, 2016). Teachers in these schools have taken the lead, modeling for students what it would look like to carry out educational aims together, across politically charged religious lines. During our time in Ambon, our group connected with each of the partners involved in making such initiatives possible. We visited the Islamic State University, Universitas Kristen Indonesia Maluku (UKIM), and met with the Vice Governor of the Maluku.

Representatives from the Protestant Seminary (UKIM) coordinated our visit, and our group was met with an elaborate processional filled with music and dance. In a public assembly, there was a question and answer period between our group and the students. One of our students, Bryce, invited the students gathered to ask us questions. “Ask us anything,” he said. They wanted to know why we came, and he told them that we were interested in how they were approaching interreligious conflicts and healing in their own context. We wanted to bring the insights back to the United States. He said, “The work you are doing is hard for us in the U.S.” Before turning to the students, the teacher doing the translation asked. “Before I translate for the students, I am just curious: Why is it so hard for you?”

This question jolted us, and for a couple of our students, it remained with them throughout the trip. The work of interreligious healing is hard. But why? Why so difficult? It was the directness of the question that seemed to cut through the layers of complexity that many of us, living within the U.S., found difficult to decipher. Where would we even begin to name the factors contributing to histories of suffering and dynamics of injustice that persist for decades in the U.S.? Especially in light of the U.S. political situation, the challenge of bringing sectors of society together seemed impossible. The country seems locked in polarizing dynamics. Leaving Boston’s Logan airport on the final day of 2016, we were aware that it was a unique moment in U.S. political history. President-elect Donald Trump would take the oath of office just days after we returned from Indonesia. The campaign year had been turbulent, and the wounds of past histories, particularly in respect to race and gender, seemed to be torn open. And yet our studies pointed to
questions of whether the wounds had ever been closed up. Perhaps they remained below the surface of everyday life in the U.S.—present, but untended.

This teacher’s question did not solve anything. It was not offered as a nugget of wisdom or even as an indictment. Instead, its unfettered simplicity cut through the fog of the U.S. situation. It turned a mirror to us. Why is it so hard? While studying one context and the dynamics of traumatic histories living on in Indonesia, distance from the U.S. context and discussions of the distinctive manifestations of trauma in Indonesia proved productive for reflecting on the U.S. situation. But the reflections did not necessarily end with the U.S. Instead, the question of how polarizing dynamics might be disrupted is a question that arises at the juncture of histories. It is a shared question. Multidirectional crossings take the shared question as a starting point for telling difficult truths, specific to each context. Memories operate not to cancel each other out, but to reposition the agents of history differently.

Multidirectional memory work might be a stated learning outcome for such cross-cultural short-term experiences. The students from Jakarta and Boston had many moments of connection. Some of these moments were between individuals. But there was a lot that was not shared, including formative aspects of cultural and political identity. In travel seminars such as this, bonds of faith are often appealed to as common ground for the work. Christian identity is often an assumed common ground. And yet Lakawa and I take trauma as a common ground, and an understanding of the impact of trauma and the importance of witness as the link between the groups. Thus, faith is a way of being positioned in relationship to events that live on. There is productive work to do together. But it is not the same work.

**Multidirectional Memory Work: Theological Crossings**

One of the inspiring things about the partnership with Lakawa is that she insists that this memory work is deeply theological. Christian mission, the proclamation of “good news,” is bound up in responding to the
aftermath of 1965. This is the central claim of Lakawa’s dissertation, titled “Risky Hospitality: Mission in the Aftermath of Religious Communal Violence in Indonesia” (Septemmy Lakawa, 2011). Her research is not focused on 1965 but in 2000, as she tells the story of violence between Muslims and Christians in neighboring villages. These dates are not unrelated. While writing about more current interreligious violence within Indonesia, 1965 is always in the backdrop. A missiologist by training, Lakawa began to transform the missional context of Indonesia in the aftermath of Muslim-Christian violence in Dumas, Indonesia. The capacity to witness the effects of events that are largely still governed by silence is, Lakawa argues, not ancillary to the Christian gospel. Witness to the trauma that remains is a profoundly Christian task (Rambo, 2010). Lakawa writes: “The mission of the Spirit as the practice of witnessing in the aftermath of violence emphasizes the need to compose a different narrative of mission as it is re-narrated in the lives of survivors of religious and communal violence in many parts of the world” (Lakawa, 2014, p.52).

In reflecting on how histories might cross productively, I want to describe this juncture or potential passage across histories theologically. In *Spirit and Trauma*, I began to identify a previously unexamined site of witness within the gospel narratives (Rambo, 2010). The Gospel of John, in particular, provides an extended account of witness following the death of Jesus. There appears in the final chapters of John multiple accounts of what it means to witness death and stand in the precarious space of not-knowing, not-seeing. In this gospel, the risen Jesus appears to the disciples, but his appearances are met with confusion and uncertainty. Mary Magdalene mistakes him for the gardener. Her witness, along with the beloved disciple and the various unnamed others, is not straightforward. Visibility and communicability are hampered. This depiction of gospel witness is what both Lakawa and I take as a starting point for thinking about how persons of Christian faith ought to position themselves in relationship to the aftermath. What this reading of the Johannine gospel suggests is that something of death still remains, even as the spirit is released into this space.
But in this gospel, there is also the presence of a spirit remaining in this space, identified in terms of breath and witness. If we track the notion of witness, so central to the Johannine gospel, witness is not only a complex task; it is also fueled by the surviving figure of divine spirit, expressed in these chapters through the distinctive term, parakletos. My claim is that this figure of Spirit, uniquely rendered, is significant for traumatic witness. Rather than the image of the Spirit of life, the depiction of parakletos maintains a link to death and emphasizes the more precarious presence of the divine, a presence so faint that it may barely be detected. Mary Magdalene struggles to come to terms with the shock of Jesus’ crucifixion. Her witness provides guidance for those coming to terms with traumatic events. The power of sacred stories is that they can provide powerful counter-testimonies to principalities and powers that sweep such truths under the carpet. The students in the course are the contemporary Mary Magdalene’s. This biblical witness entails standing in very difficult and often confusing spaces of truth-telling.

For communities in which the Christian gospel is authoritative, the disciples in John 20 unearth a terrain of discipleship bound up in what it means to live on. While the moments outside the empty tomb were important for glimpsing one dimension of witness to the aftermath, another dimension might come to the fore when the disciples are together. The collective gathering of disciples following Jesus’ death is often referred to as the Upper Room scene. The depiction of this room in John 20 shows us a community afraid, locked in a room and unsure of where to go. This climate of fear also breeds suspicion of outsiders. Jesus appears, as a ghostly figure of a “still present past” but as a fleshy figure insisting that his wounds are real (Cho, 2018). See and touch them, he instructs the disciples. The mixture of the spectral and the somatic resonates with how memories function for those who live on. Naming the fear, he also positions them in relationship to it. When wounds surface in this context, they could trigger past wounds. They could also be refracted through the lens of their particular locations, and they could enter into the marketplace of memories. And yet the wounds of the past, appear differently here. They are located singularly in him. He will be the site of memory work. In their gathering, memories might cross productively. And he tells them that something of their future depends on how they engage his wounds.
The Upper Room scene is noted for not only the miraculous appearance of the risen Jesus but also the gift of the Holy Spirit, breathed into the disciples by Jesus, who instructs them not to be afraid. He also directs them out of the room. These appearance accounts provided assurance to Jesus’ followers that their discipleship was not in vain and that he returned to promise them a future.

Although I cannot fully spell out the various dimensions of this “post-traumatic” narrative here, the spirit becomes the breath that powers new routes through painful histories. If these “sites of memory” are sites of Christian witness, then the productive work might be about bringing together histories of suffering into a different configuration. It is the work made possible by the risen Jesus, but it is the work powered by the breath and bodily movements of the witnesses. If this is Spirit work, the work of witness, then the challenge of the Upper Room is about envisioning passages across wounds, to forge points of crossing.

**Theological education**

Jakarta Theology Seminary has become a dancing school. Incorporating dance into their communal life, they see it as important for preparing religious leaders for the work of communal witness. Lakawa leads these dances, guiding members into movements that both figure narratives of suffering but also release these narratives. Many of these leaders hold histories of pain in their bodies. And with word-centered theologies and theological studies, seminaries are often challenged to pay attention to bodies. The spaces of worship at JTS are configured to awaken the senses, and the careful attention to color, art, and movement is continually arranged to return to the question: how might testimonies to difficult truths surface here, to be witnessed and transformed?

The hope is that if future religious leaders are introduced to these movements, they will incorporate them into the life of their communities. Singing and music is central to Indonesian Christianity, but the collective dances, while expressions of cultural life, are not necessarily incorporated into Christian worship. And yet, if Christian witness is reframed in terms of trauma’s afterlife, bodies become sites of remembrance.
and potential healing. The dances can become living embodied testimonies to the transformation of traumatic histories. They are not the only expression, but Lakawa and others believe that they bear witness to what cannot be spoken. One of the things that Lakawa has done is to bring together the sacred sounds of Christian and Muslim traditions and to take into her body the clashes and cacophony of those sounds. Through prayerful and intentional gestures, her body becomes a receptacle for pain and its transformation.

Embodied aesthetics, she believes, forges passages that cognition and language cannot build. Icha, one of the students, has designed a dance, particular to her own region in Indonesia. She presents the combination of cries, word, and movement to our group. Crafting such liturgies is part of her theological training.

Working from the vision of the Upper Room, if the witnesses are locked in fear, they will be unable to engage with wounds, either their own or the wounds of communities whom they serve. To work with one’s own body is an act of self-compassion; it is also takes seriously the Johannine gospel’s claim that God’s Spirit resides in those who remain. 1965 does not simply go away. But its power to determine the future can be countered and redirected through the engaged work of those who witness to trauma’s effects.

In Jakarta, Lakawa introduces class members to this embodied aesthetics of witness. It culminates in a responsive collective dance that the group participates in on the final session of our travel seminar. One of the movements strikes me as an image of multidirectional crossings. Turning to the person next to us, we each reach out our hands. Space is preserved between the hands. It is as if both members are holding something between us that is not visible. The hands do not touch each other. This space is important, because it is not empty. Instead, it is a generative space of witness. Lakawa narrates through bodily movements the space that I identify as a middle space. When danced, it is not empty space. The hand approaches mine, but it does not grasp mine. Something is crossing there. When put into motion, the crossing is material, but it does not involve direct contact. Instead, it attests to unspeakable histories of pain, but also provides fervent witness to healing and transformation. For Lakawa, this dance anticipates a “long and fragile process of restoring relationship with the other” (Lakawa, 2014, p.463).

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Through bodily movements, Lakawa understands herself and the group “to be reclaiming the cultural and religious texts, symbols, and narratives that are attuned to healing and transformation.” (Lakawa, 2017). In a presentation to the students, she offers this poem:

The middle

space—

remaining,

breathing,

holding,

bearing witness.

Below the poem, she references John 20:22. She dances her vision of the Upper Room, and we are gathered there, witnessing histories crossing.

Trauma is often in the background of travel seminars, and the effects of historical suffering may not be explicitly acknowledged by those facilitating the learning process. But in the course of such travel seminars, these histories surface. Both Lakawa and I believe that these effects are operating regardless. This course, organized around the frameworks of trauma and the biblical story, places the notion of witness at the forefront of the course. Witnessing is a multidirectional posture that we hope to cultivate in the process of the course. It is a learning outcome. Attunement to the ongoing presence of these histories can lead to a variety of pedagogical insights and innovations yet to be fully articulated. By forging productive passages across competing histories of suffering, educators can begin to cultivate skills and capacities to address the long stretch of violent histories, not to repeat them, but to transform them.
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Immersion Pedagogy: Connecting the Dots

Michael S. Koppel

Abstract This article explores immersion pedagogy as a lifelong practice of learning that forms seminarians for thoughtful and emotional engagement in intercultural contexts in service to the practice of ministry. The method of teaching and learning developed models a network of associations that draws on connections instructors have with a culture or environment and invites students to make their own connections with this culture or environment as well as with other immersion participants. Content, context, and community comprise interrelated components that together serve as the vehicle for teaching and learning. Theory and practice in this article forms a rich tapestry as it draws from various aspects of the author’s direct experience in the People’s Republic of China, teaching pastoral care at a theological seminary with a mission to become a truly global seminary, and the practice of ministry in local church contexts.

Keywords travel seminar, theological field education, affective experience, process learning

I distinctly remember the interview question at Wesley Theological Seminary in February of 2002 for a faculty position in pastoral theology and congregational care. During an interview with the faculty, a future colleague looked at my curriculum vitae and noticed I had spent three years studying Mandarin in college, and served for a year as a foreign teacher in China. She asked me pointedly: if you were to join the Wesley faculty, would you be interested and willing to lead an immersion to China? Without missing a beat, I simply said, “I would love to do that!”

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Introduction

My call to teach at Wesley Seminary has been a match between my gifts and skills and the school’s mission and needs. I am a strong proponent of experiential teaching and learning, and the school has long valued its inclusion in the curriculum. My commitment to experiential learning emerged from my participation in theological travel seminars as a seminary student when I remember the world ‘coming alive’ through immersion pedagogy.

This article explores immersion pedagogy as a lifelong practice of learning that helps individuals and groups engage potent lived experience and to begin making connections for the practice of ministry. Immersion pedagogy is a fluid and connected form of learning that builds in time; emerging information and experience trigger new questions and shape perspectives on previous learning. As pastoral psychotherapists regularly say to clients as they wrestle with difficult and often unwanted emotional and spiritual issues: remember, it is a process. The same needs to be emphasized in formal contexts of theological education and in other environments of immersion pedagogy. Educators provide the jumpstart and people learn as they go.

This method of teaching and learning models a network of associations that draws on the connections instructors have with a culture or environment, and invites participants to make their own connections between the culture or environment, and to make connections with immersion companions. Content, context, and community comprise interrelated components that together serve as the vehicle for teaching and learning. Immersion learning is the direct opposite of what Paulo Freire called “the ‘banking concept’ of education” (2000, p.58) that emphasizes delivery of information and content. In the banking model, students are seen as depositories of data, and not engaged participants with facts and information. Banking education renders people as objects and
does not cultivate imagination and creativity which are arguably vital assets for professional leadership.

I envision immersion pedagogy as a liberative educational method that introduces learners to key resources and relevant information, and invites them into an experience that funds reflection, ignites questions, and informs practice. My view aligns with William Bean Kennedy who claims, “immersion projects add experiential and unfamiliar modes of learning, where involvement forces change that reflection can expand into fresh and different ways of learning and teaching in theological education” (Evans et al., 1993, p.287). In this method of teaching and learning, experience itself becomes authoritative and instructors serve as advanced co-explorers rather than resident experts. Pastoral theologian Bonnie Miller-McLemore’s image casts the vision for this model of education: as teachers and learners we exist within a “living human web” in which “knowledge is seldom universal or uniform, and truth is contextual and tentative” (Miller-McLemore, 2005, p.46). Immersion pedagogy exposes people to unexplored dimensions of the web and helps them make connections.

**Cultures of connection**

Intercultural immersions have been a requirement in the Wesley curriculum for more than twenty-five years. The theory and practices generated in this article are connected with the culture of the institution in which I serve. In the 1980s, Wesley was one of 12 theological schools that participated in a project spearheaded by the Plowshares Institute in Simsbury, Connecticut and funded by several grant streams. Plowshares Institute was an early pioneer in the implementation of the international travel seminar as an immersive learning experience. Entitled PIP/GTE, Pilot Immersion Project for Globalization in Theological Education, the five-year long project involved
institute staff, senior school administrators, faculty, and staff. The project posed the following question: “How can a seminary change the way it teaches in light of the ultimate goal of enabling the Church to be more faithful in an increasingly interdependent world” (Roozen et al., 1993, p.11)? The term ‘globalization’ was chosen as an apt though imperfect description to name the emerging reality of a world in which “people, cultures, societies, and civilizations previously more or less isolated from one another were now in regular and almost unavoidable contact” (Lartey, 2003, p.8). Pastoral theologian Emmanuel Lartey acknowledges limitations to “[t]he term ‘globalization’ [since it] has been used in many different ways and is, of course, itself ambiguous” (2003, p.43). Contemporary scholarship (Lartey, 2003) uses terms such as ‘internationalization’ and ‘indigenization’ to name more closely the immersion pedagogy’s aim: to catch glimpses of how people and communities affect and are affected by the interrelated systems of culture, religion, economics, and politics. The whole is much too large to tackle, of course, so we connect a few of the dots.

From the beginning, Wesley’s participation in immersion pedagogy has reflected a spirit of partnership. The joint seminary project assumed a posture of collaborative learning in which participants engaged mutually with others in the host culture; it was not seem as an opportunity to export western culture and Christianity. “The ultimate purpose of the PIP/GTE was to prepare church leaders for building up a church able and willing to respond to the challenge of global witness and service” (Roozen et al., 1993, p.13). The effort led to change. Schools made various kinds of shifts including: new courses that emphasized pedagogical experimentation; a greater presence of sensitivity to diversity and international experience in worship, teaching, and faculty promotion/hiring; increased sensitivity to marginalized cultures and groups in the United States; new and revised support systems for international students; formalization of oversight for
‘globalization’ with a school’s committee structure’ heightened emphasis on globalization in faculty and student “discourse,” research, and recruitment; and made financial commitments to continue building on the project’s experience (Roozen et al., 1993, pp.20-21).

Each school covenanted to engage the issue of globalization in a real way; the change included making adjustments to mission statements, curricular offerings, organizational commitments, and/or the culture of the school. Most of the schools in the program agreed to a combination of structural and pedagogical changes. Over a three year span from 1989 to 1991, each member of the Wesley faculty participated in international travel. Experience in the immersion pedagogy model guided the faculty’s decision to require seminarians to participate in an intercultural immersion as part of the degree program (M.Div.). We continue to expand immersion learning options within the country and around the world. Furthermore, in 2004, the school developed a strategic plan that included the actionable goal for the institution to become a “truly global seminary.” The position of Vice President for International Relations was formally added the same year.

**Resources and reasons for connection**

“Can travel lead to transformation?” is a question educators often ask in regard to immersion learning (Ronald Kimball in Evans et al., 2000, p.165). As faithful stewards of time, talent, and money, we want to put resources to good use. As a travel seminar leader, I make extensive efforts to keep costs at or under budget. I know firsthand that travel seminars can be expensive, so they need a clear purpose and reason to exist. However, in my efforts I have also worked against the impulse to overpromise what immersion pedagogy can accomplish. In a chapter entitled, “Traveling for Transformation,” (In Pedagogies for the Non Poor by Alice Frazer Evans et al), the
authors build a case for the value of “providing experiences which lead participants to transform their previous, U.S. oriented view of the world by taking into account Third World perspectives on global relationships and problems” (2000, p.162).

