



## *Trauma-Informed Pedagogies in the Religious Studies Classroom*

*Spotlight on Teaching*

Jessica L. Tinklenberg, Editor

*Spotlight on Teaching* is a major teaching and learning initiative of the AAR and its Committee on Teaching and Learning. Over the last several years, it has become a principal venue for exploring opportunities and challenges in teaching and learning about religions. Each issue focuses on a particular theme, concern, or setting.

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## Editor's Introduction

Jessica L. Tinklenberg, Claremont Colleges

In a timely piece for *Inside Higher Ed* in June, 2020, Dr. Mays Imad speaks to the unbelievable reality of our times: in this COVID-19 academic year, we are all traumatized, anxious, and scared.<sup>1</sup> Our trauma may come from feelings of isolation, constant ambiguity, a vague awareness of unseen danger, food or housing insecurity, unrelenting racist, sexist, homophobic, and transphobic violence, or from any intersection of these and more. Wherever our trauma originates, Imad ensures us that it is real, pressing, and impacting our ability to teach, learn, and survive right now.

In this issue of *Spotlight on Teaching*, eleven scholar-teachers from the Academy discuss the ways they understand trauma in the religious studies classroom. Each offers a unique insight into how we might recognize, honor, and respond to the needs this time presents to our students, our institutions and ourselves. The anchor for this issue is provided by Dr. Darryl W. Stephens (Lancaster Theological Seminary), who offers readers the definitional and theoretical foundations for understanding trauma-informed pedagogy. (Note: aspects of this piece previously appeared in *Religions*, an open access journal.<sup>2</sup>) Then follows a series of shorter, practical pieces that rely on the pedagogical underpinnings provided by Stephens.

Dr. Julianne Hammer (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) offers a discussion of processing the traumas of gender violence in "Gender-Based Violence and Muslim Communities: Trauma Processing through Art." She argues that student-created visual art, poetry, and creative writing can help students understand and work through the emotions that might impede learning in an Islamic studies course; this process might also mitigate sentiments of Orientalism and Islamophobia among students.

Unfortunately, it is often the case that our work in the classroom ignores the embodied aspects of trauma and its impact on learning. Instead, we tend to see our students as disembodied brains to fill with knowledge, to our students' detriment. In "Addressing Race in the Classroom: A Trauma-informed Communal Embodied Practice," Dr. Leah Thomas (Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary) invites the reader to incorporate aspects of contemplative pedagogy and

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<sup>1</sup> Mays Imad, "Leveraging the Neuroscience of Now," *Inside Higher Ed*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/06/03/seven-recommendations-helping-students-thrive-times-trauma>.

<sup>2</sup> Darryl W. Stephens, "Trauma-Informed Pedagogy for the Religious and Theological Higher Education Classroom," *Religions* 11, no. 9 (2020): 449. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11090449>.

somatic psychology into their classroom practices around race. I am particularly appreciative of the ways she emphasizes consent, choice, and safety in these exercises.

Dr. Oluwatomisin Oredein (Brite Divinity School) also invites instructors to engage in deep reflection on racialized trauma in the classroom in her piece, “We Have to Tell the Truth: A Liberative Approach to Trauma-Informed Pedagogy.” From her own reflective practice, Oredein came to recognize the ways many of her assignments and expectations devalued the language, abilities, and contexts of her Black students; she offers to the reader several changes that she made in the fall of 2020 to decrease stereotype threat and other sites of racist trauma. She also implores us all to see the classroom as a liberative space for both our students and ourselves, approaching each teaching and learning interaction with honesty and humanity.

Doctoral candidate Alexiana Fry (Old Testament, Stellenbosch University) discusses the ways biblical narratives are often trauma narratives in her insightful piece “Processing By/Through/In Written Word.” Fry describes the process of inviting students in her biblical hermeneutics course to develop and share their own trauma narratives in ways which support student safety and well-being, and then connect that process to the larger task of understanding biblical interpretation.

As a (very bad) runner myself, one of the articles I most appreciated was authored by Dr. Elizabeth Vasko (Duquesne University). In “Getting Comfortable with Being Uncomfortable: Reflections on Running and Teaching,” Vasko imagines faculty self-care in traumatic times as akin to learning to run: setting realistic and authentic goals, practicing mindfulness and bodily awareness, redefining success, and being present throughout. Her reflections on the ways these practices can support us in a pandemic end with a challenge to “lace up our shoes and run.”

Those who are teaching in pastoral care or counseling face very specific hurdles in the trauma-informed classroom, among them: helping students understand their own context and trauma, building intercultural awareness, and developing skills that will assist students in providing future care. To assist with all three of these needs, Dr. AHyun Lee (Indiana Wesley University) foregrounds compassion, connection, and celebration through a “tree of life” activity that will be equally applicable in all classrooms where faculty wish to allow students to explore their own trauma and their connections to others.