For theological schools and students under financial pressure, we must ask stewardship questions plainly. Why should resources be devoted to educating the non-poor when resources could be devoted to the poor themselves (Evans et al., 2000)? Why should resources be directed to immersion learning? How does this cost figure in relation to overall degree costs? Over the years at Wesley Seminary, we have discussed various financial possibilities to sustain immersion learning for students by reducing costs or eliminating them altogether. This priority, unfortunately, can too easily drop below the radar screen of a school’s mission and budget priorities. Daniel Aleshire, recently retired as Executive Director of the Association of Theological Schools, recognizes the benefits and costs associated with theological education in general and the important work schools do to minimize the burden for students. He argues the work of theological schools is “worth the investment because the learning, teaching, and research that comprise [their] work serve communities of faith and inform the mission of those communities in the world” (Aleshire, 2008, p.164). The most compelling vision for defraying immersion costs in my view is to build an endowment to support the endeavor; it would take concerted institutional effort but would be well worth the energy. Given the longevity of the Wesley program and its stated purpose in the curriculum, I think this commitment sends an important signal to future students that the institution values this method of education. Our immersion program offers in-country and out-of-country opportunities that currently range from about $1000 to more than $5000. Students have options, but they are often limited by cost.
A significant factor related to Wesley’s immersions to China is this: they have been educationally and financially viable because I have partnered with colleagues at other institutions to co-lead them. Jim Higginbotham, Professor at Earlham School of Religion, and I have co-led two immersions, while Carolyn Higginbotham, former Dean and Professor at Christian Theological Seminary led one trip together. A married couple, Jim and Carolyn developed a passion for China and the Christian Church in China when they served as teachers and experts in the 2001-2002 academic year.

I lead travel immersions with the personally held conviction that experiential education makes a difference for doing theology and practicing ministry. This sense is confirmed in student self-assessments and reports as well as course evaluations that indicate the personal and professional importance of engaged learning. Participant reflections from a recent trip to China capture both the hopes and shortcomings of time-limited travel. One student writes, “[I]t was often difficult to digest what was being heard and seen. I am a visual learner and so I could have spent much more time simply being in many of the locations to which we were taken.” The pace of this particular immersion experience did not naturally suit this student’s own inclinations, though she was a thoroughly engaged participant. As a visual learner, she took many pictures of the trip only to arrive home to realize that she was making meaning of the experience in ways that could not be captured in photographs. Another participant makes connections between a history of oppression in China and her experience as an African American. A question for her during and following the trip relates to freedom: “To me freedom is the ability to make choices without the fear of punishment or reprisal. As a black female Christian, freedom personally means something different than what the founding fathers imagined when they wrote the Declaration of Independence.” This student is coming to awareness about the limitations of freedom and relative
meanings of the term. She is beginning to connect the dots between her experience of marginality around race and ethnicity in the United States and that of the Chinese Christians in relation to the limitations government places on religious expression. One other participant named ecclesial practices that she distilled based on experience, observation, and interviews with church leaders in China that will inform her practice of ministry in the United States: focus on perseverance; unity is important; lay leadership is critical; and worship, prayer, study. It is clear that the dots this participant is connecting have to do with theology and practices that matter for growing healthy congregations. She concludes her reflection with this statement: “One thing is for sure. My experience changed me, and China and its people will remain in my prayers in the years ahead.”

In spite of what superlatives students may use in describing their immersion experiences, I think it best to modulate learning outcome expectations. Emphasis needs to be placed on the ‘lead to’ rather than on ‘transformation’. Immersion pedagogy fosters a process of making connections over time. For G. Douglass Lewis former president of Wesley Theological Seminary, individual and social transformation can be defined as “(1) a new way of seeing; (2) new way of acting; and (3) a new way of feeling” (Evans et al., 2000, p.181). In his view, feelings are the most difficult to change so immersions rightly focus primarily on developing new perspectives and actions. My view is that immersions as experiential learning provide the context for participants to make shifts in thoughts, feelings, views, and actions in a complex and nuanced manner reflective of personality and social location. In short, to me transformation sounds like an overstated goal. Instead, I prefer to pose questions to participants to reflect on their own learning over time. How does immersion pedagogy lead to any meaningful change in viewpoint or practice over the course of ministry? How has an experience with immersion pedagogy become a touchstone for ongoing reflection and expansion in ministry? In what ways has the immersion experience shaped your ministry? How
have you engaged people in your community in immersion learning or mission? Using myself as a case study, I certainly can answer this question in the affirmative, but I want to know whether this is largely the case for students at our institution. Targeted surveys sent to alumni five or ten years beyond graduation from seminary is one means to gather information about these questions.

**Connected learning**

Immersion pedagogy by nature encourages participants to link learning between head, heart, and action. Learning objectives (University of Connecticut, n.d.) for an immersion need to recognize the three general domains: 1) affective objective: What do you want students to think or care about? 2) cognitive objective: what do you want students to know? 3) behavioral objective: what do want students to be able to do? Instructors for immersion pedagogy learn by experience that outcomes guide the learning, but they do not direct it. Outcomes based on the objectives, even the complex ones, are interrelated and cannot be separated. My sense with immersion pedagogy from my own experience and through years of observation is that the affective dimension becomes a formative grounding experience. Attending to the affective dimension fosters ongoing personal and professional learning for ministry. A cultivated sense of the whole of life and the whole of God’s created world informs the “[clergy] imagination” that “requires not only capacities for engaging, integrating, and adapting learning, but also what might be called new forms of religious production” (Foster et al., 2005, p.23). I lead immersions out of the conviction that, in a sense, the “global” and the “local” need to find a home in each person preparing for ministry so that theological reflection and action emerge from a dual inhabitation.

Our school identifies goals for the immersion learning experience that include the following: beginning to develop self awareness about one’s own cultural context and being open,
interested, and curious about others; to engage in theological reflection that connects local and global issues with the practice of ministry; and the development of Christian pastoral identity in relation to other cultures and religious traditions. Such goals can be framed as course outcomes and serve as guideposts for ongoing professional learning and development. However, when goals are too grandiose and all encompassing, they become overwhelming and self-defeating for students. They presume that the experience connects all the dots. However, I believe that the experience opens us to a process of learning and encountering that extends for years beyond the bounds of formal degree program. Rather than an endpoint, the goals are the beginning of a process; they are the dots.

Immersion pedagogy increases the possibility for a potent learning experience because mind and body travel together. With the body in a new environment, the mind also experiences both connection and dissonance. Immersion pedagogy opens learning for participants by simply being in environments that stimulate sensory and affective dimensions of personhood. As David Jenkins (2017) observes, the pattern of “[d]integration and integration” stimulated through travel learning “occur[s] in bodies, individual physical bodies and communal, ecclesial, and political bodies” (p.152). I am no longer surprised when participants experience a variety of body responses on trips. This is not to downplay real and serious medical needs. Participants need to receive prompt and proper treatment for whatever negatively affects participation on the trip. Barring medical emergencies and taking into account an adjustment period for acclimating to food and recovering from jet lag, the body may need a break to metabolize all that is being experienced. I embrace the wisdom of allowing people time to retreat. I have also learned to pace a trip for maximum mind and body benefit; too many activities packed into a day leaves participants tired, and several packed days stacked together makes them exhausted. I resist the temptation to do ‘one
more thing’ as I trust potent experiences occur through the process and people will make sense of them in time. I can still recall ‘scenes’ and learning from long ago immersions: retrieving baggage from the dusty room in the airport in Kunming, China; seeing Table Mountain and Robben Island in Cape Town, South Africa; traveling the dusty road in an open air truck toward Ixmiquilpan, Mexico. Each experience captures what I call ‘layered memory’: the visual remembrance connects with aspects of self and professional learning that stay with me even now. Whether through the painful body experience that accompanies disintegration or the delight that comes with integration, immersion pedagogy opens learners to the power of learning through time and space in surprising ways.

Gathered around the breakfast table at a professional conference, I enjoyed talking with colleagues about my own learning through immersion pedagogy. As I spoke, I could feel myself animated by an immersion learning experience that occurred thirty years prior. I vividly recalled being part of an experience during which the group was engaged in Bible study. After I heard Luke 4:21 read aloud, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,” I said to the group: “This is my responsibility!” I remember how that moment felt and how it suddenly connected the dots of seminary learning to that point. Pastoral psychotherapists know what it is like to encounter these moments with clients. It is as if the light bulb of awareness switches on and people can make sense of the past and the future in a new way. Teachers and therapists alike learn to trust the process of unfolding experience knowing that awakening occurs on its own timetable.

Affective experience
Immersion pedagogy opens the possibility for potent experience and helps students to make connections with theology, social and cultural history, and economics. What we sense and feel are starting places for reflection. Too much emphasis on the cognitive dimension can overload or override the generative possibilities of the potent experience. The places where we are ‘affectively grabbed’ hold generative possibilities for self-awareness and reflection. It is in the affective dimension of experience that I encounter what I need to learn; this is certainly the case for a number of my students as well. The Bible faculty at Wesley Seminary value the role of affective experience in biblical interpretation as they have for years used a method (Ringe & Tiffany, 1996) that includes five steps, one of which is paying attention to textual ‘speed bumps’. Textual speedbumps are those aspects that catch the eye, grab the gut, trouble or perplex the mind and, in effect, communicate “focus; something vital is at stake here.” Interpreters learn to embrace the potency in this step as a means to connect affectively with what matters to them. In so doing, what may initially seem like a personal affective experience connects to interpretations that resonate with wider communal experience.

As others have noted (Jenkins, 2017), preparation and debriefing are key components to immersion learning. It should not, however, be seen as an isolated experience disconnected from other areas of the curriculum and ministry. At Wesley, the reflection paper instructions help student begin to access the affective dimension of learning. It reads: “[the integration reflection paper] includes your own grappling with disorientations, conflicts, and struggles with what you ‘heard, saw, and touched.’ It is a reflection of your encounter with yourself within a different culture.” Instead of helping students delve deeply into these experiences, the instruction guide poses many other questions which tend to prompt superficial rather than in-depth responses. We

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8 I credit my colleague, Mindy McGarrah Sharp, for introducing me to this helpfully descriptive term.
could focus our efforts more pointedly in order to help participants notice and unpack their affective experience. In a general debriefing session the program director and staff invite students to “share a word or image from your experience” (internal document, debriefing outline). This question allows students to give a range of responses, and most importantly in my view allows room for the emergence of a fresh image or metaphor. I think we need to prompt this source of reflection earlier in the process by asking participants in the required reflection paper. Starting with the image or metaphor privileges the affective and sensory dimensions of learning, and signals to students that embodied experience matters for generative theological reflection. Inserting this question in our standardized institutional materials reinforces that the program itself takes seriously the “immersive” (whole body/mind/spirit); teaching students to pay attention to thoughts and feelings while they occur is a practice for staying “in the moment” and provides useable information for making theological connections in ministry.

Immersion curriculum must also generate and build upon a pedagogy of metaphor which emerges organically and attends to the affective. “Metaphors help us to speak imaginatively of a lesser-known thing in terms of a better-known thing. Using metaphor, we evoke and organize associations and embrace new understandings” (Dombkowski Hopkins & Koppel, 2010, p.59). Metaphors capture experience and invite connections to feelings, thoughts, and behaviors in previously unimagined ways. Through metaphor, participants not only can name a feeling such as fear, frustration, anger, satisfaction, joy, bewilderment, confusion, or elation, but also a possible way for the self to relate with the it. A group of pastoral leaders named “Air Traffic Controller” as a metaphor to describe their ministry; the metaphor signals aspects of high pace, stress and anxiety, and coordinating efforts. It was no accident that this group expressed the most interest in self-care. The metaphor invites individual and group reflection and allows for the indirect naming of feelings.
and emotions when they may not nameable directly. Instructions for reflection on metaphors include: sit quietly for a period; allow a metaphor or image to emerge; reflect initially on what this image suggests; ask how the image or metaphor captures various aspects and the whole of your immersion experience? What does it teach you about yourself? Others? God? How does this image connect with other areas of your theological study? The current assignment nods to the affective and sensory dimension of learning but needs to be bolstered in order to help immersion participants mine the richness of potent learning experience.

A longstanding issue is how schools prepare immersion participants to encounter the soul of a place and not just information about it. Even when our school first engaged in immersion learning, participants were expressing an interest in how to “adapt to a new cultural setting” and to prepare with a “personal/experiential feel” for the places and people they would encounter (Roozen et al., 1993, p.110). Assigning novels, poetry, and films can be one way to help people access the affective along with the cognitive dimensions of learning in preparation for and following an immersion seminar. Before a trip to South Africa, I read *Cry, the Beloved Country*, a novel by Alan Paton (1987) that portrays the racism embedded in social structural dynamics against the backdrop of a country brimming with natural beauty. Repeatedly during the trip, I referenced the novel because it left such a strong impression. For the China immersion, we have recommended participants view *Nanking* (Guttentag & Sturman, 2008), a documentary that showcases those who protected Chinese from brutal atrocities and genocide by Japanese forces during WWII. This cinematic account prepares participants for our visit to the city of Nanjing and the holocaust site. In essence, I want students honor the affective with a reverential bow, an intentional gesture that signals a face to face encounter with a matter of importance even if its full significance is a mystery. Bowing is an embodied gesture that conveys respect, and its practice...
helps form an attitude of deep appreciation among teachers and students who learn together in intercultural contexts (Koppel, 2013).

Faculty Connections

Immersion pedagogy serves as ongoing formation for theological school faculty. Entering into an unfamiliar culture, seeing and experiencing social, religious, political, and economic patterns, and returning to share new insights and perspectives with others mirrors ministry with local congregations. My initial learning goal started modestly: to tap mostly dormant preaching skills and to become more knowledgeable about congregational dynamics. I was seeking to ignite my own curiosity, engage observational skills, and relate with groups of people outside the school.

A recent immersion experience showcases opportunities for new learning. I arrived on a Sunday morning to a church with only partial electrical power. Elders on sight were navigating darkened spaces with flashlight. The sanctuary lights were on, but part of the way through worship they too went out so we used candles for light! The service extended well beyond one hour—my internal cultural expectation for the usual duration; the choir sang multiple times; announcements came from a multitude in the congregation; and ‘passing of the peace’ marked an opportunity for everyone to greet one another. The time with children emerged as potent experience for me personally. The children imaginatively interacted as I told a story about holding the door open for people who did not say ‘thank you’. Through my evocative question asking and our mutual dialogue, the children and I together concluded with a moral lesson: we need to acknowledge our feelings of being angry even as we make the choice to do the right thing by holding the door open.
It is an act of hospitality. We came to mutual agreement as we listened and acknowledged the voices that suggested otherwise. We engaged the story together across lines of difference: all the children are of African descent and I am a middle-aged Caucasian professor/pastor. Though the children did not name this difference, I was certainly aware of it, and used the power available in the interaction to underscore their voices. I came to lead worship and to preach, and only later realized the need for the children’s story time. For me it turned out to be the highlight of the service and prompted ongoing reflection and teaching about care giving practices within the context of worship in local congregation.

This immersion learning experience overall sparked new associations for “interpathic” teaching or teaching across lines of similarity and difference, and renewed an interest in the theological care and education with children (Augsburger cited in Dombkowski Hopkins & Koppel, 2010, p.161). I impress a maxim upon seminarians: assuming difference is beneficial for care because it keeps practitioners attentive to information and attributes that may otherwise be overlooked, while assuming similarity, conversely, can lull practitioners into predictable repetition and complacency in receiving the experience of another person or group. This snapshot of experience along with others like it in local congregations has provided living contexts out of which I teach and theorize about care. I regularly talk about the need for pastoral care leaders to be equipped for ministry across lines of similarity and difference, but yearn for illustrations to make this come alive. Immersion learning in local congregations provides experiences and stories to enrich my vocation as teaching minister.

Potent moments also occur for other faculty who travel globally to teach. A colleague conveyed how teaching in Haiti has ignited her research and writing around theological reflection and ministry with people who are poor. She grapples mightily with what it means to begin
theological analysis with “God’s preferential option for the poor” (Gutierrez, 1971, p.xxv). It a claim that now grips her in the gut as she reflects on how to live as a theologian and first world person given the grinding reality of children living in slums. A photo of a child tugging at her clothing is placed prominently on a bookshelf in her office, a material remembrance of immersion learning’s potency.

**Sacramental Table Connections**

During our final dinner together on the most recent China immersion, a group participant asked: “What will you take back from China?” Before anyone had a chance to respond, he pulled a refrigerator magnet from his backpack and said, “I will be taking this back!” Members of the group laughed even as they began to ponder meaningful responses to the question. As a co-leader for the immersion, I was most pleased that a group member exercised initiative by opening space for our reflection together. In turn, participants talked about being emotionally touched by the vigor and tenacity of the Chinese church communities, learning more about Chinese culture, releasing long held stereotypes of the country and people (in some cases, those learned in a long past childhood), sensing the vibrancy of religion in general, gaining a deeper sense of call, seeing ministry in a new light, appreciating how our interdenominational group had formed its own community, and connecting with an ‘alive past’ (my co-leader’s reference to his memorable year teaching in China fifteen years previously). The conversation had gravity. Each person in the group and our Chinese hosts contributed intellectually and emotionally to its weight. One group participant talked poignantly of the postures of suffering and joy she had witnessed in China. “Some of my learning, though, cannot be translated,” she said. Experiential learning works at the head and heart in
nonlinear ways and may only be translated in time, if at all. We connect some of the dots, and more appear.

Gathering for meals has been a central feature of every immersion I have led to China. An abundance of meat and vegetable dishes fill the turntable at the center from which people take what they like. Eating is an immersive learning experience: participants encounter unfamiliar foods with different tastes and textures. The food adventure is enjoyable for most people; occasionally, an immersion participant needs to make a “McDonald’s run” to satisfy a craving for the familiar. Mostly, participants connect with our guides and local hosts, and bond with one another around the table. In this open space without direction from leaders, participants are free to engage one another in conversation that can range from the mundane to the meaningful. At times, a topic will capture the interest and imagination of the whole group and it seems as if a truly democratic classroom process evolves on its own. I noticed this could the most beneficial time of reflection, and have been pondering its significance beyond simply seeing it as a time to abate hunger and nourish the body. Following Mary Elizabeth’s Moore’s (2004) assertion that the vocation of teaching can be a sacramental act, I wonder if immersion pedagogy provides opportunities for sacramental encounters that might not occur in other educational formats. A sacrament “[mediates] the grace of God through the concrete stuff of creation for the sanctification of human communities and the well-being of God’s creation” (Moore, 2004, p.10). Our sitting at table together signifies formation of covenant community taking place throughout the immersion, a sign making evident the Holy’s indwelling and calling among us.
Conclusion

Thirtyfive years ago, I began learning Mandarin and I had no idea where the language study would eventually lead. Through teaching in China and years of wondering how my love of the culture and customs would connect with my love for teaching pastoral theology and care, I kept saying ‘this has to connect somehow.’ I first went to China less than ten years after the churches began to open again following a decade of closure during the social upheaval of Mao’s Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. My early connections in China were not formed in and through the church, but in the classroom among my students at the time. I have been deeply aware in leading immersions that a part of me yearns to reclaim that past, and the connections to people and a city in China I once knew well. But the past has grown, and the call of immersion learning continues. At that table of sacramental connection, I welled up with emotion recalling the experience of standing before a congregation where a Wesley graduate is minister, and of visiting a seminary campus where a current advanced degree student is professor. I was “tapping authentic experience” (Koppel, 2005) in both instances and realized new connections are always being made. Immersion learning continues to open new personal and professional vistas. I hold this hope for participants of immersion pedagogy as they engage the affective dimension of learning for the benefit of effective ministry in the world God loves.

References


Towards A Pedagogy of Privilege

Kathleen D. McCallie

Abstract This essay investigates intersections between global citizenship education, service-learning in higher education, and phenomenology of immersion pedagogy. Dismantling privilege is a goal of postcolonial theological education that correlates with goals for immersion learning. By focusing on the experience of travel days and the privilege of travel, this essay critiques tendencies toward poverty tourism or charity models of service-learning. Practices of seeking to be fully present in one location at a time despite travel pose theological reflections related to finitude, mortality, and vulnerability. Since having the privilege and resources to travel for immersion learning is rare, the pedagogy of privilege must accompany the pedagogy of the oppressed. Inspired by Freire’s wisdom and the pedagogical movements he inspired, this essay challenges elite learners to deconstruct the privilege to travel for immersion study.

Keywords dismantling privilege, global citizenship, solidarity ethics

Introduction

Only a small fraction of the human population has both the privilege to travel and engage in theological education. By examining the privilege of travel as the process of transportation for immersion learning, we can improve theological education by more fully integrating our pedagogical moves with our commitment to dismantle privilege. In this essay, I focus on privilege and the use of spiritual practices like accompaniment and pilgrimage to increase capacities for being more fully present, conscious, and curious during transportation to and from the immersion

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location (Williams & Appler, 2016; Sharp, 2016). In this way, I seek pedagogical convergence that can bridge different contexts rooted in mutual commitment to expand and deepen justice and compassion by dismantling privilege.

For years, I have been teaching North Americans in service learning immersion trips to Nicaragua. During these courses, I draw connections between geopolitical history and global economy with concepts from virtue epistemology and the framework of the global citizenship continuum (Hays, 2015; Ronan & Kisker, 2016). Beyond changing students’ minds, how can we transform hearts and habits to improve intercultural competency and democratic activism? My goals include deepening the longing for a more egalitarian world through liberation and postcolonial methods of experiential learning to expand capacity for relationship across difference.

I view the trips as opportunities for spiritual formation inspired by the pedagogy of the oppressed (Friere, 2000). However, the learning process for those of us drawn to these justice-seeking movements of liberation includes painful recognition of ways we ourselves are embedded in systems in the position of oppressors. So, in addition to learning about pedagogies of oppression, those of us who are North Americans must unmask our participation in the benefits of unjust distribution of resources. We need something like a pedagogy of privilege. I suggest we need a pedagogy of privilege and offer a phenomenology of immersion learning to that end.

Our varied levels of privilege affect our choice to travel, our preparations for travel, and our financial resources that allow us to travel for immersion learning experience. What can we learn by drilling down on two timeframes of pedagogical opportunity: the transportation from our home departure gate to arrival in a new context and then the return flight after the intensive immersion experience? The ways that privilege sustains us through the dislocation process of transportation from what seems like one world to an unfamiliar world can generate fertile questions
or even pose new problems (Rademacher, 2009; Stevenson-Moessner & Snorton, 2010). For a time, I was oblivious to the privilege of having the financial resources to travel and the consequences of the reality that most people do not have that power. Beginning with the premise that no one is truly free or whole while others are oppressed, I approach theological education as a form of activism seeking justice, compassion, and equality. So rather than taking for granted the ability to travel in search of learning, I now examine dimensions of the material transportation itself. By attending more closely to the travel days and the layers of issues generated by transportation, my classes complicate and then deconstruct privilege as it operates in immersion learning.

**Every arrival is a departure**

Intercultural immersion learning requires material and psychological preparation including spiritual practices of commitment for seeking transformation, actively reaching out for help, and embracing the vulnerability of letting go of control and the position of dominance in relationships. The marvelous experience of arriving in a new context, exploring another geopolitical location, and learning about another cultural reality make the trip itself worthwhile. However, it is not much fun to negotiate customs lines, security, and crowded air flights. So, some of us unconsciously or intentionally avoid staying present and open during the travel days. Instead of focusing on the process of transportation, a person might immerse herself in a video game, film or novel. Another traveler might try to sleep or purchase a cocktail. He wants to leap from one geographic position to another as if trying to hold his breath and take the plunge wanting to surface in a new context. When we fly, many North Americans approach days of international travel as an unpleasant means to an end. As I examined the phenomenon of transportation, more reasons for resistance come into
focus. Despite a desire to experience solidarity and accompaniment, our ability to travel illustrates a severe disability to immerse ourselves as equals in global struggles for justice because our privilege is a barrier.

Ernesto Cardenal transcribed and recorded sacred conversations with Nicaraguan peasant farmers reflecting together on gospel texts. Cardenal documented Nicaraguans who named a significant distinction between people who have the money to travel and others who do not (Cardenal, 1976). Many of our North American students would be quick to argue that they struggle financially and only access immersion learning through scholarships or other financial support. Nevertheless, North Americans are privileged by being born in a community where public education is available, libraries and educational materials are plentiful, and there are systems of support for learning. The majority of my students come from central or south central states where the landscape consists of flat plains or rolling hills. To travel to Nicaragua and engage in service learning in a small, rural farming village for a week immerses them in a disorienting process. Still, they cannot leave capabilities acquired through cultural privilege like certain forms of literacy, economic power, and confidence rooted in national citizenship.

Having the financial resources to travel is a rare privilege. What are the theological implications of this inequality with all the consequences for levels of capability due to economic means? When we mine the process of transportation itself, mysterious insights unfold regarding privilege, power, and inequality. Our learning community deconstructs our process of immersion travel with a critical and curious gaze on the steps of deciding to undertake the journey, preparation to depart from home, and arrival. If there is nothing particularly revelatory about noting that every immersion is a dislocation from another context, then what can be surprising is the insight that one can physically travel without necessarily being completely present in the new location. The more
fully one leaves home, the greater the opportunity to gain new perspective on self and community both in a new context and back home. The world that seemed familiar, my home, looks different when I change. In fact, my absence for a time from that system back home can teach me how finite, how mortal, how dispensable I am. This type of theological reflection shapes the spiritual formation potential of the immersion learning. Ironically, we are stripped of much privilege and rendered vulnerable in the face of our mortality.

I remember the first time I traveled to what we then called a third world country. It took a few years of listening wistfully to friends who had transformative experiences on such trips before I found the courage to go myself. I kept coming up with reasons why it would be impossible to make the trip. Remembering that now helps me have sympathy for students who sign up and cancel or explain why they can’t go despite their desire to go. They say things like: “I cannot leave my children, my elderly parent, my sick family member, my pets, my home. I do not have the money. I do not have the time. I cannot leave my job, my church, my volunteer work…” Because we tend to view our home context as the way the world is, we find it challenging to imagine those systems surviving our absence. This can be complicated by fear of the unknown or resistance to the vulnerability of travel. It is difficult to extricate oneself from one’s familiar home context for many reasons, including legitimate responsibilities and relationships.

What might it mean if a person could be gone for a week to ten days and the world went right on humming along without her or him? We might resist diving in to depths of learning about the reality that folks back home will indeed get along fine while we are gone. We could come to see that we often view ourselves as indispensable, but we can be gone for this duration without serious consequences to the systems of our home contexts. Exploring this reality can bring a perspective to our spiritual formation with richer awareness of our finitude and mortality. Every
departure is a mini leave-taking, a departure from the world as we know it. Our finitude as embodied human creatures means that we can only be in one physical location at a time.

In preparation for the trip, I first invite participants to consider how they feel about change and movement. The immersion experience requires changing time zones, currency, language, and physical comfort. We reflect together about impulses that are part of patterns of reacting to change such as the seduction of fleeing mentally, closing off emotionally, or becoming defensively critical of others. Students are often anxious about how they will get along without the configuration of familiar daily systems and comforts of home. Students often express fear about how they will handle the heat, the mosquitos with tropical diseases, the unfamiliar food, the language barrier, and lack of privacy in lodging and toilet facilities. However, in recent years the number one concern during preparation for travel is the question of cell phone and internet access during the immersion experience.

As a container for reflection on the process of transportation to the immersion context, I utilize a ritual of leaving home and arriving in Nicaragua. This includes discussion and commitment through a covenant about cell phone and internet use. I ask students to consider staying off the phone all week. At minimum, I require that students limit internet and cell phone use to one hour a day during free time. It helps that there is little or no internet access in the area where we stay in Nicaragua. Prior to travel, I give emergency contact numbers with instructions for student to give those to people back home before leaving. The staff of the non-profit host agency has internet and phone access. If there is an emergency back home, students can be assured that the staff will deliver the message quickly.

What it means to ask people to stay off the internet and phone can be a matter for serious reflection and learning during the trip. Some students recognize dynamics of their own withdrawal
from media addiction. They may find silence unnerving. Yet, students’ ability to be more fully present to new friends they meet and work with in Nicaragua depends on growing curiosity about global neighbors who do not have phone or internet access. Chacraseca, the community where we work and learn, is a small, rural village community with no paved roads. Like many areas in the Nicaraguan countryside, most houses have dirt floors and no running water. Few people have cell phones, and there are only a few computers in the entire county. The level of poverty in the area prevents easy access to computers, but also the humidity, insects, and heat are hard on them. Electricity in the entire village is often turned off for several hours when there is a thunder storm. If our students from North America come to Chacraseca with the expectation that they will have reliable access to the internet or phone signal, they can be severely frustrated and disappointed. Part of the learning is realizing that we have taken for granted the capability to instantaneously transcend spatial limitations of our location through digital media. What is life like for our neighbors who don’t share those capabilities? By visiting the two-thirds world, we can surface however briefly from the soup of first world problems for a refreshing gasp of breath. We can emerge from the saturation of mesmerizing, numbing crush of continual over-stimulation. We can notice our restless inability to be fully present, grounded, and serene. We discover that we have been constantly distracted, overextended, overworked. During immersion learning participants in the learning community must unplug to gain this awareness.

Our pedagogy of privilege calls for practice at being in one place rather than attempting to transcend a material location by dwelling in a virtual, online reality. The concept of an online social media presence that must be continuously monitored, cultivated, and refreshed can be an oppressive burden. But, the flight from limits of one geographical location is like a transcendence of finite, material space. With the privilege of online access, persons submit to weakened abilities
to be fully present in their bodies, homes, and physical communities. The spiritual disciplines of returning to awareness of embodiment, of consciousness of one’s bodily location, or physical location are practices that require time and focused attention. To be generous and graceful listeners and partners in community requires learning to navigate silence and relationship rather than the deep internet. This is not to say that being proficient at online work necessarily detracts from competency in interpersonal relationships. However, the time it takes to develop facility in face to face communication requires unplugging. For many of us, it is not easy to keep our conscious focus in the same time and space where our body is present, let alone meet other embodied persons for genuine relationship.

**Ritual of divestment and departure**

I lead a ritual of departure shortly before boarding time near the departure gate. This includes naming some layers of disembarking from home to arrive as fully present as possible in Nicaragua. Some things can be left behind; others we will carry with us. Implicit bias, internalized racism, cultural identity, and various forms of privilege cannot be checked at the gate. Taking a break from family and work for a while can seem like a relief for some who may feel guilty at the same time. For all of us, the intentionality of opening ourselves to a transformative learning experience can be like throwing your heart over the fence and then going around to see what is on the other side. Paying attention to what is happening within our bodies can be a spiritual practice that requires focused, intentional effort. We name our trust in people who will pick us up at the airport, drive on roads with different traffic patterns and indecipherable signage, and arrange lodging and meals for us.
During the departure ritual I distribute the following reflection questions for a journaling assignment to be completed during the flight:

What made it hardest to leave home right now?

What are things you will miss most?

Who are the people most affected by your leaving home?

What do you notice about yourself while being transported from one world to another?

During these early reflections students often focus on people in their families or work systems that are on their minds, material things like air conditioning or bathroom facilities, and their own anxieties related to being away from home for a week to ten days. Their perspective of themselves and their identities is framed by their local context. The flight from Houston to Managua, Nicaragua takes less than three hours. As the plane begins to descend in Nicaragua the view of numerous volcanos washes over travelers with the stark reminder that we are far from home. Students often report feeling a surreal sense of disruption, as if we have been transported from one world to another one. The steamy heat, glaring sun, and humidity all signal an unfamiliar landscape, and immersion in different language, traffic signs, billboards, graffiti, radio, pungent smells from wood fires, diesel, and tropical trees and plants. In contrast to insular, individualistic patterns of life we left at home, here windows and doors are open. We ride in a van with the windows rolled down. Numerous people walk along the roadways or sit outside in front of houses crowed along the roadways. We become immersed in Nicaragua. We can practice bringing our attention back to our experience of embodiment in this unfamiliar geographical context. The extreme sensory stimulation of unfamiliar smells, sounds, and sights coupled with the immersive effects of the kinesthetic sensations of humidity and heat can shake us up (Hahn, 2006). But, being
present requires ongoing efforts to unplug from home, divest from privilege, and depart from assumptions and expectation about the world as we have known it.

**Immersed in Chacraseca**

We are travelers all week not only on days when we fly. It would be a mistake to draw the distinction too sharply between the transportation days that bookend the week versus the days of sojourning in Nicaragua. Managua has the only airport in the country of Nicaragua. After landing there, we travel by van for several hours to reach the rural countryside of Chacraseca where we stay at the Peace House. Casa de Paz is a rustic community center at an intersection of a few dirt roads in the farm community centered around the Catholic church. Although it was founded decades ago, the base community is now organized by JustHope, a nonprofit organization that develops long-term partnerships with North American groups to combat poverty. A thorough description of the volunteer work and leadership and development projects in Chacraseca that our class studies is beyond the scope of this essay. Since I am focused on the travel aspect of the immersion experience, I simply note that the rich schedule of learning opportunities throughout the week to ten-day visit provides ample illustration of political, economic, and cultural diversity.

**Calling out poverty tourism**

In many ways, we are like tourists. Students on our trips are fond of saying that they are happy we are not just tourists. They see themselves as solidarity workers seeking genuine accompaniment. However, I want students to be able to articulate an ethical critique of the recent development of poverty tourism and the exploitive injustice of that type of travel. In years past, an older missiology
motivated privileged travelers to go convert people around the globe. That form of missionary travel was replaced with updated narratives in recent decades about mission travel to serve the poor. Sadly, this conception of mission was often tainted with unconscious paternalism and cultural elitism. More recently, service-learning programs encouraged young people from North America to travel in order to appreciate and be grateful for how good their life is in comparison to the stereotypical squalor of life in developing economies. That type of poverty tourism exoticized and romanticized severe poverty. Sometimes this travel mixed a self-serving sense of superiority and smug gratitude with neoliberal goals of expanding global markets and exporting American consumerism (Radmacher, 2009). As a type of bourgeois elitism wherein tourists visit slums or garbage dumps to see how awful living conditions can be, persons who had financial resources to travel interacted with host partners as if viewing animals in the zoo. Travelers with conscious motives of doing charitable good works sometimes fail to acknowledge that are actually driven by boredom or a quest for novelty because of the spiritual poverty of their over-privileged, consumeristic lifestyles. Even travelers with genuine charitable desire to help the poor can cause harm through their paternalism and sense of superiority as helpers.

Calling out the insidious injustice of that type of poverty tourism requires careful scrutiny of our own immersion pedagogy. The spiritual practice of staying present, reflecting critically on privilege, and dismantling oppressive systems requires sustained intentionality. A critique of that type of exploitative travel tourism includes identifying privilege as part of the oppressive inequalities that block solidarity or accompaniment. In contrast, a pilgrimage model of immersion learning provides an opening for more faithful and just relationships with global neighbors (Williams & Appler, 2017). The best models for service-learning aim to change the travelers’ habits.
of active engagement, lifestyle choices, and community involvement (Active Citizen Continuum, 2012).

Virtue epistemology explores how we learn and teach values or virtues like compassion and justice (Sosa, 2009). Revolutionary pastoral theologian, Marie Fortune, reminds students that information is not enough to change hearts (Fortune, Abugideiri, & Dratch, 2010). Exactly what forms of experiential learning can change hearts toward justice and compassion is an ongoing subject of study. At its best, immersion learning seeks to transform hearts, minds, and lifestyles. The challenge of spiritual formation for more virtuous, egalitarian, and faithful communities parallels many aspects of the continuum for global citizenship. At its best, the experiential learning in Nicaragua operates towards the end of the spectrum of Kolb’s learning cycle where students are exploring new conceptual frameworks after extensive prior experience, reflection, and conceptualization (Kolb, 1984). Some of the methods I utilize include practice as participant observers, collective interviews, written self-reflection, direct observation, and informal peer interviews grounded in the power of experiential learning (Dewey, 1997; Freire & Faundez, 1989). As participant observers doing action research, students need some information about political history, and theological and cultural practices that are unfamiliar. They also require practice at deep listening. This learning is a matter of habits of practice, not simply unlearning some conceptual frameworks while constructing others. To practice being more fully present in one place may sound antithetical to the motif of journey or pilgrimage. However, being awake to a process with all the relational dynamics involved is the goal.

A pedagogy of the privileged is necessary to dismantle privilege just as a pedagogy of the oppressed is necessary to deconstruct oppressive systems. Models of accompaniment must include an awareness of solidarity ethics and a cultivation of full presence in order to advance
transformational models of ministry (Sharp, 2016; Peters 2014). Education for global citizenship and democratizing movements are controversial (Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, 2002; Peters, 2014; Standish, 2012). A tension exists between the complex identity politics of national identity and faith formation based in universal human connections. The very concept of citizenship implies geographically located and circumscribed belonging, yet notions of post-national citizenship and universal interconnectedness drive global movements (Habermas, 1994; Corrie, 2013). Global citizenship education at its best is designed to build on “an attitude of permanent openness” as opposed to abstract, universalizing claims that a single truth is valid (Friere & Faundez, 1989, p.119). Students advance toward greater intercultural competency as they learn to recognize the baggage they could not leave at home, such as classism, white privilege, lens of perception, micro-aggressions, addictions, habits of consumerism, and greed driven by fear of scarcity.

During the 2015 Forum on Education Abroad, The National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE) focused on moving students from ethnocentric perspective and practices of intercultural awareness to adaptation and integration without unethical appropriation (Ronan & Kisker, 2016). Following that model, I began including more daily reflection on our immersion learning experience as a pilgrim’s journey. I realized that not only on travel days, but every day during the week in Nicaragua, students need to return to reflective questions about themselves as sojourners or travelers undertaking something like a pilgrimage. It was ineffective to act as if students could simply put a bookmark in questions or thoughts of home to return to them at the end of the immersion experience. So, I circled back daily to these reflection questions for discussion and journaling during the week in Nicaragua:

What is making it hardest for you to be fully present today?

What material things are you missing from home?
Who are the people most affected by your presence here today?

What do you notice about yourself as you are present here today?