Dr. Ryan Rideau (Tufts University) utilizes his experience as both a professor and an associate director of teaching and learning to share promising practices for trauma-informed antiracist teaching. His piece “Fostering Collaboration and Agency in an Antiracist, Trauma-Informed Classroom: Creating Community-Learning Agreements through Reflective Practice” invites readers to consider the importance of learning agreements (sometimes also known as community norms) for all classrooms. I particularly appreciated the way his suggestions are designed to better ensure the success and well-being of minoritized students, and to center their voices, whether race is explicitly discussed as a part of the class content or not.

As is the case with many other authors in this collection, Dr. Yohana Agra Junker (Claremont School of Theology) asks us to attend to the relationship between the affective and cognitive

dimensions of learning in her essay “Breathing | Being | Praying Meditations: The Generative Possibilities of the Arts.” Junker invites us to consider a guided practice, doodle therapy, which helps students (and community partners she has worked with) connect with untapped feelings around the pandemic, racialized trauma, and even capitalist and white supremacist hegemony. This piece provides step-by-step directions to enact this practice in our classrooms as we all seek to help students become more reflective and aware of their own experience.

Dr. Ella Johnson (St. Ambrose University) offers readers a way to invite classroom colleagues into reflective and ideologically aware critique as a means for understanding the traumatic events in this past year. In “Critical Reflection Ensuing from Traumatic Events and Ideology Critique,” Johnson suggests that “disorienting events” must be discussed in the trauma-informed classroom—even if we don’t feel that it is our academic purview—and should never be left to asides or one-off discussions. Instead, we should ensure that critical, ideological reflection on trauma is embedded throughout our curriculum, including as we read religious texts and historical documents.

Finally, Dr. Liora Gubkin (California State University, Bakersfield) reminds us that sometimes, the simplest approach to addressing student trauma is by far the best—especially when we are teaching online. In her piece “In Defense of the Simple Writing Assignment,” Gubkin discusses the process of moving her brick-and-mortar, face-to-face Holocaust class to a fully online format. In that transition, she thought deeply about the ways students could still connect to the material and apply their learning to current traumatic circumstances. Through a series of short, reflective writing assignments, Gubkin was able to provide an outlet that allowed students to see themselves (and their concerns) as deeply related to the course.

The reader may notice that several of the submissions here were offered by theological educators, and that they certainly represent more of the authorship than in previous issues of *Spotlight on Teaching*. I have wondered over the months of work on this issue if that is because those teaching inside religious traditions are more likely to address the affective dimensions of education head-on in their work or if nonreligious institutions (rightly) worry about the scholarly implications of impinging on the noncognitive aspects of students’ lives and work. Whatever the reason, I am convinced that the writing in this volume is worthwhile to every educator. It has been an honor to edit this volume for many reasons, but above all because I believe that the advice and guidance offered here can truly help ourselves and our students survive and even thrive in this year and beyond.

Be well and stay safe,  
Jessica L. Tinklenberg, PhD  
Editor, *Spotlight on Teaching*



## What is Trauma? What is a Trauma-Informed Approach?

Darryl W. Stephens, Lancaster Theological Seminary

“What’s wrong with you?”

When one of my students is habitually distracted, inattentive, or disruptive, this question might surface in my mind. If vocalized, this response to undesired behavior in my classroom, might, at best, suppress outward disruption so that class can continue as “normal.” Yet, it could perpetuate a cycle of shame and blame, exacerbating the underlying issue and contributing to an ongoing public health crisis. Over the past thirty years, our societal understanding of trauma has opened up a different way to address these presenting issues. Instead of confrontation, I focus on care. Now I know to ask instead, “What has happened to you?”<sup>3</sup>

This shift from confrontation to care is the crux of a trauma-informed approach, a new paradigm in public services. As educators, we are part of a community of service providers with the power to contribute to or detract from this circle of care. Furthermore, our understanding of trauma (or lack thereof) significantly impacts our pedagogical effectiveness and ability to nurture the best learning in our students. We enter the classroom uninformed about trauma at our own peril—and to our students’ detriment.

This issue of *Spotlight on Teaching* is dedicated to the theme of trauma-informed pedagogy. Kate Ott and I proposed this theme to the *Spotlight* editor, Jessica L. Tinklenberg, as a way of generating conversation on this important topic and building on the scholarship of Michelle Mary Lelwica, Stephanie M. Crumpton, and others who contributed to our recent, co-edited volume, *Teaching Sexuality and Religion in Higher Education: Embodied Learning, Trauma Sensitive Pedagogy, and Perspective Transformation*.<sup>4</sup> For this issue of *Spotlight*, Ott and I have broadened the scope from sexuality and narrowed the purview to trauma. We invited new contributors to address specific aspects of classroom teaching, illustrating how we as instructors in higher education can bring a trauma-informed approach to our pedagogy in religious studies and theological education. This introduction serves as a shared basis for this endeavor. It offers a basic definition and description of trauma, introduces the features of a trauma-informed approach, and presents the core values guiding a trauma-informed pedagogy.

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Salasin, “Sine Qua Non for Public Health,” *National Council Magazine* 2011, no. 2: 18.