During reflective conversation sessions and journaling throughout the week, students sometimes name loved ones or situations back home that remain on their minds. Increasingly they shift focus to encounters with people in Chacraseca. Students bond with each other while sharing struggles with material reality of the heat and the harsh sun. One student indicated surprise at the realization of discovering that he himself might be the person most affected by his own presence in the context that day. Considering both positive and negative consequences of our groups’ presence in Chacraseca broadened awareness of the interconnectedness of the global economy and international relations. At first their writing demonstrated little or no awareness of how their position in the global system affected how they show up as a global citizen or what is possible in terms of solidarity. But students increasingly viewed themselves as persons whose lives are directly intertwined with members of the communities both in Nicaragua and back home in North America. This fostered the growing awareness that I hoped to develop, demonstrating the interwoven systems of economic, environmental, political, and human communities in our rapidly globalizing world. Students’ consciousness of their own privilege as travelers grew. They increasingly understood that they had differing levels of privilege because of their identities as members of a particular nation, class, or racialized group. Whatever solidarity or accompaniment form of relationship they sought through immersion, they still experienced Nicaragua with something like a life preserver they could not shed. Students grew in awareness of the dual nature of their citizenship. They are citizens of a nation that imbues them with privilege, and in another sense, they are also members of a planetary system with global environmental concerns (Tawil, 2013).
New point of departure

After a week to ten days in Nicaragua, students have a broad range of thoughts and feelings about leaving to head home. On the one hand, many are longing for familiarity and comforts of home. They miss their favorite foods, air conditioning, their own beds, hot water, private bathrooms, loved ones and friends. There are often feelings of relief as if they were survivors of all the unlived and untrue anxieties they associated with leaving their native place. Yet, many feel a spiritual sadness. They are reluctant to leave a place where, through a mirror dimly, they glimpsed a type of community they long for with wistful envy. After some time, those who benefit from inequality begin to see ways that what at first looks like our privilege also enslaves and damages us. We begin to open more fully to our partners in Nicaragua as those who have much to teach us, and have relational competencies and local knowledge that we desperately need ourselves. In this way, we can take steps toward mutuality and sustainable possibilities for partnership and greater solidarity.

The time for the return flight approaches swiftly, and once again we prepare to pop from one world to what seems like another reality. Re-entry to our home contexts is not easy or simple. The physical and psychic fatigue of the intense experience of immersion learning has worn us out and generated disturbing new questions. In a ritual of departure and arrival on the travel day when we return home, I ask students to do reflective journaling on the plane trip again using the following questions:

What made it hardest to leave Nicaragua right now?

What are the things you will miss about Nicaragua?
Who are the people most affected by your leaving Nicaragua now?

What do you notice about yourself while being transported from one world to another?

As you travel home, reflect on your movement on the global citizenship continuum.

In response to these prompts, students write about new friends in Nicaragua with whom they formed a special bond, their appreciation for the art, music, and beauty of the landscape, and their conviction that they have been transformed and have new eyes for seeing the world. One student marveled over the mixture of gratitude and sadness involved in sorting out thankfulness for the privilege of making the trip while at the same time pain at the discovery of layers of global injustice that implicate the United States and its citizens. Theological questions about human nature, injustice, evil, and activism stick to students like seeds that they transport home whether or not they are fully aware of these souvenirs of the journey.

Towards arrival in a new place

My hope is that students leave with more curiosity and persistent questions than they had before the trip. I hope they will be disturbed by questions as a result of their immersion encounter that will continue to challenge them regarding their own privilege. A pedagogy of privilege must be a problem-posing form of education (Freire, 2000). I hope that immersion learning in Nicaragua gives students more discomfort, trouble, anguish over global injustice, and more commitment to action as well as life-long learning. Often students say that this course was a life-changing experience. I hope we are all changed by the learning experience. However, I hope that students also have new perspective regarding things that resist change: the inherent privilege of U.S. citizenship, systemic racism and bias, and class/financial power. National borders are political and
historical constructions, but departure from recognizing the power of those borderlines is not easy. I hope Nicaragua has implanted questions like seeds in our hearts and minds that will continue growing and cracking open our conceptual frameworks and consciousness. In conclusion, I hope that students leave questions like these: How can we continue to practice becoming better global citizens and neighbors at the same time to enhance of practice of being fully embodied and present in one place? Since we want to be neighbors in solidarity, what causes the barriers between us and Nicaraguans? Why didn’t we know more about our global neighbors? What theological reflections arise from our experiential learning with our neighbors in Nicaragua? What ways do advantages that we enjoy and think of as privileges prevent us from becoming more fully human?

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Flipping Immersions: Decolonizing Pedagogies of Disability and Theology

Katharine E. Lassiter

Keywords citizenship; disability; colonialism; flipped classrooms; immersion pedagogy

Abstract Immersion pedagogy flips narratives and practices of teaching and learning, paying close attention to locations, institutions, and theologies in order to decolonize structural ableism. Drawing from my experiences teaching a course on disability and theology, I argue that the linguistic use and practice of citizenship is a decolonizing pedagogical practice that builds power and unity between two groups of people—people with intellectual disabilities and learners enrolled in a higher education program of study. In doing so, I also speak to the qualities and traits which the immersive pedagogue must cultivate in herself in order to lead learners.

“I am the voice of one behind you saying, This is the way, walk in it.” Isaiah 30:21

Introduction

Flipped classrooms have been the newest pedagogical innovation for some time now. Flipped classrooms prioritize the classroom and class time as the place and space where learners apply key concepts with feedback from the instructor. Learners prepare to participate in class activities before class, and then, following the class session, reinforce their understanding and extend their learning. This form of pedagogy encourages creating knowledge over banking knowledge. Lectures, often

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delivered online, prepare students for class activities. Reading and homework follow. What then does flipping the theological classroom look like when applying a pedagogy of immersion to the contexts of (post)coloniality and (dis)ability?

This key question guides my reflections on what kind of pedagogy is possible when we start with a more porous sense of the boundaries of the classroom, the institution, and the learners. In teaching my course *Disabling Theology*, everything must be flipped in order to upend the constellation of death-dealing normativities and narratives which learners take to be the God-given order of material things: ableism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, capitalism, colonialism, and religious monism. For many in the globalizing world, a shift in physical abilities or mental and emotional faculties will create changes in moving through the world that may have us be seen by systems, institutions, and other individuals as incapable, broken, unfinished, and unhuman. It is those narratives that are not told, not held, not located either internally or externally within individuals, curricula, or institutions which is the work of decolonizing locations of disability and theology.

In this article, I invite you to think with me about the locations of disability and theology, about how we decolonize these locations, and about what a pedagogy that intentionally embodies dislocation can do to transform us as selves-in-relation. I argue that a theological pedagogy of dislocation flips the task of decolonization by enabling citizen encounters between persons with disabilities and persons without (yet) disabilities. A framework of citizenry flips the scripts amongst young adults and persons with disabilities, both of whom are two populations who often do not or cannot exercise the most foundational right of citizenship: voting. My argument proceeds in three steps. First, I describe the course and its logistics of location and dislocation. Second, I use institutions as a place to encounter the effects of colonialism. Last, I outline the double
decolonization that is made possible through citizen encounters and which become an impetus for self- and social-transformation. By attending to these three dimensions, I build toward a theological pedagogy of encounter where sacred difference marks the route forward toward God.

**Flipping locations**

As both an undergraduate and graduate course, *Disabling Theology* is one of several required electives that introduce learners to inequity, social injustice, and the common good. The course proceeds by attending to ableism as both personal experience and as socially constructed injustice. Ableism names the bias and injustice which assumes that nondisabled people are the norm of human life and that people with disabilities are deviations from this norm. Ableism is subtle, persistent, and prejudicial, sustaining unjust patterns of individual and collective thought, violent social structures, and oppressive physical structures. The course explores themes of accessibility, inclusivity, universal design, institutionalization, deinstitutionalization, eugenics, and theological discourse around persons with disabilities. The content runs the gamut, but is ultimately about seeing and experiencing disability in places where disability is present but not visible to those without eyes to see: texts, history, community, and self. Although we never travel further than fifteen miles from campus, our pedagogical journey immerses us in distant and seemingly foreign worlds.

We make pilgrimage into another’s psychosomatic experience through first-hand accounts. We read *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* by Jean Dominique Bauby, a fashion magazine editor who blinks out his thoughts while experiencing locked-in syndrome. We read *Until Tuesday*, by Luis Carlos Montalván, a seventeen-year veteran and former U.S. Army captain who experiences
traumatic brain injury and physical injury in Iraq, and who becomes an advocate, author, and college graduate through the help of his service animal, Tuesday, the golden retriever who ‘saves’ him. We read Crazy in America by Mary Beth Pfeiffer (2007), an investigative reporter who narrates the lives of “vulnerable citizens” all of whom experience the intersectional effects of intergenerational poverty, misdiagnosed and/or untreated mental illness, and incarceration (p.x).

We study horrifying narratives of wrongful imprisonment of persons with severe mental illness and we examine how mental illness is produced through solitary confinement.

We travel to Atlanta and Nashville through Skype. We call the house coordinator of l’Arche Atlanta, who invites us into her living room, also Terry’s and John’s living room, all three of them showing us what it’s like to live intentionally together. We call a federal investigator for death row inmates in Nashville whose job it is to decipher and find the locations where the narrative of a prisoner’s life demonstrates the compounded effects of structural ableism.

We journey into our local community, making visits to Visionaries and Voices, an art gallery and art making space for people with disabilities. We drive to St. Joseph Home, a faith-based non-profit which provides long-term residential and short-term respite care for non-ambulatory children and adults who have severe or profound mental disabilities. We go to Starfire Council and their sponsored local learning labs and potlucks, an asset-based community development organization committed to increasing social inclusion.

We walk around the globe even though both my students and I are restricted in our ability to travel. We look at the experience of mental illness in Ghana, where religious healing camps proliferate based on the belief that mental illness is demonic possession. We witness the horrifying effects of the toxic gas poisoning of the residents of Bhopal, India, and see that disability is made and manufactured through global economic systems.
We actively navigate into a 4-D world. We chart a spiritual cartography, a landscape of liberation, self-determination, and becoming. We read theology: Founder of l’Arche, Jean Vanier’s *From Brokenness to Community* and Nancy Eiesland’s *The Disabled God*. We wrestle with scripture from the Hebrew Bible and Christian Scriptures, all of which must be contextualized within their socio-cultural context. What does the story of the man with the withered hand say to hard hearts who uphold ableism through faith?

We turn and drive into the interior experience held by the collective whole of those enrolled in the course: student veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injuries; students with learning disabilities; students with family with intellectual disabilities or mental illness; students with pain disorders. “I am” or “my friend” or “my family member”—these places of relationality—also become critical locations of disability and theology. They are the leverage for empathic connection. They are also the leverage for building power.

Post-colonial scholar and Kingston, Jamaica native Stuart Hall (1999) writes, “Instead of asking what are people’s roots, we ought to think about what are their *routes*, the different points by which they have come to be now; they are, in a sense, the sum of those differences” (p. 5). Immersive pedagogy takes learners on a route which intentionally dislocates and displaces their roots. Immersive pedagogy uproots them from the ground that they think is good soil, exposing its barrenness, rockiness, or thorniness. They learn that what they have been taught is good soil is an illusion maintained by structural forces. Logistically, this takes some work, as all immersion courses do: developing relationships and building trust with community partners; arranging visits; preparing learners and debriefing learners; preparing community partners and debriefing community partners; asking for institutional support, whether money, people, or time.
Likewise, immersion pedagogy requires deft maneuvering and the pedagogue must become even more intentional in leading and guiding. Flipping the classroom through immersion does not result in a free-for-all where learners or community partners run the show. On the contrary, self-leadership, strength, discipline, focus, and strategy become even more critical as the pedagogue engages the enemy within and without. As Sun Tzu (1910) warns in The Art of War, “When the general is weak and without authority; when his orders are not clear and distinct; when there are no fixed duties assigned to officers and men, and the ranks are formed in a slovenly haphazard manner, the result is utter disorganization” (p. 42). Have no doubt, immersion pedagogues lead a small army of people with a ticking timeline through unfamiliar terrain. We map out multiple routes through hellacious and holy places. We decolonize through human bonds and as we reclaim the territories, narratives, rituals, and ancestors that were lost or stolen from us, that we hid underground, that we were asked to forget for the sake of their and our survival. There is a clear mission: humanization, at all cost.

**Flipping the institution**

We invite each other to be made strange, to go to these hellacious and holy places, in order to subvert the dominating and colonizing epistemologies of disability. While learners are immersed in many terrains, there is a central location where we dwell for some time: that of the institution. By using the word institution, I mean to conjure in your mind both a specific place, like the state sponsored schools and residential facilities which served as primary centers of care until the 1980s, and the phenomena of institutionalization as displacement from the goods of social, political, relational, and spiritual life.
Powerful examples come from the photographic essay *Christmas in Purgatory* which shows the living conditions at The Seaside, an institution for persons with intellectual disabilities in Connecticut. Locked doors, overcrowded facilities, and children and adults naked are the tell-tale signs of abuse, neglect, and social isolation. As authors Blatt and Kaplan (1966) affirm, “There is a hell on earth, and in America there is a special inferno” (p. v). Geraldo Rivera exposed similar conditions in his 1972 investigative report on Willowbrook State School and Letchworth Village in New York, including a 100% rate of hepatitis infection within six months of entering the institution, disabled individuals lying naked on the floor, and residents covered in feces (Trent, 1994, p. 258).

These are the colonial horrors of specific institutional places. Persons who lived under these conditions were colonized peoples. Like the colony, the institution creates the conditions for subjugation under the context of care. Rather than places of shelter, institutions became workshops of displacement. Residents were removed from the goods of human activities which constitute our social life and indeed ourselves. “I don’t belong in society,” and “There is no place for me here,” become the operant pathogenic beliefs of a colonizing practice of care for persons with disabilities. Like the colonial imagination, the displacement of persons with disabilities is by design, seeing abnormality rather than asset and reinforcing powerlessness through internalized self-hatred. Following the colonial bifurcation of city/colony and dominant/submissive, persons with disabilities were located outside the public spheres, removed from accessible locations, and institutionalized, sheltered, and workshopped ‘for their own good.’

While these specific institutions, like Letchworth Village, no longer exist, institutionalization as mindset and social practice continues to be deeply inscribed in our social, political, and even theological spheres. Criminalization, imprisonment, and execution of persons
with disabilities is certainly a case in point. While students are initially outraged, the mechanisms by which some people are constituted as disposable remain oblique to them. It takes significant work to show them codified evil. Likewise, students tend to be moved most by the pictures of children and the babies in the cribs, while also psychologically removed. “That’s horrible,” they say. Emotionally, these representations make the person with a disability into an object of pity or a holy innocent.

Institutionalization, like colonization, cites persons with disabilities as objects of study, not subjects in their own right—and from the context of multiple institutions, including that of higher education. Even when residential institutions have shut their doors, institutionalization is recreated over and over again. In a telling survey, 51 persons with intellectual disabilities were asked about the nature of the relationships in their lives. Researchers recorded that each person had, on average, 68 other people with disabilities in their lives, 24.39 paid human service professionals, 7.76 family members, 2.41 friends, and 2.75 other citizens (Vogt, 2012). Bluntly stated, disability issues forth not only a severe curtailment of unpaid and non-disabled social relations, but also removes persons with disability from a cartography of social and theological encounter to the detriment of all citizens. What is needed, then, is an ongoing commitment to flipping physical locations, social space, theological schooling, and the human heart. Hence, decolonization of disability, and also of theology, flips and deconstructs through deinstitutionalizing pedagogical practices.

**Flipping Theology through Citizen Encounters**
Deinstitutionalizing immersive pedagogical practices are manifold, united by a desire to name destructive forces, hold power structures accountable for the harms that they cause, and show students, and remind pedagogues, how change is made as we advance a theological vision of justice and love. I have alluded to some of the practices that I use in coordinating and juxtaposing reading, site visits, and personal interrogation, but I’d like to focus on a close collaboration with Starfire Council of Greater Cincinnati. Starfire Council is an asset-based community development organization working to build inclusive lives and inclusive communities. Their work is shaped by the principle of connection between citizens, not person with disability connected to person without disability, ‘abnormal’ to ‘normal.’ Linguistically, Starfire uses the term of citizen to describe everyone who possesses assets, or gifts, that they are invited to share with the community. However, the linguistic use of citizenry is double decolonization, especially in a context where persons with intellectual disabilities have been denied the very thing that we most often associate with citizenship: voting rights. So too have they been denied other goods of social, political, and theological life: access, living wages, adequate and affordable housing, legal and political representation, self-determination, inclusion and belonging, love. Citizenship is a central reclamation of human dignity that presses back on infantilizing representations and makes visible violations to human dignity. Likewise, in a context of higher education, to educate learners for citizenry and full participation is to recognize them as already gifted and contributors to the social fabric, particularly in an educational culture where they are coerced to submit to structural injustice in order to become ‘career-ready,’ made for full participation in dehumanizing capitalistic practices which annihilate the soul and violate our deepest values and hopes for beloved community. In other words, to claim citizenship amongst diverse groups is to build power for social change by pressing claims for redistribution, recognition, and representation together.
The linguistic use of citizen is accompanied by programmatic and institutional efforts. This includes monthly gatherings which are potlucks, discussions, and local learning labs. The point of these gatherings is not some kind of volunteer or service-oriented, feel good, pat yourself on the back encounter with a person with a disability. Instead, these gatherings enable encounters between citizens who are engaged in building community and building power for social change. In the context of my class, students are required to attend several gatherings and develop relationships. This is another displacement: our scholarly, higher educational institution is meeting, but in a deinstitutionalized context, e.g. not at the prescribed course meeting time, not in Classroom Building Room 116 but at Heritage Community Church in East Price Hill or McKie Rec Center in Northside, and with many people who are not college students but who, nonetheless, are also fellow learners.

Like all forms of immersion pedagogy, there is risk and discomfort from every side. Citizen encounters can go in all sorts of ways. In Black Skin, White Masks, psychoanalyst and postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon (2008) describes how he comes to accept his own objectification, and also how he comes to resist his objectification and embody his subjectivity. He writes, “Disoriented, incapable of confronting the Other, the white man, who had no scruples about imprisoning me, I transported myself on that particular day far, very far, from my self, and gave myself up as an object” (p.92). Despite his submission, he also recognizes that “the white world, the only decent one, was preventing me from participating” (p.94). To participate in the social world he must “make [him]self known” through confrontation and he does so (p.95). Recalling an objectifying conversation he writes how a woman commented to her child while looking at him, “Look how handsome that Negro is.” He replies to her, “The handsome Negro says, ‘Fuck you,’ madame.” (p.94). He is no longer an object; he is a subject. Fanon’s “fuck you” is a verbal decolonizing
practice, a response to subjugation which colonizes not only institutions, but also his own self-conception. This signals Fanon’s recognition that no amount of individual psychotherapy can resolve the social illness and structural dysfunction of white supremacy, while also upholds structural ableism, as a totalizing and sick worldview.

Fanon’s exchange makes clear that harms which are not transformed are transferred. Thus, citizen encounters can go all sorts of ways. My own personal experiences weigh heavily on me in recognizing the danger and risk for all sides. Over fifteen years ago, as a recent college graduate with a Bachelor’s of Arts in Theology and minor in Philosophy, I accepted a position as a program manager at a community-based housing facility for six men with intellectual disabilities with accompanying physical and psychological disabilities. On a Sunday night, one of our higher functioning adult men, twice my age, deaf and mute, came back to his home, my workplace, inebriated. He was ‘non-compliant’ and ‘defiant,’ refusing to complete his activities of daily living. The situation escalated. I was called into work to deescalate. He, like Fanon, made his presence known. I opened the office door and walked into the living room. He stood up. He made a fist and pulled his arm back. His fist landed on my face. I was shocked. Then I cried. Then he knocked over a table, went to his room, and slammed the door. I had become a victim of crime according to our juridical sphere. I did not call the police. I did not press charges. He was not my enemy (although he is accountable for his actions). The dysfunction of the social, political, economic, and religious world who uphold ableism are guilty of perpetuating his dismemberment from community.

To say it again: citizen encounters can go all sorts of ways. Hence, creating a controlled, low-risk environment with in-tact safety mechanism that centers persons with disabilities and their needs, not the students, is the central task of an immersive flipped pedagogy. Centering persons
with disabilities is a decolonizing practice in itself, but becomes even more potent when theological rituals of hospitality and celebration frame citizenry. For example, at the end of last semester we had a gathering to celebrate our work together. As an organization, Starfire presented each student with a small succulent plant; as a class, we brought gifts for a white elephant exchange. When Sandi, a citizen, opened her gift of a water gun, she said something along the lines of, “Are you kidding me? I’m not ten.” And when Morgan, a student, received her succulent plant, she reacted similarly, saying something like, “Are you kidding me? I have a black thumb.”

As my colleague Mindy McGarrah Sharp has noted, these kind of relational misunderstandings need not reify colonial practices of subjugation and domination, but can be used as places for repair. As postcolonial psychologist Ashis Nandy (1983) writes, “that which begins in the minds of men [sic] must also end in the minds of men [sic]” (p. 3). Decolonizing the location of disability is a recognition of the heart’s longing for relationships of mutuality, made possible through a commitment to unlearning in order to repair. Sandi and Morgan were given the opportunity to address their interpersonal ableist bias and to laugh together. A plant and water gun, accompanied with cake and snacks, are fairly low stakes.

I have yet to say much about decolonizing the institution of theology, but in many ways I hope that you have perceived its deinstitutionalization. Where is theology located? We do read theology of disability proper and attend to Scripture, models of ministry, and liturgy and sacraments, but theology is also found in the memoirs, in citizen encounters, and in the horrors of the institution. It is also located in the practice of building power to engineer our social, political, and theological institutions for belonging and inclusion. Institutions are not inherently bad, but bad things can happen in those places. This is, actually, the central problem of many mission-oriented institutions: that they are born from a charism, or gift of love, but that the practice of that love is
warped by a desire to fix and stabilize, rather than embracing the gift of transformation that is made possible through a love that embraces the brokenness of the human condition and its dizzying array of unknowns. Every institution ought to contain within itself the possibility for deinstitutionalization. For some institutions, this is a radical model, like Starfire Council, which can envision its own destruction in order to transform the social ties that bind us. In the context of institutional thinking, this is a shift from institutions as necessary evil to institutions as intentional places of becoming, and a shift from citizen as constituted by a granting of identity from a sovereign state institution (or not), to an appreciative claim of unique personhood oriented toward growth and self-determination, stemming from a self- and communal-blessing of recognition.

**Conclusion**

“What do you call a person with an intellectual disability?” asked one guest speaker to my learners. Consumer, client, people first language—these are all possibilities. “You call them by their name.” Decolonizing the locations of disability through immersion pedagogy is a project to unlock those caged by structural ableism and to make explicit the theological values which we struggle to make fully realized. It reverses easy definition of guest and host. It flips who holds power and where it is located. It is dangerous, raw, and risky, but hopeful and transformative. It is the eye of the needle and the eye of the storm. It is exactly where theological pedagogical must venture if we remain true to the call of discipleship.

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Reflections from the Pedagogical Frontlines

Katharine E. Lassiter

Abstract This essay reflects on immersion pedagogy concretely, inspired by self-reflexivity in ethnographic methods and Theodor Adorno’s *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*. *Minima Moralia* is a foundational text of the Frankfurt school of critical theory. Its style is fragmentary in nature, written as captured episodes of everyday life, which make visible dehumanization, its social, political, and economic structure through late industrial society, and its personal and social cost, most obviously in the form of fascism. Immersion pedagogy is responsive to these same sets of conditions, and is, likewise, fragmentary and situated in attentiveness to everyday life. Hence, immersion pedagogy is primarily performative. Thus, dreams, conversations, aphorisms, and texts are cobbled together to give shape to the risk, transformative power, and, ultimately, radical hope of freedom, all made possible by practicing an immersive attention which teaches, trains, and learns for the sake of redemption.

Keywords Immersion pedagogy; trauma; racial justice; gender justice; practices of attention.

1. To be in a fugue state is to lose yourself, to forget who you are, to dissociate from your core identity in order to survive traumatic conditions that kill the soul and lacerate the body.

The self forgets the self in order to remember to live. What is real and what is false, what

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is dangerous and what is safe, what is harm and what is healing: parallel streams of confusion become the norm.

2. The magician reveals the trick to you as she does it. After five and a half years of instructing over 200 undergraduate learners per year, I have learned that the pedagogue often knows the least about what is actually happening in any classroom and within any learner. Particularly when white learners lash out when confronted with their naïveté at the depths of racism, when good Catholic boys and girls sidestep their fear of queer and claim hateful heteronormativity, and the supposedly abled (but not really—they’ve just been told to believe that they are not disabled) mistake pity for charity and charity for justice when they see that global capitalism manufactures disability. They resist. They get angry. They decide to stop doing the homework and reading, but come to class because they are under the mistaken impression that their attendance matters. They don’t yet understand that showing up is different than bringing their body to class. They email and text in the front row as we talk about an imminent God who experiences suffering, who knows terror and anxiety. “My God doesn’t see race or gender or sexuality or ability,” they say. “Then your God is blind,” I reply. They invoke their priests, parents, police, and politicians as if they were God.

3. There was never an outside to immersion pedagogy. It was always inside. Inside the classroom. Inside the self. Our stories give us license or caution. All I have are stories from this fugue pedagogy of insider immersion. Drifting memories, dreams that awaken me,
stories I tell to the multitude in order to make an identity for myself, in order to not 
dissociate, in order to live in another state. Even as I confront the State.

4. Choose your battles wisely. “Feminist approaches urge us to develop understandings of 
social relations, whose connections are often initially only intuited. Everyone is familiar 
with the slogan, ‘The personal is political’—not only that what we experience on a personal 
level has profound political implications, but that our interior lives, our emotional lives are 
very much informed by ideology. We ourselves often do the work of the state in and 
through our interior lives. What we often assume belongs most intimately to ourselves and 
to our emotional life has been produced elsewhere and has been recruited to do the work 
of racism and repression” (Davis, 2014, p. 142).

5. Watch what people do, not what people say. A deep hermeneutic of suspicion fills my 
pedagogy. What does immersion pedagogy require? The courage to confront reality, to 
name the words and ideas that have been stolen from us, used against us, numbing and 
pacifying us. The billboards that tell me to report heroin users are free ads for the next 
electoral race for sheriff. Turn in addicts: the prison industrial complex needs free labor. I 
walk in the woods and talk with the ancestors, animals, angels. I vomit. Chamomile tea 
burns my throat in its backwards movement.

6. “You are aggressive.” Students keep saying this as I teach my course, “Hands Up, Don’t 
Shoot: Practical Theology for Racial Justice.” I ask if they would call me aggressive if I 
were a white man standing up at the front of the room, showing them murder after murder,
or if they would just call me Professor Lassiter and not make a peep. And still I play pedagogue, sending them follow-up emails after I show them violence sanctioned by the state:

“Mayor Ginther of Columbus, Ohio gave his second State of the City address last Thursday. While the mayor stated that every person deserves to be safe, he is stepping up and rolling out an ‘enforcement blitz’ that resulted in someone your age, Henry Green, a 23 year old black man, being shot by undercover officers last summer.”

“You should be asking a lot of questions by this point in the course, but let me give you a few: (1) How is the term public safety being used? Does it mean safety only for select communities and groups of people, or does it mean safety for all people? (2) What is the best means to achieve safety? Is it the creation of a group of people who work deceitfully and duplicitously, who have the burden of bearing lethal weapons, and who are charged from the top-down to serve and protect according to the interests of the mayor? (3) Who benefits from an ‘enforcement blitz’?”

“Moreover, we have to ask ourselves what God would say and what Catholic social teaching has to say to these actions that are sanctioned in our names and our dollars. Does God want more murder? Does God want safety for white people and not black people? Story after story in the Bible is about the God who stands with the oppressed and marginalized. The God of our ancestors calls us, not just to safety, but to flourishing, to life abundant, to grace, gift, and peace, to solidarity and inclusion. That God is a god of belonging.”

“Which is all to say: don't be tricked by idols and false promises.”
The veil is ripped by the end of the semester: “Your class stole my innocence.” I look at the handwritten quote on my refrigerator door: “[T]he price of absolute purity is irrelevance” (Niebuhr, 1959, 168).

7. To read with smart phone in one hand and Bible in the other: this is our shorthand for theological method which attends to the world and seeks to change it. This is not theological immersion. This is reproduction of theological propaganda, which may or may not lead to theological freedom and/or theological malpractice. It all depends on how much we believe and disbelieve, all at the same time. It all depends on how much we show up to do the work with Spirit and not spirits. The integrity of the witness matters. Leading with the heart matters.

8. Theological disgust is a powerful tool. “Do you want to be holy?” I ask this question to a 20 year old white female student from rural Ohio after she tells me that could never love Dajerria Becton as much as she loves her mother. Dajerria was a fifteen year old black teen who had the audacity to go to an end of year pool party in McKinney, Texas, a white enclave. In footage shot from another teenager’s phone, police officer David Eric Casebolt grabs her by her braids and throws her to the ground, her two piece bathing suit and 100 pound body scant protection against a grown man wearing a Kevlar vest and a gun on his person. He digs his knees into her back, pushing her face into the ground. He is a man sworn to protect and serve all people. He pulls a gun on her and her friends—children worthy of protection—and calls them a mob. “If you want to be a human, you’re going to
have learn to love and care about her as much as you love and care about your mother. You’re not a human, yet. You can leave my office. Now.”

9. Ground Zero is not just in New York City. Ground Zero is Cincinnati, Ohio. From my tiny studio apartment, situated amongst million dollar homes, I see the Ohio River, freedom to so many. But history is not dead, and down the road there are homes with chains in the basement from where slave catchers made their profits returning people. Is it any wonder that the Licking River flows backwards here? Is it any wonder that eight Fortune 500 Companies, worth a total of $242.9 billion, are headquartered here? Is it any wonder that the current president’s first victory lap post-election brought him straight to the U.S. Bank Arena, nestled downtown with the river lapping its walls?

On that night, December 1, I missed my last class of the semester: Disabling Theology. I sat in traffic for three hours, crawling through a downtown where traffic lights did not matter, where the rules we used to maneuver through our grid were no longer operant. Three hours to think. Three hours to feel. Three hours to see. Wave after wave hit me. I allowed the terror to rise as I imagined a future of chaos. I thought about how rape is used as a weapon of war. I made a list of items to have in my to-go bag: cash, passport, change of clothes, protein bars, water, dog food, first-aid kit, emergency contraception for myself, young girls, and women. I cried in fear and anguish. I called a friend who bore witness.

Then, I remembered. There is no need for the State to declare martial law when it has trained men and women alike to be its soldiers: surveilling, raping, stealing, murdering,
saying nothing, doing nothing to intervene. We mistakenly call it ‘patriotism’ and ‘making a living.’

10. When does the banality of evil finally cast out the good of the human heart? My co-teacher, a 6 foot, 180 pound man who passes as white, with a white wife, two kids, and a mortgage, is gone for a work trip. We often play good cop-bad cop in class. Tonight I am both. It’s 9:05 pm and I am standing in front of 40 students, half black, half white, one Latina. To end class, I lead them through a visualization exercise in empathy. “Who has kids or wants to have kids?” I ask. “What’s it like to be mom or dad? What is it like to love your son or daughter more than anything else? What would you do to protect the ones that you love? Would you teach them to put their hands in the air whenever they see a police officer so that their lives aren’t ended for no good reason other than the color of their skin or because they are different? Do you teach them their rights and to resist? What do you teach them?”

I ask them to open their eyes. “What does it feel like to acknowledge that their lives are seen as less valuable for no other reason than that they are black or brown or transgender or Muslim or a female? How are you going to make black lives matter this week?”

From the back of the classroom a white male student, a criminal justice major who hopes to attend the police academy, yells out, “Blue lives matter!” All eyes are wide open. My black students in the front of the classroom turn around to look at him and the words as weapons begin to pour out. I know their anger. There is already verbal violence. I fear physical violence and know who will bear the brunt of any student judicial conduct hearing. I am scared. My grad student and I make eye contact. “Enough,” I say. “I can’t do anymore tonight. If you are uncomfortable, good.” I pause. “I teach this class to heal my family line
which has been both perpetrator and perpetrated. My great great grandfather was born in Paducah, Kentucky in 1862. His parents named him Jefferson Davis Lassiter. They chose the wrong side. Meanwhile, my Native and Black ancestors married into my family line and disavowed themselves in order to survive. Instead of honoring them as I grew up, I was raised with the story that ‘there were n*****s in the woodpile’ and ‘half-breeds.’ They were all fooled and allied themselves with power which did not serve them. They took the race bait that keeps us all imprisoned, trapped, locked in cages. That’s why I’m here. Now go home and think about why you are here.”

Silence as everyone leaves. It’s now 9:30 pm. I don’t feel safe. I process the provocation and why it happened tonight of all nights as I drive home. I follow up with an email to the white male student and ask him to help me understand what happened. I still believe that I can change his heart and thus his actions. Or change his actions and thus his heart. I ask him what he wanted me to do during class. He writes, “I wanted you to defend me.” I ask him to meet with me and my co-teacher the next week before class. I bring up the email. I respond, “I won’t defend you. Your position is indefensible. You took the race bait. Do you reject it and all the evil it stands for?”

My co-teacher makes eye contact, more of an eye roll, to let me know that my hyper-rationality and veiled baptismal promises are not going to win the day. He wants me to let him do what he does best: flip a no to a yes. They tell stories about growing up in rural areas and the police bringing them home when they had done stupid teenager things. “Don’t your classmates, your football teammates, deserve the same kind of opportunity to make stupid mistakes and be given another chance?” The student is persuaded this time. Over the rest of the semester, more resistance will emerge. My co-teacher will persuade. I
will rationalize. I will learn that white supremacy is not rational although it takes the form of rational argumentation. Self-deceit is an act of survival. Have we flipped him or is he a threat that must be contained?

I sense the answer months later when I go to my credit union. He is my teller. In that moment, I know that he should not have access to my bank account number, to know how much I’m withdrawing, or my current balance. I smile, ask him about his summer, whether he has graduated yet. “Next semester,” he says. “Let’s avoid dual roles. I’ll wait for the next teller,” I say. I lie through my teeth when I say to him, “It was good to see you.” It’s an act of survival.

11. Waking up is a conscious act. I am in a prison and trying to escape. There is a rental minivan planted inside the facility and I go through the dark to get to it. I want to put my hands in the air when I see or hear others. I have a blanket with me and think about walking back to my cell to return it, but don’t want to retrace my steps in the dark. I take it with me, even though I contemplate leaving it in the forest. I get to the minivan and jump into the backseat first as the vehicle begins to move on its own accord. I jump into the front seat, over the seats, leaving the blanket in the backseat. I approach the guard tower. “It’s a rental,” I explain when I accidently open the sliding rear door instead of the window. The guard looks at me. Prison guards are on the other side, too. “Can you read the line on the display?” he asks. I look first at the wrong display, then the correct one. “Is that carpet?” he asks as the rear door closes. I read the display: 2-D. “Yes, it is carpet.” “You are free to go,” he says. I start to roll the window back up and he puts his hand on the edge of the door. “Don’t forget to lock the doors,” he says. “Ok,” I say, lock the doors and drive forward, away from...
the prison. I awake. I write the dream down and my most salient thought: “In the dream I am worried that my safety blanket will give me away as a prisoner to the guards as I break free.”

12. “That wasn’t supposed to happen.” My community partner and I are debriefing the 5K/10K race that my students staffed and fundraised to support. It was for a great cause: incarcerated men. “Who knew that fundraising for convicted felons was going to be so hard,” says a grad student. The scenic location: a pitted out, non-regulation, gravel track inside a correctional facility, surrounded by armed and uniformed correctional officers and barbwire at 7 am. Unbeknownst to either of us, my student sees her high school classmate. He who murdered her best friend’s girlfriend. They start a dialogue. My partner and I meet with her to debrief a week later over frozen yogurt. She told one of her friends that she saw him and spoke to him. Her friend replied, “What did you do that for? You should have punched him. Killed him. Hurt him as much as he’s hurt us.” We process with her. My student confesses, “I can’t tell anyone. I have to keep this a secret.” I ask why. “My friends and family won’t understand. I don’t want to lose them.” I wonder what unacknowledged secrets she keeps—what unacknowledged secrets we all keep—to which we do not give our consent but which guide our actions and shape our very being.

13. The rug is ripped out from underneath me. I must move everything out of my office the day winter break starts. They are removing asbestos and replacing the moldy carpet that developed due to poor ventilation. Unregulated petrochemical products from the 1960s may very well kill me. I clear everything out, returning books and papers and ideas and
emotions that were never mine to carry. The work of dispossessing is an act of self-love and of self-preservation. I have to love myself enough to create the space to receive non-possessive and non-manipulative love from others. I shred reams of paper. I sell a bin of books. On graduation day, I take a long look at the empty space, vestiges of where I have prayed and learned and taught. Lesson after lesson. I remember a dream from months ago. I fall into a pool while carrying the Journal of American Academy of Religion and my water bottle. The journal sinks to the bottom of the pool. The bottle floats away from me. I swim after my water bottle. Water is life. I will drown if I dive for the journal. I swing my garment bag over my shoulder, gown and hat tucked inside, and close the door behind me. The right commitments set me free.

14. Mental illness is a communicable disease. Another white male student is enrolled in Disabling Theology. He wants to be a sniper. He is concerned about the survival of the human race. He actively challenges the central premise of the course: that ableism is an injustice. He cites, inaccurately, Darwin, survival of the fittest, and genetic occurrence. I correct his biology lesson and cite the deep footnote of grace as theological and humanistic claim. I tell him there are consequences to his ideas: Hitler, Nazi Germany, eugenics, genocide. He cites his agnosticism as cause. I invite him to look from his place of agnosticism, of unknowing and uncertainty, and ask him to have compassion for those whose lives are also unknown and uncertain. I ask him if this could include people with disabilities. He ends our conversation with a challenge: “Would you want someone with an intellectual disability to ejaculate into you?” I have no more time to be patient with
harms. With his mental illness or the collective mental illness that shapes his thinking and his actions. “Get out,” I reply.