<sup>4</sup> Darryl W. Stephens and Kate Ott, eds., *Teaching Sexuality and Religion in Higher Education: Embodied Learning, Trauma Sensitive Pedagogy, and Perspective Transformation*, Routledge Research in Religion and Education (New York: Routledge, 2020).

## Trauma

Simply put, psychological trauma is the result of an experience that is too much to handle. Judith Herman, a pioneering researcher in the modern understanding of trauma, stated that, “traumatic events . . . overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life.”<sup>5</sup> Trauma engages psychic, physiological, and neurological survival mechanisms when a person feels disempowered to respond to a grave threat. Trauma involves a loss of agency and a profound sense of powerlessness. Yet, a trauma victim is also a survivor, coping with overwhelming danger in ways too deep to fathom.<sup>6</sup> The result is often some variant of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The effects touch the core of being and reside deep in the body.

A central feature of trauma is that it disrupts one’s personal narrative, interfering with one’s sense of self and experience of the world. Traumatic memories interrupt the present in ways unbounded by chronology. A traumatic memory can be neither coherently articulated nor forgotten. It is an unspeakable response to horror, a response that refuses to be integrated into the past even as it haunts the present.<sup>7</sup> Bessel van der Kolk, another pioneering researcher in the field, described it this way: “trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body.”<sup>8</sup> A traumatized person relives their terror again and again, triggered involuntarily by sensory reminders.

Because trauma overwhelms the normal coping mechanisms, it is fragmented rather than integrated into a person’s experience. One result is popularly known as a “flashback,” for example, when a war veteran with PTSD responds viscerally to the sound of a car backfiring as if the noise indicated a mortal danger. For a person with PTSD, the trigger brings the past trauma into the present moment, and they relive the original experience, engaging in survival response to the stimulus. Traumatic memories can be triggered by emotions, sights, smells, noises, and many other somatic reminders of the original traumatic experience. The work of recovery involves practices of mind and body designed to empower a person to integrate their traumatic memories into their sense of self, reducing the past’s hold on their present reality.

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<sup>5</sup> Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, [1992]2015), 33.

<sup>6</sup> Foregrounding the language of “survivor” over “victim” is an intentional aspect of a trauma-informed response. See glossary of terms in: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), “Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services,” Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) Series 57. HHS Publication No. (SMA) 13-4801 (Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014), xvi–xix. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207201>.

<sup>7</sup> Herman called this “the dialectic of trauma”: being “caught between the extremes of amnesia or of reliving the trauma.” Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 47. Shelly Rambo explored the narrative disruption of trauma as a site for theological exploration and meaning in *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 21.

In 2014, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) provided the following definition of individual trauma to serve as a common reference point among various sectors of public service provision:

Individual trauma results from an event, series of **events**, or set of circumstances that is **experienced** by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse **effects** on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.<sup>9</sup>

This definition highlights what SAMHSA referred to as “the three E’s of trauma”: events, experiences, and effects.<sup>10</sup>

An event can be traumatic in a single occurrence or over a series of incidents. Traumatic life events include military combat, natural disaster, life-threatening accident, sexual assault, abandonment, death of a loved one, and many other psychologically overwhelming situations. Trauma can also result from prolonged exposure to threat, including domestic violence, bullying, poverty, abuse, and racism.<sup>11</sup> Encountering negative biases through microaggressions based on race, gender, sexual orientation, and other identity markers can also be experienced as traumatic.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to remember that trauma is not the event but rather the wound resulting from the event. Thus, trauma can result from a variety of events, depending on how the event is experienced by the individual within their community.

The experience of trauma is personal, resting on a combination of factors. Not every adverse experience is traumatic, and the same event might be experienced as traumatic by one person and not by another. Researchers use the term “potentially traumatic event (PTE),” since the experience of the event (as traumatizing or not) will vary from person to person.<sup>13</sup> Personality, social support network, developmental health, previous experiences, and other complex factors shape whether any particular event is experienced as traumatic. These factors contribute to a person's degree of resilience, defined as “the capacity to bounce back from adversity.”<sup>14</sup> A landmark study in the late 1990s examined the relationship between “childhood abuse and

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<sup>9</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), “SAMHSA’s Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach,” HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14-4884 (Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014), 7. <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/SAMHSA-s-Concept-of-Trauma-and-Guidance-for-a-Trauma-Informed-Approach/SMA14-4884>. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>10</sup> SAMHSA, “SAMHSA’s Concept of Trauma,” 8.

<sup>11</sup> Shannon Davidson, “Trauma-Informed Practices for Postsecondary Education: A Guide” (Education Northwest, 2017), 4. <https://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/resources/trauma-informed-practices-postsecondary-508.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> On microaggressions, see Kevin L. Nadal, *Microaggressions and Traumatic Stress: Theory, Research, and Clinical Treatment*, Concise Guides on Trauma Care (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Isaac R. Galatzer-Levy, Charles L. Burton, and George A. Bonanno, “Coping Flexibility, Potentially Traumatic Life Events, and Resilience: A Prospective Study of College Student Adjustment,” *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 31, no. 6 (2012): 542–567. <https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.2012.31.6.542>.