15. Wash it away. My Russian scientist neighbors teach me a new cheer as we drink vodka the day after my 38th birthday and as I analyze my morning. I was in the car, driving to give a retreat talk to a local faith-based non-profit on the good news of racial justice, when I saw a black woman, at least 7 months pregnant, lying in the middle of the road and screaming in pain. I pulled over, put on my emergency blinkers, ran across the street. A young woman came running, too. “Call the police,” I tell her. “It was a hit and run.” “The police say not to move her unless she is in danger,” the other first responder says. “It’s rush hour and she’s in the middle of William Howard Taft Road. We are moving her.” We deadlift her to the sidewalk. I ask for more detail from the pregnant woman: a dump truck hit her as she was getting in her car to go to work, ripping the car door off its hinges and driving away without stopping. I lead them both through breathing exercises and tell them to clap their hands and stomp their feet to move trauma energy before it gets locked in their bodies. I hear the sirens, hand the other first responder my card, and tell her to get in touch with me if they need a report. I’m a few minutes late for my talk and give them a snapshot. “The metaphor is crystal clear, isn’t it? In Cincinnati, Ohio, this black woman and her baby are a piece of garbage that can be left lying in middle of a road named after the 27th President of the United States and 10th Chief of Justice.” My Russian neighbors shake their heads, fill the shot glass again, and cheers with a phrase that sounds like “Ha-po-ta-sho.” It roughly translates, “You can’t drink away your skill.”
16. Father knows best. I am in South Bend, Indiana for a conference celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Pope Paul VI’s 1967 encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, On the Development of Peoples. I am presenting on repairing harms and the need for a feminist lens of care in taking up racial justice work. I walk into the lobby of my hotel. Two groups of white men are watching the Sweet Sixteen Florida-Wisconsin game. I ask for the score and begin to watch. The two younger men look at me and one pats his lap for me to sit on it. I indignantly say, “Excuse me? Dr. Lassiter does not sit on laps.” They are sheepish and offer me a beer. I take it and watch the game as it goes into double overtime. The older group of men, football coaches, say nothing. The younger men leave. I take off my jacket and the older men see my ink and comment. I know to joke about the naked woman on my arm as my sailor tattoo if it comes up and then proceed to explain about Eve and lost knowledge. This is the first time anyone has ever asked me if she has “a shaved pussy.” It’s then that I realize that I am in a hotel in South Bend, Indiana, and no one who loves me knows exactly where I am and that the night clerk is one woman who is hiding in the office and that I am wearing heels and a dress that is too short given these times. I laugh it off as a joke and then yawn and tell them to be good. I can banter with the boys. I don’t wait for the elevator. I round the corner, slip off my heels, and run down the hallway silently to the stairs to get to my room. I get in, lock every lock I can, and breathe again. I tell this story to my students. A young woman comes up to me after class and asks why I would tell everyone this. She is crying. “You’re a Catholic theologian who is supposed to uphold the values of the Church,” she says. “I’m a person who deserves to not live in fear of gang rape,” I respond. They say all roads lead to Notre Dame.
17. The personal is political is pedagogical. This is what immersion pedagogy requires: a wholesale vulnerability in which the weak armor up and the strongest are systematically under-armed. Our worst actions aren’t who we are until we become them. You don’t kill the dog that bites because it has been beaten all its life. We have to believe in each other more, not less. Even as we protect ourselves. “Are we at peace?” I ask students as we read about police offers who dragged Denise Stewart, a 47-year-old grandmother, a black woman, from her apartment naked and handcuffed her and her four children in a Brooklyn hallway. She begged for her inhaler and collapsed. Eventually they threw a towel over her naked body. Her crime? Opening the door to inform the police that they had the wrong apartment. “Why aren’t they outraged?” my co-teacher ask. I respond, “They don’t even know yet that they don’t care.” I am reminded of the words of Shunryu Suzuki: “When you are fooled by something else, the damage will not be so big. But when you are fooled by yourself, it is fatal” (Wicks, 2008, p. 141). For everyone.

18. Getting to the roots. I take myself for a run through the woods after winter solstice yoga is cancelled. My mind is also running and I trip on the roots of a tree. I plunge face down into the dirt. I roll over and sit cross-legged to get to the root of my dis-ease. I’m reminded of a wise crone story. An empath was feeling through a situation with a client and overextended her emotional boundaries. The crone watched as she did this. “Get. Back. In. Your. Chair. We don’t do that here.” Everyone does their own work. The kin-dom of God is here but not yet. What trips us up is often right at our feet, waiting to be unearthed, waiting to be mourned. A friend comments about doing the work: “You are changing states from solid
to liquid to gas. There’s a lot of energy going in and it looks like nothing is happening.” A different friend who plays games of strategy says, “You are leveling up.”

19. Pedagogy for the pedagogue. My gender queer black colleague leads me through a pedagogical exercise in a workshop on trickster methodology. Take one page of theory, any page; don’t take too seriously what you choose; don’t overthink; use a Sharpie; cross out words to make a poem.

The colonial state
a racial structure
fundamentally patriarchal

Persistent, thoughtful critic
late Mohawk legal scholar Patricia Monture
unrelenting advocate of Indigenous nationalist struggles and emancipation for Indigenous women, though she did not identify her work in these terms.

“The Canadian state is the invisible male perpetrator who unlike Aboriginal men does not have a victim face….At the feet of the state I can lay my anger to rest” (Coulthard, 2014, p. 101).

It’s not magic. There are people in power making decisions that can harm or heal. We either wield our power or give our consent. To tinker on the margins is not an option in immersion pedagogy.
20. Joy is where love comes to rest. Over the years I have learned to ask the questions that I do not want answered when I watch a reaction that makes no sense given the situation: “When has a partner or parent hit you, spit on you, thrown things at you? When have you been targeted because of your race or gender?” Teaching immersively, away from the books and articles which provide a critical distance but which are also quivers aimed to attack, requires redefining what is dangerous and what is safe. Love requires safety. Moving toward love requires walking through danger. Immersion pedagogy requires that we do both. To be in the world, but not of it. To be cunning as serpents and innocent as doves. To risk and struggle. To learn about all of the human condition. To earn the trust of self and to move in ways which allow the self to give rise to greater acceptance. To accept joy and to build with those who can show up for the work. To move through fugue, numb, paralysis, alienation, dissociation to an acceptance of reality. To see the spiritual at work in the material. To participate in pulling this world forward to truly honor all of creation. “I’m not always optimistic,” a restorative justice colleague tells me, “but I’m hopeful.”

References


Prelude to Decolonizing Immersion Pedagogy: Four Movements

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Abstract This article introduces four movements to consider when planning, experiencing, and debriefing short-term immersion learning environments in theological education based on the author’s experiences leading immersion courses in various contexts over several years. The four movements—charting dehumanizing geographies, curating immersion experiences, awakening to all sides of harm, and decolonizing possibilities—offer an invitation to teachers, students, and community participants to enter the long-term work of decolonizing immersion pedagogy. Inspired by historian Amy Lonetree, the author draws on stories from immersion courses to demonstrate a process of border-crossing that is oriented to learning while aware and awake to constant risks of harm.

Keywords Border-crossing; Lonetree; decolonization; immersion; pedagogy

photograph of ant street mural, taken by Mindy McGarrah Sharp in Arizona, US

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“Would it be better to collect all the money we spent to get here and send you a donation in the mail than being here for a week sharing stories?” – me to a host partner in an international immersion class

“Have you considered the environmental impact of our travel?” – international immersion class student

“Why haven’t I seen this before?!” – local immersion class student

“Not only do I struggle with my own fear of the way people think about me, I am also met with thoughts of who would stand up for me within my own group.” – international immersion class student

Introducing movements

I was standing still in a room, grounded on a seemingly stationary floor, yet out of the corner of my eye, I knew that the room was moving. Was that the earth groaning beneath my feet? Or was the architecture itself moving? First feeling and then seeing, I sensed the source of movement: like a pliable straw basket, the museum wall moved in response to the breeze of passersby first with a subtle shift as if the wall was breathing. Then, the wall moved more noticeably, perhaps when the group footprint made more of an impact. The shape of the room shifted as the entire wall responded.

My students, a seminary board member, local guides, and myself were visiting a Tohono O’odham museum in the Arizona borderlands, built in the shape of a large basket, a traditional art form. The walls themselves were woven to respond materially to the people who walked inside it, who were held by it. We were on an immersion learning experience, learning as much as we could about dynamics of life and death, fear and hope that wound through this harrowing and

13 While there are many O’odham scholars to recommend, and new scholarship is published every year, for deeper engagement of history and culture of an indigenous people whose current reservation spans land in both the United States and Mexico making the idea of a militarized national border across the reservation disruptive to tribal patterns and customs, I recommend the brief “Afterword” of poet Ofelia Zepeda’s Ocean Power: Poems from the Desert where Zepeda provides a broad overview of O’odham scholarship (Zepeda, 1995, pp. 85-89).
beautiful borderland region of the United States. It was clear that as visitors, we were impacting our surroundings, and clearer that traveling through the land itself rather than just reading about it from our classroom many miles away was impacting us. As a theological educator who continues to learn and lead through immersion learning, I continue to wonder, is the pedagogical method of immersion learning harmful, helpful, or both?

Immersion learning at its best holds open questions of possible, even probable, harms and goods as explicit topics to address within its pedagogy. From my experiences as a learner and teacher of many kinds of short term immersion learning experiences, local, domestic, and international, I have found that the question of harm and/or help is held open when I intentionally practice these four movements. Therefore, I structure the following sections of my article with four moving practices: charting dehumanizing geographies, curating immersion experiences, awakening to all sides of harm, and decolonizing possibilities. I contend that these four movements are important components of an immersion pedagogy that seeks to invite learning while also remaining mindful of the risk of exploitation that so often accompanies learning through leaving “home” to travel to “other” places. These movements are invitations to the long-term work of decolonizing practices: they structure immersion as a multi-faceted prelude. By practicing movements of charting, curating, awakening, and decolonizing within the fabric of immersion learning, the pedagogical practice of traversing boundaries of sacred spaces can support larger goals of decolonizing learning in theological education.

Decolonizing teaching and learning supports life-giving transformative scholarship and pedagogy in the twenty-first century. The word decolonizing denotes processes of identifying and dismantling structures instituted by colonial force and creatively making room for the necessary recoveries, restorations, and new possibilities when human experiences and communities are freed
from the restrictive constraints that colonial violence instituted. Colonization thrives alongside any justification for the success and wealth of some people and nations to trespass and thrive at the expense of enslavement, erasure, death, and silencing of other people, nations, and lands. Pedagogy denotes the process of teaching and learning a course, a curriculum, and a way of lifelong learning. Pedagogy often refers to the process of intentional course design, recognizing and fostering habits of teaching and learning, and mapping learning goals to pathways of achieving and practicing the goals through a course of study. Typically used to refer to a set of teaching practices, the word literally means “to lead a child” and is therefore “inherently directive and must always be transformative” (Macedo, 2000, p.25). Decolonizing immersion pedagogy is the long process of transforming a careful learning environment in which students and teachers travel together away from the traditional classroom of campus and then return back to the classroom or campus to integrate the learning that happened during a several hour to several week period of intense study in an “other” place. Decolonizing immersion pedagogy is about reducing and transforming structures and practices of intentional and invisible harm in this unique form of teaching and learning.

“Transformation on all sides of harm,” according to historian Amy Lonetree, involves radical listening and truth-telling in contexts of traumatic memories, complicities, and resistances. Immersion experiences, from my perspective as a pastoral theologian, invite students into the crucial prelude to radical truth-telling: radical listening to truths long masked as invisible, unimportant, or just the way things are and should be. I argue that immersion pedagogy opens space for radical listening and offers a promising invitation, what I want to call a “prelude,” into transformative practices of decolonizing teaching and learning. In this essay, I describe an immersion pedagogy that includes both multiple displacements and multiple commitments of
holding space for listening while also practicing radical listening itself. Decolonizing immersion pedagogy promises to empower practices of “transformation on all sides of harm” by refusing to minimize attention to risk, power, and privilege before, during, and after a learning process.

**Movement 1: Charting dehumanizing geographies**

How does any learner study an other context as a conversation partner rather than objectified context for study? What establishes and maintains borders between discrete communities across the broad landscape of human experience? Who benefits and who is harmed by borders? Who can cross freely and whose movement is more restricted? These are decolonizing questions in that one legacy of geopolitical colonial force is a landscape fractured by still unfolding confrontations of ownership practices with land rights. Practices of charting such dehumanizing geographies become both context and subject of decolonizing immersion pedagogy.

Decolonizing immersion pedagogy brings a particular kind of border-crossing experience into the learning experience. Though not all students and teachers would name the experiences that led to graduate theological education as such, students and teachers are already familiar with border-crossing experiences before arriving in the seminary classroom. Students regularly cross borders of expectation and opportunities in families, communities, and self-understanding. With both residential on-campus and online pedagogies, students and teachers cross thresholds of entering and exiting a learning environment on a daily or weekly basis, often shifting rhythms of learning from semester to semester, from season to season. In immersion pedagogy, in addition to crossing in and out of the learning environment, the learning environment itself also crosses particular physical, psychological, and metaphorical borders. Such border-crossing provides
greater visibility and physicality to the risk of dehumanizing particular people and places as mere objects of study.

A few years ago, my students and I were offered a tour of the newest border patrol station in the United States. In rural and quite rugged southern Arizona, a once small, quiet town was now bursting with new infrastructure – housing, food supplies, shopping, roads, gas stations – to support the now hundreds of border patrol agents stationed there. The new station building was indeed stunning – state of the art, solar powered, and with many interesting design features. After a tour through the building, including the weapons arsenal, sterile detention holding cells (which were not empty), and hallway souvenir display, we were ushered into a conference room that reminded me of university board rooms. Some of my students were impressed and others were deeply disturbed. So was I.

One member of our group suggested that this kind of infrastructure and weaponry is needed on our southern border. Our station guide responded that this is the prototype station for all national borders: south and north, east and west. Another member of the group gasped, “but we would not treat our Canadian neighbors like this.” Suddenly, a theological concept of neighbor love was made visible in a new way. Had we not just encountered neighbors, siblings in the human family, in the detention holding cells? Rather than charting dehumanizing geographies through only learning from published histories of migration and missions, or learning contours of map-making and conquest, we learned in the encounter of dehumanizing geographies in person, revealing borders within our understanding and practice of neighbor love. Who is my neighbor? How shall I love neighbor as I love self?

Becoming more aware of the risks of already present practices of dehumanization is a benefit and risk of immersion pedagogy. Dehumanization is the strategic practice of considering
some people as fully human and others as less than human. My students realized that popular discourse, belief, and practice in the United States considers some geographical neighbors more human than others. This is a huge realization and affects voting, policy advocacy, theological reflection, prayer, and more. Dehumanization is built into the fabric of national and global histories where human wealth and well-being for some people has been built through practices of dehumanizing “other” people and places through labor exploitation, enslavement, rights restriction, urban planning, land and water rights practices, and more. In my experiences, the kinds of border-crossing that immersion pedagogy structures into the learning environment reveal dehumanizing practices that are more often than not less visible in the daily life of the university. This is a great and oh so painful opportunity! And, as they say, once you know you cannot not know.

Crossing in-between frames of reference, learning is both potentially maximized and ever-fraught with danger. Seeing human dynamics in which I participate and from which I benefit in a new way can provoke disbelief, shame, or entrenchment of entitlement via justification. What is it about crossing between sacred spaces that can ignite passionate curiosity while at the same time provoke misreading, misinterpretation, appropriation, and other habits of exclusion? In the above scenario reflecting on the border patrol station visit, across a variety of political and faith perspectives, the immersion learning environment allowed the class to recognize and interrogate temptations to restrict the moral demand of neighbor love only so far and only to certain kinds of neighbors. Immersion learning both enacts and problematizes the risks of physical travel as a method of study by charting dehumanizing geographies. To unpack this claim, I first describe my own experience with immersion pedagogy.
From school field trips to short-term immersion experiences as a college student, from learning and practicing ethnography in my doctoral studies, to the past decade of designing and leading immersion learning in theological education, I can attest to the power of immersion pedagogy. Growing up in Atlanta, I recall a bus trip to the birthplace of Jimmy Carter, made even more memorable because I left my dental retainer at the restaurant hours from home and sat with my grandmother on the phone with a restaurant employee who found it and mailed it back to me. I remain grateful to the restaurant employee and now wish I had done more than send a thank you note. It wasn’t until I walked into the sacred space of Ebenezer Baptist Church with the Society of Pastoral Theology over two decades later that I more fully realized that my Atlanta public school had not offered a field trip to the birthplace of Martin Luther King, Jr., a short distance from my home. I continue to wrestle with the selective border-crossing structured into my own education and awareness. Which field trips do I take and why?

In my own wrestling with how movement (and lack of movement) through geographical spaces contributes to my own latent tendencies to dehumanize landscapes of human community, a visit to a museum in college stands out as one of my more powerful immersion learning experiences. While taking a course at the University of Virginia on Christian Ethics after the Shoah, or Jewish Holocaust during World War II, my class went on a field trip to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in nearby Washington D.C. While I don’t remember the specifics of the bus ride to and from, during my first visit to this powerful museum, I was struck by how the architecture of the space itself forced some measure of empathic imagination (what would empathy be like in this context?) and experiential learning (how am I learning through the ways my body and senses are moving and being moved in the space?). Tight corners and pathways that required walking through a train car to move through the museum impacted me on a bodily register in a
different way than walking through train cars in a train museum. The smell of piles and piles of shoes took my breath away.

And then, caught in my own imagination at a particular exhibit about how persons with varying abilities and illnesses were targeted for extermination in concentration camps, I noticed someone on my left. When I turned to look at my neighbor-stranger, she said from her wheelchair, “well, we sure wouldn’t have made it.” In the middle of my own process of recovery from an operation and leaning on crutches myself, she was right. Strangers now connected, we lingered together sharing in the depth of horror in a more personal way. We could imagine and not imagine what it might have been like for us. This is the promise and risk of immersion learning: a powerful experience that evokes a deeply embodied empathic imagination while also requiring restraint around the impossibilities of empathic imagination that simply can’t cross certain barriers of understanding into bodies distanced from the horror the dehumanizing geographies represent. Yet, it is still important to chart dehumanizing geographies, especially when they are made more visible in more than usually intense ways. The gift of clear visibility allows the opportunity for training awareness to less visible, more insidiously hidden landscapes of oppression.

In my experiences, immersion pedagogy involves intentional displacement from one contained space and a collective traversing across borders. A group of co-learners comprised of students and teachers, relatively uninformed guests and practiced guides, enters a new context whether near or far from each participant’s home. Immersion pedagogy in theological education involves multiple displacements because students and teachers have already left a myriad of forms and places called home before ever entering “the seminary classroom.” Acknowledging this informs a prelude to decolonizing immersion pedagogy, especially when considering seminary itself as a curriculum of immersion experiences. Immersion pedagogy challenges the notion that
sacred spaces are bound by human made constraints. Instead, an intentional pedagogical design that honors multiple displacements and border-crossing invites a uniquely visible practice of charting dehumanizing geographies.

**Framing movement 2: Curating questions**

!["One-Sided Conversation"

He is hard of hearing.
and so am I.
He hears only part of what I say.
and I miss half of what he says.
So we overcompensate and talk twice as much.
with the hope that we may capture the whole.


Where shall we go? What shall we do when we get there? How do we prepare? How do we share about the experience after returning home? Who has access to participating in various immersion experiences? Who are the right teachers and guides to maximize the necessary learning and unlearning that immersion pedagogy requires? How can power be acknowledged and shared? How will the immersion participants acknowledge and face various complicities in the harm that we engender in order to learn? Is it worth it? How will we know? Acknowledging underlying concerns, questions like these encourage decolonizing immersion pedagogy around the relationships an itinerary could potentially facilitate through a schedule of experiences before, during, and after any specific travel seminary.

Tohono O‘odham poet Ofelia Zepeda writes of the human inclination to fill in with speech and assumptions what is otherwise hard to receive across various differences. In immersion pedagogy, course design involves preparing, experiencing, and processing various challenges and
opportunities in listening deeply across differences that are in some ways present, but certainly not always so prominent. In addition to learning to listen with the help of language and cultural translators, participants also navigate multiple interacting levels of group dynamics, changing surroundings, and self-awareness. Participants’ expectations and previous experiences shape abilities and openness to listen deeply into these interacting dynamics. Further, the embodied, experiential nature of the learning environment that encompasses traveling, eating, resting, and playing together in addition to structured learning sessions can be overwhelming. As one of my students once exclaimed, there is no escape from the class this week – everything we do and everywhere we go all week is part of the course. As a facilitator, I am aware that my responsibilities of attention extend day and night, from beginning to end, which is of course neither possible nor healthy for anyone; therefore, I must structure support for myself so that all participants have avenues of support before, throughout, and after an immersion experience. Given predictable challenges in listening, immersion pedagogy involves practices of thoughtfully piecing together, or “curating” learning experiences both in and outside traditional and virtual seminary classrooms.

Curating learning experiences involves living deeply into trying to prepare for the unpredictable, living as fully as possible in the moment, and making intentional room for processing as learning is unfolding. Brilliant postcolonial thinker Frantz Fanon remarked in *Black Skin, White Masks*, “why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself?” (Fanon, 1967, p. 231). In the case of immersion pedagogy, not all immersion experiences are structures to facilitate experiential interaction. British psychoanalyst D.W.

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14 One strategy I have used is to ask participants to covenant with a trusted mentor (outside of the course) before the immersion with a debriefing support appointment already scheduled and agreed upon to occur right after the intensity of the immersion experience. Other times, I have met with students ahead of a travel seminar to strategize and even role play coping strategies for during the trip that aren’t dependent on the leader. Finally, I have recommended curricular innovations that include a place in the theological curriculum other than any one immersion course to prepare for and process immersion learning.
Winnicott (1971) distinguished between living, which involves interaction with human beings in their actual contexts, and what he calls fantasying, which curates experiences distanced from daily lived human experiences. Winnicott explains, “…in the fantasying, what happens happens immediately, except that it does not happen at all” (1971, p. 37). Both fantasying, development and growing a vibrant imagination, and living, alertness of engagement with other people in embodied practices, are important for well-being.

Immersion pedagogy aims for living but is always at risk of collapsing into fantasying. An excellent example of curating a fantasy immersion is Disney World, a carefully curated environment in which trash disappears from collection bins into a complex network of underground tunnels, wildlife is carefully managed, and for a fee, guests can immerse themselves in a fantasy world separate from daily life. Of course such fantasy immersions are laced with all kinds of human interactions; however, fantasying delights in detachment from daily life for the sake of a vibrant imaginative experience. Immersion pedagogy also curates experiences, but in ways that try to plan for experiences of living rather than fantasying.

Immersion pedagogy moves from fantasying toward living when attending carefully to dynamics of host, guest, relationships between the host and guest, and relational dynamics that extend well beyond the length of a course of study. Many of these relational strands become narrated as part of immersion pedagogy dynamics. Curation as a metaphor points to the ways in which fragments of experiences are collated together and narrated as some kind of provisional whole. Yet no one curation is necessarily complete. Further, curating fragments of experiences narrated into a whole (for example through an itinerary in a travel seminar) is provisional and must guard against presenting a false whole. For example, I remember the second time I led a border theology seminar on the US-Mexico border. When planning the itinerary, I realized that I had the
urge to simply use the exact same itinerary from the previous year in an attempt to replicate the experience I had already had. This was a fantasying urge because it guarded against the unpredictability of living and obfuscated my need to consult actual people about the most appropriate itinerary for my particular group in this particular season.

My planning counterpart reminded me that we could plan an entirely different itinerary and still never run out of possibilities of how to construct a seven-day travel seminar. The illusion, or fantasying fuel, of being able to schedule and contain a whole narrative of a place, border-crossings, host-guest dynamics, and other situational factors is dangerous. How can participants name and reflect on curation of identity-narratives, confront and listen to host curations of identity narratives, and organize an experience of interaction that minimizes mutual harm?

In recommending curating learning experiences as a practice of decolonizing immersion pedagogy, I am intentionally drawing upon the fraught practice and metaphor of curation. I have found curation as a metaphor that holds the kind of multiplicity involved in envisioning what decolonizing pedagogy does and does not look like. Curation as a pedagogical metaphor raises questions about epistemology (how do I know what I know?) and authority (who decides what is going on?). Curation can be a helpful metaphor for immersion pedagogy in that it raises important questions to consider before, during, and after any immersion courses. Decolonizing immersion pedagogy requires a careful practice of curating immersion experiences that retains awareness of the always near dangers of harm and risks of fantasying.

In immersion pedagogy, curating learning experiences involves careful engagement with the framing (justification) and flow (schedule). Framing and flow are drawn on to weave the story of a course of study from placement in a curriculum; to recruitment and enrollment of students; to planning, experiencing, and debriefing actual immersion courses. Immersion courses tend to be
named by students as transformative, powerful contexts for learning. One student who had been highly resistant to fulfilling the immersion course requirement throughout their course of study leaned over to me on the airplane on the return flight at the end of the immersion course they had reluctantly signed up for and whispered that all seminary courses should be taught by immersion. Another student, in a graduating student exit interview remarked to their advisor that it was an immersion course that most radically and powerfully tested their theological claims in practice and led to changes “once home.”

Ethnographer Julie Bettie (2003) notes that transformation at home is often sparked by immersion experiences somewhere else (p.25). Pastoral theologian Brita Gill-Austern (2009) charts the important psychological, theological, and social shifts that accompany practices of leaving and returning home from a powerful immersion experience (see also Sharp, 2016). However, decolonizing immersion pedagogy involves more than curating a powerful learning experience that students will remember and that scholars identify as powerful. What stories communicate what is happening in immersion pedagogy? Is this what is actually happening? Decolonizing immersion pedagogy involves curating immersion experiences that take into account the inherent risks of exploitation for both host and guest. How does one curate a non-exploitative immersion experience?

Curation as a pedagogical metaphor points to a long history of museum practices in which human beings have not only been systematically dehumanized but also disrespectfully not buried or even robbed from graves and put up on display. Students need to be invited into this work; learning about dehumanizing museum practices can awaken desires to move into longer term engagement; learning serves as a prelude to a vocation of enacting learning in practice. For example, Sarah Bartmann, the “Venus Hottentot” is one famous example of a deceased black
woman who was literally displayed posthumously with almost no body covering throughout museums in Europe in the early 1800s and is still not treated as the beloved person she is but as an object of dehumanization and oppression today (Sharpley-Whiting, 1999; Townes, 2002). In the United States, there is much work yet to do to acknowledge the mistreatment of bodies for scientific progress, such as the famed Tuskegee Syphilis Study (Reverby, 2009), or the ways in which bodily violence is depicted and sold through the US postal service through postcards of lynchings (Sheppard, 2016) or in magazine advertisements to this day (Cooper-White, 2008). The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act paves a way for acknowledging and returning bodies from museums to families and tribal burial lands (Lonetree, 2012). Respectful engagement with bodies is not an effort constrained to museum interiors, as immersion learning requires one’s own embodied engagement. Immersion pedagogy forces a group of travelers to attend to particular illness, abilities, and predictable and unpredictable bodily constraints, engages with living and memorialized bodies across borders and cultural contexts, and in the case of the borderlands, risks finding some body while walking through the desert (Chamblee et. al, 2013). Curation of museum as learning environment is an important metaphor for thinking about decolonizing immersion pedagogy. Let me explain through a brief survey of my own immersion pedagogy experiences and the six principles that inform practices of curating immersion experiences.

**Movement 2: Curating immersion experiences: Six guiding principles**

As mentioned above, I have experienced immersion pedagogy as a student. I have also served as a professor for immersion experiences, where I consider my role to be facilitator and planning partner whose job is to maintain clear connections between the immersion course and the
university’s curriculum, policies, and procedures. Additionally, I have served as a planning partner on the ground and curriculum coach for groups led by other professors in disciplines other than my own, such as nursing and social work. As professor and planning partner, I have helped to facilitate a practical theology of borders masters course in coordination with the Borderlinks organization for one week (www.borderlinks.org). I have facilitated a two-week theology of companion partnering doctoral course with one week in Nicaragua in coordination with an organization called JustHope followed by one week on my seminary campus (www.justhope.org). I have joined a team of professors who facilitated an immersion course in India for Master of Theology students where learning goals were grouped around gender, caste, interreligious relationships, and politics of religion. While in residence in the seminaries where I have taught, I have also developed many micro-immersions where one day or one class period is reoriented to a local immersion.

At both the masters and doctoral levels, I have found that immersion pedagogy challenges the model of the American “developed expert,” and makes room for partners to claim expertise through collaborative learning and teaching across multiple boundaries. I try to work with on the ground planning partners who aim to embody mutual binational partnerships. I do so to participate in the difficult work of constructing new possibilities through learning about strategic dehumanization across borders, which in turn makes way for practices of decolonization. Before leaping into radical truth-telling, courses invite co-learners to hear and witness the truths so long veiled that require unmasking. Unmasking occurs through embodied practices of relationality and in the midst of life across all kinds of logistical, financial, and intercultural barriers.

15 For example, pre-planning can include phone conversations, emails, skype or other videoconferencing, or actual pre-visit to the site for a planning retreat. From local to international immersion courses, logistics can be very difficult to navigate, which is part of immersion pedagogy’s vital processes.
Immersion pedagogy is embodied in the midst of life—over meals and sharing such basics as water, shelter, body language, and laughter. In these local and international immersion contexts in my role as student, teacher, and planning partner, and in conversation with Dr. Lonetree’s powerful 2012 book *Decolonizing Museums*, I have discerned six principles that inform practices of curating immersion experiences.

(1) *Practice Connecting*: It is important to foster connections in curating immersion experiences. Lonetree recommends connecting every object, place, and person encountered to the network of personal connections, memories, and hopes that well exceed any one encounter. Lonetree (2012) argues that any object, particularly objects on display in a museum which are like any object curated as part of a brief immersion class, remain connected to “stories shared by those whose families remain deeply connected to [the objects]” (p. xiv). For example, across the years that I have traveled with students to the US-Mexico border, an object we always visit is the border wall. Each piece of art painted on the wall, each sticker or rosary on or near the wall, even each piece of debris at the foot of the wall, as well as the ground into which the wall beams are sunk and the sky in which the beams arise has a host of imaginable and unimaginable stories. Curate immersion experiences that foster connections to these imaginable and unimaginable stories.

(2) *Practice Trust-Building*: Fostering connections is important because of legacies of disconnection; legacies of disconnection breed mistrust. Therefore, it is important to practice trust-building in immersion pedagogy even while realizing that short-term immersion experiences are not conducive to the long and engaged process of building and sustaining trust that is foundational to decolonizing pedagogy. Lonetree acknowledges, “without trust, a collaborative partnership is simply not possible” (2012, p. xiii). In the process of building trust, even short-term immersion experiences include many opportunities for practicing trust-building. For example, I have
witnessed more than once my own hesitancy and student hesitancy to believe what seems to be an unbelievable experience shared in conversations. A student has said out loud, “that can’t be true!” Or someone will have vastly different personal experiences or different expectations or prior knowledge of aspects of the kinds of sacred story sharing that unfold regularly in immersion learning. It is important to prepare participants with a range of responses when encountering predictably difficult narratives. Curate immersion experiences that allow for practicing a key trust-building phrase, “I believe you.”

(3) Practice Bearing Witness: I believe that every encounter in immersion learning offers an opportunity to practice bearing witness to the sacred narratives of human trauma and survival historically and today. Lonetree (2012) writes,

Objects in museums are living entities. They embody layers of meaning, and they are deeply connected to the past, present, and future of indigenous communities. Every engagement with objects in museum cases or in collection rooms should begin with this core recognition. We are not just looking at interesting pieces. In the presence of objects from the past, we are privileged to stand as witnesses to living entities that remain intimately and inextricably tied to their descendent communities (p. xv).

With immersion learning students in Nicaragua, we visit a beautiful nativity mural painted on the walls of a covered open-air church. The vibrant mural depicts the birth of a Christ child who is attended by painted angels, by mothers of the disappeared, and by other human figures. Upon conversation with our local guide, we learn that actual community leaders and members are also painted into the wall mural, particularly when loss of human life is connected to trauma and political violence. The mural provide my group an opportunity to see how another community bears witness to the trauma in their midst. As a second layer of bearing witness, we bear witness
to our own visitation to this sacred visual set of storytelling and to how this experience informs our bearing witness to trauma-informed narratives we will continue to hear in the coming days of the immersion experience. Practice bearing witness to pain and hope.

(4) Practice Reflexivity: Reflexivity is paying attention both to what is being experienced and to myself as one who is experiencing something, a spiraling intention that connects my experience of learning to the things about which I am learning. In addition to connecting every object with a network of relationship that exceeds the object here and now, reflexivity is connecting with myself and how I am growing and changing, being challenged and/or not challenged in the midst of an immersive learning environment. For many immersion learning participants in the context of theological education, one way to practice reflexivity is to raise questions about missions. Immersion learning in theological education is not a mission project, but is often confused as one and can include service learning elements. Another way to practice reflexivity is to examine assumptions that are challenged almost in passing in immersion experiences. In a local immersion experience visiting a museum in an impoverished part of town, one student exclaimed that museums are supposed to be nicer and neater than the one we were visiting.

Still another common opportunity to practice reflexivity in immersion pedagogy is when (not if) microaggressions arise amongst the immersion class participants. Microaggressions are often invisible and unacknowledged “‘brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership’…[and] can occur in verbal, behavioral, and environmental form…[communicating] subtle messages of hostility, degradation, or insult…” (Sanders & Yarber, 2015, p. 12). Microaggressions happen regularly and all people habitually take part in them; microaggressions thrive on invisibility and unawareness.
Microaggressions that are normally invisible in everyday life can be made more visible in immersion pedagogy in ways that provide significant opportunities for individual and group reflexivity. For example, when traveling in Southern India with an immersion course, participants noticed skin whitening in marketing billboard advertisements. Preferences and oppressive practices around skin-whitening provided a visible opportunity for reflection on skin color bias that was operative internal to the group itself both on the immersion experience and back on campus. The group then had a significant opportunity for making visible microaggressions based on skin color that were normally less visible in our daily life together as students and teachers. Curate immersion experiences with built in opportunities for reflexivity.

(5) Practice Sharing Power: Both as an immersion experience curator and as a participant witness to experiences curated by others, all my immersion experiences have included power imbalances. Typically, the people who travel to the immersion site, the ones who are immersed in an unfamiliar setting, have more power. Typically hosts of immersion experiences have less power and access. The imbalance of power can shift where hosts have more power and traveling guests have less power, such as when students and I sit in the public gallery of a US federal courtroom to bear witness to deportation court proceedings. Even in these circumstances, power is almost always imbalanced in immersion pedagogy and rarely shared.

Immersion pedagogy provides countless opportunities for practicing sharing power, or more often, practicing what would need to be in place in order to conceive of actually sharing power. In curating immersion experiences, one readily available way to practice sharing power is to shift the authority of the narrative of what is going on in the experience from the curator (teacher, students, holder of the itinerary) to shared authority. Lonetree (2012) talks about this as a shift from a unidirectional process to a collaborative process (p.1). At the end of each day, most
immersion pedagogy models I’ve seen recommend debriefing, reviewing the timeline of events of the day, sharing feelings, raising questions, and more. Where do these daily debriefing narratives include room for voices and perspectives beyond the immersion course participants?

Another opportunity to practice sharing power or to imagine practicing sharing power is when, inevitably, immersion course participants begin to compare their prior experience with their immersion course experience. In my immersion pedagogy experiences, this routinely occurs around food, gardening, eldercare, childcare, marriage, transportation, trash collection, refrigeration, cooking methods, the color of certain fruits (e.g., green oranges or white sweet potatoes), water systems, architecture, translation, health care, education, dental care, surgical follow up, entrepreneurship, and more. Opportunities to share power arise alongside the urge to say, “but that’s not how it’s done.” Decolonizing immersion pedagogy stands ready to interrogate claim about “the right way” to do the thing in question. Who decides? How has this thing changed over time? Destabilizing basic needs and familiar practices sustained even over a short period of time (1-2 weeks) is one of the difficulties of immersion pedagogy in practice. However, even one day is long enough to spark at least one observational comparison. Curate immersion experiences that have room to practice sharing power and practice inviting the desire to share power within the rhythms of the course itself.

(6) Practice Preparing the Post-Immersion Narrative Curation: All members of an immersion class will reengage their life after the immersion experience. The extent to which the immersion experience is integrated into life at home will vary; yet, even a decision to hold the immersion experience at bay is a post-immersion experience narrative curation. I have increasingly decided to practice post-immersion narrative curation within the framework of the course itself. For their final course project, one Doctor of Ministry immersion class to Nicaragua curated a
temporary art exhibit at a seminary conference that occurred six months after the immersion experience. Mixed media projects from quilts to digital media to broken pottery to collage narrated the immersion experience in multiple ways. In addition, the assignment raised the issue of curation for the class in a new way, especially knowing that conference attendees might only ever experience the immersion experience host country through the students’ representations of it. In other classes, I have experimented with public theology blogs, worship services and liturgies, and educational events as practices of addressing curation of the immersion experience that lives on beyond the constraints of the class itself or the curated learning environment during the immersion course. Curate immersion experiences that anticipate issues of curation that participants will engage after the course is over.