<sup>14</sup> van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 163.

neglect and household challenges and later-life health and well-being.”<sup>15</sup> The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study clearly showed that “adverse childhood experiences are common and they have strong long-term associations with adult health risk behaviors, health status, and diseases.”<sup>16</sup> More to the present point, “early exposure to ACEs is associated with traumatic stress reactions and subsequent exposure to trauma in adult years.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, the experience of trauma varies by person and is shaped by previous social, psychological, developmental, and cultural factors.

SAMHSA’s definition includes single horrifying events as well as a series of events or set of circumstances experienced by an individual as traumatic. Religious educators Callid Keefe-Perry and Zachary Moon described these aspects of trauma as temporal and structural:

Trauma is an experience that is not readily assimilated or accommodated into a sense of normalcy, overwhelming a person’s beliefs, values, behaviors, and/or meaningful relationships. Traumatic experiences have features that are both temporal (occurring in a certain moment of a traumatic event) and structural (occurring as a result of ongoing systemic social and economic inequalities). Trauma leaves a person grasping for new, functional coping strategies meant to facilitate survival, including ways in which to re-develop meaningful relationships.<sup>18</sup>

This definition also emphasizes the communal and relational impact of trauma. Trauma is not confined to individual experiences of single horrifying events; trauma can be collective (community-wide),<sup>19</sup> epigenetic (inherited or intergenerational),<sup>20</sup> social-cultural (e.g., racism), or vicarious. Regardless of the type of trauma, its effects on persons and relationships are real and noticeable.

In classroom teaching, what is most evident are the effects of trauma. A. Hoch and colleagues presented this list of effects observable in postsecondary learners:

- Difficulty focusing, attending, retaining, and recalling

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<sup>15</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “About the CDC-Kaiser ACE Study,” <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/about.html>. Last accessed February 26, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Vincent J. Felitti, Robert F. Anda, Dale Nordenberg, David F. Williamson, Alison M. Spitz, Valerie Edwards, Mary P. Koss, James S. Marks, “Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 14, no. 4 (May 1998): 254.

<sup>17</sup> SAMHSA, “Trauma-Informed Care,” 47.

<sup>18</sup> L. Callid Keefe-Perry and Zachary Moon, “Courage in Chaos: The Importance of Trauma-Informed Adult Religious Education,” *Religious Education* 114, no. 1 (May 2019): 31. doi:10.1080/00344087.2018.1435989.

<sup>19</sup> Institute for Collective Trauma and Growth, “Seven Key Traits of a Trauma Informed Congregation,” Nov. 18, 2019, <https://www.ictg.org/congregational-blog/seven-key-traits-of-a-trauma-informed-congregation>.

<sup>20</sup> Rachel Yehuda and Amy Lehrner, “Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma Effects: Putative Role of Epigenetic Mechanisms,” *World Psychiatry: Official Journal of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA)* 17, no. 3 (2018): 243–257. doi:10.1002/wps.20568.

- Tendency to miss a lot of classes
- Challenges with emotional regulation
- Fear of taking risks
- Anxiety about deadlines, exams, group work, or public speaking
- Anger, helplessness, or dissociation when stressed
- Withdrawal and isolation
- Involvement in unhealthy relationships<sup>21</sup>

Some of these effects were evident in my classroom during the spring 2020 semester, in the first months of societal response to COVID-19. Many of my students suffered from distraction, inability to concentrate, and short attention spans. They exhibited the effects of trauma (though most of them were unaware of this connection). Furthermore, [students of color seemed to be the most affected](#).<sup>22</sup> The long-term trauma of racism compounds the effects of ACEs and other potentially traumatic events, contributing, for example, to the well-documented disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Black and Latinx communities in the United States.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, sparked by the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, compounded trauma upon trauma for many students, their families, and communities. In these circumstances, how can we, as instructors in higher education, contribute to the health and success of our students?

### Trauma-Informed Approach

A trauma-informed approach signals a recent (approximately 15-year-old) culture-shift in public services of which education is one part.<sup>24</sup> It is a community-wide effort involving social work, public health, policing, law, education, ministry, and other sectors of public service. While some sectors provide trauma-specific services or interventions, many do not. Thus, it is not the

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<sup>21</sup> Davidson, "Trauma-Informed Practices for Postsecondary Education," 8.

<sup>22</sup> Oluwatomisin Oredein, "Pandemic Predispositions: Minority Trauma Responses in Higher Education," Teaching and Learning During Crisis blog series, Wabash Center, May 18, 2020, <https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2020/05/pandemic-predispositions-minority-trauma-responses-in-higher-education/>.

<sup>23</sup> SAMHSA, "Double Jeopardy: COVID-19 and Behavioral Health Disparities for Black and Latino Communities in the U.S." (Submitted by OBHE), <https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/covid19-behavioral-health-disparities-black-latino-communities.pdf>. Last accessed February 26, 2021. For an example analysis of a specific geographic area, see Matt Nowlin, Jeremy Townsley, Jay Colbert, and Sharon Kandris, "The Inequalities Behind COVID-19 Disparities for African Americans in Indianapolis," SAVI, May 15, 2020, <http://www.savi.org/2020/05/15/the-inequalities-behind-covid-19-disparities-for-african-americans-in-indianapolis/>.

<sup>24</sup> Charles Wilson, Donna M. Pence, and Lisa Conradi, "Trauma-Informed Care" *Encyclopedia of Social Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780199975839.013.1063. <https://oxfordre.com/socialwork/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199975839.001.0001/acrefore-9780199975839-e-1063>.

responsibility of a classroom instructor to provide mental health services but rather to partner with mental health and other service providers by becoming part of a trauma-informed community.<sup>25</sup> Becoming a trauma-informed institution is a campus-wide effort, involving student services, academic affairs, administration, athletics, and all areas of the student experience. “SAMHSA defines any setting as ‘trauma-informed’ if the people there realize how widespread trauma is, recognize signs and symptoms, respond by integrating knowledge into practice, and resist doing further harm.”<sup>26</sup> This four-fold description (realize, recognize, respond, and resist) provides guidance for classroom instructors to contribute to a community of trauma-informed care.

Realizing the widespread impact of trauma is essential. For example, “By the time they reach college, 66 to 85 percent of youth report lifetime traumatic event exposure, with many reporting multiple exposures.”<sup>27</sup> This is one of many statistics aggregated by Shannon Davidson of Education Northwest on the prevalence of trauma. The ACEs study revealed that adverse childhood experiences are disturbingly prevalent in US society.<sup>28</sup> The point is, trauma is not an unusual experience, and many people bear the effects of trauma in their everyday lives. Furthermore, students bring “their whole-messy selves” to the classroom, including past experiences of trauma.<sup>29</sup> Thus, a trauma-informed approach does not view the student exhibiting the effects of trauma as the exception. Rather, “trauma-informed care is initiated by [the] assumption that every person seeking services is a trauma survivor.”<sup>30</sup> A trauma-informed approach to pedagogy is for the benefit of every student.

Recognizing the signs and symptoms of trauma is also essential, as is understanding the causes. Common external indications of trauma, listed above, can often be observed in students by classroom teachers. It is important to understand that these behaviors are adaptive. Trauma overwhelms a person’s normal stress-response and elicits a survival-based alarm system. The effects of trauma include adaptive behaviors essential to survival, including fight, flight, or freeze responses. However, when traumatic memories are triggered (often with no

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<sup>25</sup> SAMHSA, “Spotlight: Building Resilient and Trauma-Informed Communities—Introduction,” SMA17-5014, February 2017. <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/Spotlight-Building-Resilient-and-Trauma-Informed-Communities-Introduction/SMA17-5014>.

<sup>26</sup> SAMHSA, “Spotlight: Building Resilient and Trauma-Informed Communities.” See also SAMHSA, “SAMHSA’s Concept of Trauma,” 9.

<sup>27</sup> Davidson, “Trauma-Informed Practices for Postsecondary Education,” 5.

<sup>28</sup> SAMHSA cited the ACEs report as one of two studies significantly influencing the development of the trauma-informed care model, the other being: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, “The Women, Co-Occurring Disorders and Violence Study and Children’s Subset Study: Program summary” (Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2007), <http://www.wcdvs.com/pdfs/ProgramSummary.pdf>. SAMHSA, “Trauma-Informed Care,” 8.

<sup>29</sup> Michelle Mary Lelwica, “Embodied Learning Through Pedagogical Promiscuity,” in *Teaching Sexuality and Religion in Higher Education: Embodied Learning, Trauma Sensitive Pedagogy, and Perspective Transformation*, eds. Darryl W. Stephens and Kate Ott, Routledge Research in Religion and Education (New York: Routledge, 2020):17–29. For data, see American College Health Association, “National College Health Assessment: Executive Summary,” 2017, [www.acha.org/documents/ncha/NCHA-II\\_FALL\\_2017\\_REFERENCE\\_GROUP\\_EXECUTIVE\\_SUMMARY.pdf](http://www.acha.org/documents/ncha/NCHA-II_FALL_2017_REFERENCE_GROUP_EXECUTIVE_SUMMARY.pdf).

<sup>30</sup> Salasin, “Sine Qua Non for Public Health,”18.

conscious awareness by the survivor), the body responds as if the original threat were still present. The very behaviors that ensured survival in the first instance become ineffective and inappropriate when triggered at other times and places. The response is individualized: “resilience and recovery look different for each individual. Thus, what educators often identify as maladaptive behaviors are really misapplied survival skills.”<sup>31</sup> The classroom teacher, recognizing the signs of prior trauma in students, can then learn to respond in appropriate and helpful ways.