The risks of harm are clear and present in all immersion learning experiences. Part of the prelude to decolonizing immersion pedagogy involves bringing these everyday risks and harms into plain view in the constructing of the very narrative of what is going on in an immersion course. Therefore, decolonizing immersion pedagogies require curating immersion experiences that respect and engage these risks as part of the structure and schedule of the learning environment. For example, students in immersion courses are often surprised to find happy, playing children in contexts of extreme poverty. Countless immersion participants have been moved to tears at receiving hospitality that is much more extravagant than they expected and that they have considered offering to strangers themselves. Beautiful stories of human survival exist in the most difficult places I’ve immersed myself and students. However, sometimes immersion participants can linger in these astonishing experiences of survival and thriving seemingly against all odds (Occhipinti, 2014, p. 48ff). Lonetree (2012) writes that “it is time…to acknowledge the painful aspects of our history along with our stories of survivance…we fail to provide the context that
makes…survival one of the greatest untold stories” (p.6). Decolonizing immersion pedagogy aims to make space for radical listening on all sides of harm.

**Movement 3: Awakening to “all sides of harm”**

This article opens with four representative quotations from various immersion learning experiences I have helped to curate as a professor of pastoral theology and ethics.¹⁶ In a local immersion, a student exclaims with both curiosity and deep frustration that they never knew about what they were encountering right here in a familiar hometown that they thought they knew well. In an international immersion, after seven flights, one train ride, and countless miles in a shared van, a student laments the environmental impact and issues an invitation for all participants to purchase a carbon offset. Another student wonders in a new way how supportive their own group members will be during more vulnerable parts of the immersion experience, especially when not all group members have proved to be trustworthy on campus in other class settings. In an international immersion experience planning session, I asked a host partner whether the financial resources needed to travel with students to facilitate an in-person immersion encounter was worth it or whether the financial impact would be better served as a donation to the community’s expressed needs for an ambulance, which we could underwrite with the same amount of money.

All four of these queries represent predictable harms in immersion pedagogy: exposing the limits of previous knowledge, environmental impact, weathering trust within the group of travelers, and the exploitative risk of access to stories over and against a project funding model of international service. Decolonizing immersion pedagogy involves awakening to what Amy Lonetree calls all sides of harm. I am not yet convinced that the risks of immersion classes are

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¹⁶ The quotations are my own, composites of various student quotations, or attributed to students who asked to remain anonymous while also giving me permission to quote them.
insurmountable and maybe in due time I will change my mind. I do have to constantly evaluate the extent to which my own set of embodied and social privileges—my whiteness, my enormous educational access, my United States citizenship, my job security and the fact that my participation in the experiences I describe are funded by tuition and donor dollars, and more—contribute to my argument in favor of immersion pedagogy and faith in my ability to practice my own commitments to decolonizing immersion pedagogy.

If I am to advocate for and practice this powerful kind of learning, I must also commit to decolonizing immersion pedagogy. I must recognize that my vocation of teaching and learning, reading and writing, speaking and listening, grading and assigning books, and more, contribute to practices that have been managed historically as more accessible to some and less accessible or even illegal for others. In other words, the vocation of formal learning itself is complicit in dehumanizing geographies and must be charted (Smith, 2012). I learn, develop, edit, and rely on guidelines for curating immersion experiences that will host experiences of awakening for myself, my students, and the multiple connections we foster, give, receive and, yes, resist, in immersion learning. To this end, decolonizing immersion pedagogy also requires the deliberative practices of awakening to all sides of harm.

I rely on many mentors and guides as necessary accountability partners in my movement toward more fully practicing decolonizing immersion pedagogy, as I am a novice and make important mistakes that require my sustained attention (Sharp, 2013). In this article, I engage historian Amy Lonetee as conversation partner. Lonetree (2012) does not advocate the dissolution of museums in decolonizing them; rather she advocates institutional “transformation on all sides
of harm” (p.5). Describing examples of long fought but not yet achieved indigenous body part repatriation and the newer more well-intentioned yet still not yet realized power sharing in the American Indian Smithsonian Museum’s nearly two decades of planning and embodiment at its opening in 2004, she explains just how hard it is to share power using the contents of museums as one narrative medium for sharing stories of a community’s pasts, presents, and futures.

The multiplicity implied here suggests a decolonizing intention, as colonizing like the Christian equivalent of crusade implies a discrete and discernable right side and wrong side, a sacred dualism of the right and wrong, the good and bad, the saved and unsaved. Immersion classes disrupt dualistic fantasies. In contrast, decolonizing immersion pedagogies are inherently multiple. I recently asked some residential students to name the people they would want to talk to in order to find out what’s going on at the US-Mexico border. In thirty minutes, a room of about thirty graduate theological students named over eighty discrete persons they could imagine meeting with to learn more about what is going on and to help awaken to the ways in which knowledge is formed, communicated, and challenged. There are not two and only two sides of immigration; rather, from these students residential thought experiment, and from my many years talking with all different kinds of people from all different political persuasions who live on both sides of the US-Mexico border, it is evident that the issues of our day are complicated. Likewise, visiting Dalit Christian communities in India complicate caste; visiting and talking with domestic workers in Costa Rica complicate labor issues in Nicaragua; and Nicaraguan migrants complicate immigration dynamics on the US-Mexico border. There are no simple dualisms within dynamic issues and places with a long history of violence and human migration.

17 Similarly, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012 c. 1999) argues for decolonizing research methods as a process of transforming research, not doing away with research, and likewise Luz Calvo and Catriona Rueda Esquibel (2015) argue not for the end of eating, but rather for decolonizing practices around harvesting and consuming food.
However, decolonizing immersion pedagogy also challenges the notion of innocent bystander better than almost every other pedagogical innovation I have tried on campus, online, or in retreat settings (those these are also necessary and promising contexts for decolonizing pedagogies to be sure). For example, practices around food, clothing, and labor are immediately implicated and complexified in immersion visits to free trade zones in NAFTA and CAFTA regulatory landscapes (Brubaker, 2007). For this reason, my border theology immersion courses tend to commit to eat vegetarian, which for some students proves difficult after the first few days of the immersive learning environment. When traveling to India, the US-Mexico border, Nicaragua, or even a one-day mini local immersion, participants long for the familiar: a coca cola, a visit to Walmart or McDonald’s, or some other very specific longing. Awakening to these desires is also instructive in the long process of awakening on all sides of harm that supports decolonizing immersion pedagogy.

It is important to consider how to curate the “narrative after” of an immersion course. Curating immersion experiences includes discerning how, whether, and when to structure in material purchases: a sari from India, painted pottery or silver and turquoise jewelry from Mexico, spices, or traditional dress are often the examples given alongside participant requests for souvenir shopping that exceeds what is planned in the itinerary, and more. Here again, Amy Lonetree is an important conversation partner. What kind of objects will help communicate the complexities of awakening to all sides of harm that can and often do begin to stir in immersion courses? What objects do I desire to buy and are glad to see marketed for sale? When is this disrupted for me and how do I respond? When a student is concerned about the inherent traps of representation in buying and then wearing at home clothing that is indigenous to a particular region, ought they purchase from a sustainable source and then use the material object to help communicate the dilemma they
face or shall they refrain from participating in the local economy while traveling in an immersion seminar? Decolonizing immersion pedagogy refuses to answer this question with a simple and clear right and wrong, but rather allows the question to linger complexly as part of the purpose of the learning environment.

Transformation on all sides of harm requires awakening to the complexity of experience and complexities of power sharing. As mentioned above practicing power sharing, much less sustaining power sharing, is difficult. Power sharing must be intentionally demanded and desired over and over again. I once heard theologian Roberta Bondi advise that if one were having trouble praying, one might pray for the desire to pray. And if that desire feels far away, one might pray for an awakening of the desire to pray for the desire to pray (Bondi, 2017). Decolonizing immersion pedagogy carries a similarly inherent spirituality of awakening power sharing: share power or if that is not yet possible, connect to the desire to share power, or if that is not yet possible, pray for an awakening of the desire to share power.

At once, the genre of immersion holds decolonizing potential right alongside ever-present risks of shoring up and contributing to colonization. Immersion pedagogy holds amazing potential to allow experience to hold significant weight in the learning process. This highlights that learning is itself experience, even while it adds experiential elements to a traditional classroom environment. Simultaneously, the experience is both about recognition and complicity. There needs to be room to process even while recognizing that time and space for structured processing (experiencing, then retreating from intensity of experience in order to write a paper, journal prompt, or other reporting about the impact of the experience in actual daily life back home) is a privilege. This privilege maintains the fiction of dualism and literally builds and continually renovates the structure to maintain fantasy. Radical truth-telling can interrupt such a fantasy.
Actually engaging the living human web undoes the potential work of empathy, mutuality, and healing. Yet, to enter and then leave breaks down the fantastic dualism as going home provides an opportunity to begin to see the pervasive “object of study” dissolve into greater complexities that resist any simple dualisms.

No one perspective or cultural identity, no one contextual boundary or institutional arrangement, can open anyone or any community into knowing cross-contextual capacities for healing and harming. Both healing and harming intersect and unfold within and especially across embodied constraints of life together. Immersion pedagogy—structures and habits of learning intentionally placed at border-crossings and intersections of cultures and contexts—provides access into the kind of learning that supports practices of naming resistances.

The phrase “transformation on all sides of harm” suggests that complicity in harm and/or experiences of harm is currently inescapable and in urgent need of transformation. Who wants to live and learn in the midst of complicities embedded in daily life practices? Or, better, why seek to do so? I believe that igniting desires to lean into the heart of resistance provides an antidote to the habitual and strategic forgetting that serves to fortify today’s colonizing violence, a violence increasing in visibility and strength. Immersion pedagogy ought to serve the goal of social transformation by empowering participation in decolonization as the primary learning objective.

What are some decolonizing possibilities in immersion pedagogy?

Movement 4: Decolonizing possibilities

Radical (n.d., Dictionary.com)

adjective

1. of or going to the root or origin; fundamental
2. thoroughgoing or extreme, especially as regards change from accepted or traditional forms
3. favoring drastic political, economic, or social reform

Decolonizing immersion pedagogy promises to empower “transformation on all sides of harm” by refusing to minimize attention to risk, power, and privilege in the learning environment. These pedagogical commitments pave the way for co-learners to move into radical truth-telling, a key instrument of decolonization. Practices like charting dehumanizing geographies, curating immersion experiences, and awakening to all sides of harm help decolonizing immersion pedagogy unfold in the planning, experiencing, and debriefing of immersion courses in theological education. These practices share a commitment to radical listening at the intersection of multiple narratives, connect ethics and emotions, and support possibilities of a decolonizing process. The following paragraphs take up these three themes.

The process of radical listening in immersion pedagogy is vital to decolonization because of at least five converging factors: (1) it invites all participants into a decentered position, (2) it unmasks instability of histories through experiential intersections with multiple narratives, (3) it invites participant vulnerabilities and complicities into the learning process, (4) it necessitates attention to intersectionality, or reduction of experiential dynamics to single issue or dualistic phenomena (Crenshaw, 1989, pp. 145 & 149), in practice as well as theory, and (5) it exposes a myth of preparation that tempts to privilege fantasying over living in immersion pedagogy. Each factor depends on cultivating a practice of radical listening to oneself, to the immersion experience community, and to much broader narratives.

Why radical listening? As cited above, the word radical means “going to the root” for the sake of transformative change. It means examining practices of learning through travel in which teachers and learners encounter people and places well outside the traditional classroom from the sake of transformation but shaped by factors that require humility, self-awareness, and a posture
of uncertainty. It not only raises questions of inclusion and exclusion in the learning environment, but attempts to cross borders of inclusion and exclusion within the learning environment itself, making listening more challenging, more radical, and more morally imperative so that the immersion experience is not an end in itself, but a means to deeper change over time.

In addition to radical listening, decolonizing possibilities unfold at many intersections, including intersections between emotions and ethics. Because the use of the body through travel and shared living conditions is more prominent than in traditional 3.0 credit hour courses on-campus or online, boundaries and emotions both need to be explicitly welcomed and structured throughout the immersion experience. On the one hand, this can cause some confusion since maintaining healthy boundaries is urgent at the same time that the course requires crossing borders. On the other hand, discussing boundaries of time, space, and relational negotiation explicitly and regularly helps facilitate the necessary border crossing. For example, roommate assignments are one host to intersections of emotions and ethics. Who should and should not room together? How would an instructor find out?

What do participants have to disclose and what self-identifying information can be held in confidence, from sexual identities to allergies to histories of mental illness? Should roommates change so as to catch any unhealthy or potentially toxic situations such as the formation of cliques, sleep preferences, personality conflicts, or more worrisome dynamics? When should a participant need to leave the immersion event? Is the professor ever “off”? Should alcohol be allowed at restaurants at all? What about when there are survivors of alcoholism in the room? How to welcome students of various financial means without outing class? How does the class negotiate internal and internalized racism that might unfold not only in the whole group but also in roommate situations? How are host families chosen and who goes where? How many of these and other...
questions and concerns should be shared and negotiated with all participants? These are just a few of the many questions that evoke emotional engagement and require a clear sense of moral engagement in curating immersion experiences and often moral imagination in the moment. Students can be transformed when they are provoked to have a psychological reaction, from ecstatic insight to depressive lament, through and beyond the learning environment. Yet, this is also an ethical question. How are learning objectives oriented toward transformation met?

Decolonization is not a quick project, but rather a long process. Decolonizing immersion pedagogy is also a long process. The four practices I describe in this paper arise from my own experience with immersion pedagogy and form for me part of the crucial prelude to the longer, deeper work of decolonizing practices. Immersion pedagogy also serves as such an invitation for students. How, therefore, does course design include support for the longer-term process of incorporating invitations to transformation more broadly than one class or one degree program at one point in time? Where emotional engagement arises alongside the urgency of an invitation into this lifelong work, how do immersion courses support participants through the challenges of immersion experiences so that a deeper participation is possible and more likely?

Finally, possibilities of a decolonizing process include deliberate movements from colonizing strategies to decolonizing strategies. Again, Lonetree (2012) is instructive. In the case of museums, decolonizing strategies aim for making museums more accessible and communally relevant (p.1). In and beyond museums, rather than talking about or depicting indigenous communities, decolonizing strategies value and practice partnerships, denounce stereotypical representations, challenge any decision made by only one person, advocate for repatriation of cultural objects, and combine education with activism (pp. xi, xiii, & 17). When learning about and crossing borders, decolonizing strategies question the role and implication of colonial
violence, expand sources of knowledge, lament broken treaties, and expose genocidal policies (pp.xii, 9, & 120). Learning about death and dead bodies is placed in a context of family histories, “complex subjectivity,” historical trauma and unresolved grief (pp.3, 5, & 11). In general, colonizing strategies freeze human narratives, relationships, and histories into simple, dualistic, static forms, while decolonizing strategies welcome a range of emotional, historical, multi-vocal engagement with past, present, and future. These decolonizing possibilities, alongside radical listening and attention to intersections of emotional engagement with moral imagination contribute to transformative immersion pedagogies in theological education.

Learning with butterflies and ants: Concluding thoughts on a prelude

As a theological educator who continues to learn and lead through immersion learning, I wonder, is immersion pedagogy harmful, helpful, or both? I check in with hosts and presenters who share their vulnerability with my traveling students and myself, asking “is it worth it?” I am convinced that invitations into unlikely relationships with partners who will never be published in academic libraries mitigates the risks of exploitation. But I must remain mindful that each immersion experience invites just a few pieces of relational growth into the overall ecology of a life lived together in solidarity across borders. In this article, I argue that immersion pedagogy can hold open sacred spaces.
space for radical listening and offers a promising prelude into transformative practices of decolonization. I have learned to adopt an immersion pedagogy that includes displacement alongside practices of radical listening in all its messiness, resistances, and urgencies. Immersion pedagogy can serve a goal of social transformation by empowering participation in possibilities of decolonization as a learning goal piece by piece and without pretending to grasp the whole.

Physicists have shown through the butterfly effect that a butterfly’s wing can move an ocean (Gleick, 1987); at the beginning of the article I share my experience of seeing a museum wall move in response to patron curiosities. Amy Lonetree (2012), historian and inspiration in my reflections on decolonizing immersion pedagogy, argues that transformation on all sides of harm unfolds where humanity is “visibly moved while remembering” (p.xiv). Transformation is always sparked by the human experience of being moved to change in the face of what is haunting and/or beautiful. By design, immersion pedagogy haunts and beautifies participants physically, emotionally, and relationally. I believe that immersion pedagogy is also infinitely invitational, moving participants toward deeper engagement well beyond any one immersion course. Can immersion learning also be transformative?

I argue in this article that for immersion pedagogy to be transformative it also must enter a process of decolonizing itself as a pedagogical method, to cross borders and to invite movement into seemingly fixed places. Museum walls that move illustrate the permeability of borders crisscrossed with privileges and restrictions of access. Butterflies are often seen as expert border crossers in that they can crawl and fly through and above walls, and even cross borders between life forms in their own lifecycle. On the border wall between Sonora, Mexico, and Arizona, United States, a seemingly immovable wall, butterflies are painted on the beams. Instead of the usual rust
of static metal structures, the wall bar background matches the Sonoran Desert blue sky. Is it cruel and/or liberative to mark walls with signs of moving transformation?

Immersion pedagogy is not about distancing a mythical over there fantasy world from a mythical right here and now. Immersion is a description of decolonizing practices. I advocate for immersion pedagogy within theological education as oriented toward living not fantasying. Immersion sharpens my and my students’ radical listening on all sides of harm, weaving compulsities and transformative possibilities as the norm of human life: seminary learning, church leadership, and indeed, human relationships are all immersion experiences. And the sharpening can serve both healing and wounding.

At once, the genre of immersion holds decolonizing potential right alongside ever-present risks of shoring up and contributing to colonization. Immersion pedagogy holds amazing potential to allow experience to hold significant weight in the learning process. This highlights that learning is experience even while it adds experiential elements to a traditional classroom environment. Even though immersion pedagogy depends on displacement, it is designed to be time-limited. The course ends; co-learners return home. Paradoxically, immersion at its best paves the way for participation in decolonization over time.

How do leaders prepare for the invisible and contested border crossings that are navigated across the thresholds of our lives together? While I’ve not yet learned to cross borders with the butterfly, I have been moved by its inspiration. The butterfly effect could indeed move a museum wall through physicality and collective inspiration. In the meantime, inspired by the butterfly, I can learn and lead in community with the physical and metaphorical ants. Throughout liberation theologies and organizing efforts, the ant symbolizes how little by little, person by person, piece by piece, the universe moves and is moved. To me, an ant representing a decolonizing perspective
attentive to listening to all sides of harm is the pedagogical commitment into which I move when I teach by immersion. Ants are not solo travelers; they depend on each other to move whole picnics one watermelon seed at a time. I only have to remember unwittingly stepping into red mounds of anthill in my childhood to know the collective movement of ants. Immersion pedagogy awakens the pieces I carry alongside all other carriers of stories, histories, and hopes. In a recent immersion course, a student began to learn the significance of ants depicted in public art by saying out loud, “I thought that was just an ant!” Yes, it’s an ant on the move carrying a vital piece of transformative possibilities. Immersion courses can be the crucial prelude to participating in the decolonizing possibilities that arise in such small but mighty collective movements oriented toward constructing a new world.

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