Responding as a trauma-informed organization involves more than strategies for immediate intervention. A trauma-informed institution “responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, practices.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, a set of classroom pedagogical techniques is but one part of an overall organizational response, the purpose of which is to “promote a culture based on beliefs about resilience, recovery, and healing from trauma.”<sup>33</sup> In higher education, it is just as important for administrative assistants, administrators, housing directors, and athletic coaches to become trauma-informed as it is for classroom instructors. For example, the Association of Title IX Administrators identified “failing to understand and use trauma-informed investigations and questioning” as the first of “The Seven Deadly Sins of Title IX Investigations.”<sup>34</sup> For classroom teachers, this means we are partners with all of the other offices on campus contributing to any aspect of the student experience in our institution in responding to the effects of trauma.

Resisting doing further harm is the fourth aspect of a trauma-informed approach. Failing to realize, recognize, and respond appropriately to a survivor of trauma can do harm. Re-victimization can easily occur when I fail to shift from an attitude of blame, “What’s wrong with you?” to a stance of care, “What has happened to you?” This shift in perspective, to a trauma-informed approach, allows the classroom instructor to become a partner in recovery and resilience for survivors of trauma.

### **Trauma-Informed Pedagogy**

A trauma-informed approach requires not only knowledge of trauma but also commitment and action. “The foundation for effective trauma-informed classroom practice is the educator’s grasp of how trauma impacts students’ behavior, development, relationships, and survival

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<sup>31</sup> Davidson, “Trauma-Informed Practices for Postsecondary Education,” 13.

<sup>32</sup> SAMHSA, “SAMHSA’s Concept of Trauma,” 9.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>34</sup> According to this 2016 whitepaper, Title IX investigations should include four components: understanding the impact of trauma, promoting safety and support, proactively avoiding retraumatization, and promoting choice and empowerment of the trauma survivor. Michael Henry, et al., “The Seven Deadly Sins of Title IX Investigations: The 2016 Whitepaper,” ATIXA, 2016. [https://atixa.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/7-Deadly-Sins\\_Short\\_with-Teaser\\_Reduced-Size.pdf](https://atixa.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/7-Deadly-Sins_Short_with-Teaser_Reduced-Size.pdf).

strategies.”<sup>35</sup> However, subject matter knowledge is not the essence of trauma-informed pedagogy.

[T]eaching about trauma is not the same thing as using trauma-informed pedagogy and educators should aim to reduce the risk of retraumatization (triggering or reactivating trauma-related symptoms originating from earlier life events) and secondary traumatization (experiencing trauma-related symptoms from learning others’ stories) when exposing students to potentially sensitive material.<sup>36</sup>

I would hasten to add that trauma-informed teaching is not reserved for “potentially sensitive material” but rather recognizes that many of our students arrive in the classroom already dealing with past traumatic experiences. A trauma-informed pedagogy is guided by five core values: safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment.<sup>37</sup> Each of these values can guide classroom pedagogy and practices, allowing classroom instructors to contribute to a community of trauma-informed care.

Safety is a high priority—not only physical but also psychological. A person dealing with the effects of trauma must feel safe in order to de-escalate their physiological survival-response, allowing them to regain some sense of control in the present. While the need for safety pertains to all aspects of a survivor’s life, in the classroom, safety may involve clearly marked exits, nearby restrooms, and the ability to leave the classroom at any time. The level of commitment to and awareness of safety is communicated from the first contact. Trigger warnings are one way to provide classroom safety.<sup>38</sup> How might a commitment to safety shape the kind of welcome and introduction activity used in your classroom?

Trustworthiness is also necessary for a trauma-informed approach. Many traumatic experiences are due to a person in authority abusing their power over someone more vulnerable. Re-establishing trust is imperative for many survivors. In order to lessen perceived threats and to provide a conducive environment for recovery, classroom teachers must be clear and transparent about policies, procedures, expectations, professional boundaries, and roles—

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<sup>35</sup> Davidson, “Trauma-Informed Practices for Postsecondary Education,” 17.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Roger D. Fallot and Maxine Harris, “Creating Cultures of Trauma-Informed Care (CCTIC): A Self-Assessment and Planning Protocol” (Washington, DC: Community Connections, 2009), <https://www.theannainstitute.org/CCTICSELFASSPP.pdf>. SAMHSA offers six key principles of a trauma-informed approach: SAMHSA, “SAMHSA’s Concept of Trauma,” 10–11. For discussion of additional resources on trauma-informed pedagogy in higher education, see Stephens, “Trauma-Informed Pedagogy.”

<sup>38</sup> Stephanie M. Crumpton, “Trauma-Sensitive Pedagogy,” in *Teaching Sexuality and Religion in Higher Education: Embodied Learning, Trauma Sensitive Pedagogy, and Perspective Transformation*, eds. Darryl W. Stephens and Kate Ott, Routledge Research in Religion and Education (New York: Routledge, 2020): 30–43. SAMHSA provides guidance for professionals to help empower survivors to return to the present and to regain focus when such triggering occurs. SAMHSA, “Trauma-Informed Care,” 151.



including self-disclosure in the classroom.<sup>39</sup> How might a commitment to trustworthiness shape the way you present your syllabus and assignments?

Choice is important for survivors of trauma. Trauma robs a person of agency and exposes a deep sense of helplessness. Providing adequate information about their rights and responsibilities and offering choices, when appropriate, can help restore a sense of agency to trauma survivors. For example, Stephanie M. Crumpton developed a classroom “Covenant of Presence” for this purpose, assuring not only a degree of safety and trust but also choice and control.<sup>40</sup> How might a commitment to the value of choice and control change the way you shape assignments, deadlines, and forms of communication with students?

Collaboration is essential to becoming a trauma-informed community. Resilience from trauma is greatly increased by a social support network, and for this to work to the survivor’s benefit, the survivor must have agency in the process. The event of trauma is something that happens to a person, overwhelming them; healing and recovery is a process that happens with a person, inclusive of them. How might a commitment to the value of collaboration change the way you understand teaching and learning in the classroom?

Empowerment underlies all of the above values. Restoring voice, choice, and agency to a survivor is key to recovery. Empowerment means helping the student discover and develop their own capacities. Trauma-informed classroom teachers are part of the community that acts on the belief that “trauma-affected students can learn self-efficacy and social-emotional skills” needed to transcend the grip of the past and live fully into their present potential.<sup>41</sup> As classroom instructors, we are in a privileged position to assist trauma-survivors. There are few things more empowering than education. How might a commitment to the value of empowerment change the way you teach in the classroom?

Especially for instructors in theological education and religious studies, it is important to recognize that trauma is a spiritually disruptive experience. Trauma affects mind, body, and soul, causing the survivor to reassess who they are and who God is. Theological works by Shelly Rambo, Serene Jones, Jennifer Beste, and others are helpful resources. Furthermore, classroom instructors on the front lines of community support are exposed to many survivors and their stories of past trauma. The experience of vicarious or secondary trauma (sometimes accompanied by compassion fatigue) is a real and present danger. It is important that classroom instructors take time to debrief with colleagues, pastors, and other professionals about the emotional weight that such work entails.<sup>42</sup> Being aware of trauma helps us through this journey, but the spiritual effects are no less intense. Remember: a trauma-informed approach is the work of an entire community of support.

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<sup>39</sup> Stephanie M. Crumpton, “Trigger Warnings, Covenants of Presence and More: Cultivating Safe Space for Theological Discussions About Sexual Trauma,” *Teaching Theology & Religion* 20, no. 2 (2017): 137–47. <https://doi.org/10.1111/teth.12376>.

<sup>40</sup> Crumpton, “Trauma-Sensitive Pedagogy.”

<sup>41</sup> Davidson, “Trauma-Informed Practices for Postsecondary Education,” 13.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 20–21.

### Select Recommended Resources

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## Gender-Based Violence and Muslim Communities: Trauma Processing through Art

Juliane Hammer, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

In my upper-level “Gender and Sexuality in Islam” course, we begin the second week of the semester with a reading by Rochelle Terman titled, “Islamophobia, Feminism and the Politics of Critique.” In it, Terman discusses what she calls the “double bind” and develops ideas for responsible critique of gender-based violence.<sup>1</sup> The article is built around a controversy that played out on *Jadaliyya* about a music video by the Palestinian hip-hop group DAM, released in late 2012. The song video, “If I Could Go Back in Time,” shows the killing of a Palestinian woman by male family members. I assign the video along with the article and links to several opinion pieces on *Jadaliyya* written by scholars Lila Abu Lughod and Maya Mikdashi, with responses from the members of DAM. The link to the video has a trigger warning that says: “Trigger warning – graphic instance of gender-based violence.” I also mention the reading assignment in the class before it is due and repeat that the video contains violence which could trigger some students, so watching it is optional. My students in this course write a weekly journal that reflects both on discussions from the previous class and the readings for the coming week. For this week of class, that journal is a challenge because it is the first one they submit, so the understanding of the purpose and format of these may not yet have been established.

I begin that class session with a five-minute free-write exercise in which I ask students to jot down their responses to the reading and the video. I encourage emotional processing and acknowledge that in my classroom and as a feminist, I do not prefer thoughts over feelings but think of them as interconnected and valuable for our learning process. I do not ask the students to share what they have written down so as not to put pressure on students who might have linked the topic to their own experiences of gender-based-violence trauma. The free-write exercise allows for some reflection and may help students become aware of connections they are making to their own trauma.

The students then work in groups to formulate what they see as the central argument(s) in Terman’s article. I encourage critical thoughts on the piece as well. In the third step, the students share their formulation of the arguments and we untangle some of the complicated language in the piece. I provide some background on the Palestinian context of the music video in order to avoid a homogenized representation of Muslims on the other side of the world as simply foreign and other. The connection to “here” also comes through the location of the

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<sup>1</sup> Rochelle Terman, “Islamophobia, Feminism and the Politics of Critique,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 33, no. 2 (March 2016), 77–102.

scholars Mikdashi and Abu Lughod in the US academy. Towards the end of the class, we move to a discussion of art and artists' responsibility for the political impact of their work. This point has come up every time I have taught this course. I end class with an invitation to reach out if a student is struggling with their response to the class conversation.

Later in the semester, during a week on domestic violence in Muslim communities that is built around my own research and book, *Peaceful Families*, I show the students a Powerpoint with artwork from a 2011 exhibit called "Healing and Empowerment: Violence, Women, and Art" which showed pieces by American Muslim women from the Muslim Women in the Arts collective. The chapter I wrote about the exhibit did not make it into my book, but the students would have read the introduction to my book. The virtual art exhibit in class brings back the reflections and conversations on gender-based violence and trauma from the beginning of the semester, and this time, the women artists are also in the United States and what they are depicting and working through in their visual art pieces is both local and global.

I mention the upcoming art exhibit in the preceding class and describe some of the art pieces as potential triggers. This allows students to miss the class if they are concerned, and I do not ask for an explanation for their absence. The art pieces are powerful in their visual impact, and I explain some pieces in more detail, partly to talk through the tense and emotional atmosphere in the room. I also explain my own experience of third-level trauma from my research, and that I am deeply affected every time I look at these pieces. In this class, I offer time for reflection and trauma processing at the end of the class, and again use a free-write exercise. The students also reflect further in their journal for the next week.

I have always had a keen interest in art and many of my classes contain an art assignment in which the students themselves produce a piece of visual, written, or virtual art. The connection between the Terman article, the DAM music video, and the art exhibit later in the semester developed organically over two different times of my teaching this course. I used to teach the article towards the end of the semester, hoping that, by then, students would have arrived at a critical understanding of Terman's notion of the double bind: "In an age of Islamophobia, how does one engage in a feminist critique of women's status in Muslim contexts without providing ideological fuel for undesired political ambitions? When the US invokes the oppression of Muslim women to justify war, how do we practice feminist solidarity without strengthening orientalism and imperialism?"<sup>2</sup> I realized that the course needed an introductory framing through the focus on Terman's article because various forms of anti-Muslim hostility and racism are justified by instances of gender-based violence in Muslim contexts presented as exceptional (and not like us), and my students often follow those patterns of explanation many weeks into the semester. Terman also frames these questions as inherently political, which is now something I can embrace from the start of the course.

The topic of "honor" in relation to the murder in the DAM video, which is discussed in the responses as an honor killing, is complex but important in analyzing how we study gender and sexuality in Muslim contexts.

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<sup>2</sup> Terman, 2.

Trauma from exposure to gender-based violence is ubiquitous in our society and among our students. Any course on gender and/or sexuality, even if not related to Islam and Muslims, will have to contend with the presence of such trauma in our classrooms. Over my many years as a teacher, I have learned that students, like other members of society, do not always know that they have experienced such trauma because they have not even been able to recognize and name it as such. It is infinitely harder to work with and through unacknowledged trauma from gender-based violence, and I admit that I have struggled with how to prepare for class situations when trauma responses are triggered even when I knew that it could happen. I am not a counselor or therapist, but in my research on Muslim efforts against domestic violence, I have participated in many awareness events that provided counselors and facilitators to address trauma responses in the room. I do not attempt to replicate their work but offer students access to university resources should they realize they need them. The very presence of these resources in the syllabus alerts the students to the possibility of triggering material and topics, and it also signals my openness to acknowledging the trauma experiences of my students present in my classroom.

While I now teach at a large public university, the art-making assignment is a well-developed part of my courses that I retained from my time at a liberal arts college at the beginning of my teaching career. This assignment, usually due in the last third of the semester, asks students to reflect on our readings and discussions on gender, bodies, sexuality and what all that has to do with religion/Islam, and specifically with religious practice. In turning a specific idea, reflection, or thought into an art piece (keeping in mind questions as diverse as representation, critique, self-reflection, and comparison), they are asked to consider how art becomes a vehicle of communication and what they are attempting to communicate. Art pieces can be visual, textual, and also audiovisual, and there are few limits to their creativity. The students submit their projects together with an explanation of both process and meaning so I can appreciate the effort and thought that has gone into the making of the pieces.

The art assignment allows students to further develop their understanding of the course materials, but it focuses primarily on reflection and creative expression, thereby providing opportunities to work through potential trauma triggered by class content. In connecting the music video at the beginning of the semester, the art exhibit in the latter part, and the student art assignment which we view together in class, I have made art and artistic expression a thread that runs through the entire course. This thread allows students to reflect on gender-based violence in Muslim contexts and in their own lives and to do so in different registers that allow for arguments, opinions, and emotions to be expressed as the students need and want to call on them.

While other educators do not have my collection of images from the 2011 art exhibit, the Terman article and links to the music video and *Jadaliyya* debate are accessible to them. My reflections on the incorporation of visual art, by viewing it and by making it, however, can certainly be adapted to other courses and instructors. In our quest for trauma-informed teaching strategies, visual art as well as poetry and creative writing offer the students ways to work through the complicated emotions and embodied reactions to trauma we discuss in class. Rather than avoiding such discussions and topics, which is virtually impossible with the ubiquity

of gender-based violence trauma among us, I have searched for openings to process such trauma individually as well as collectively. For the collective processing, privacy is definitely a concern and so is secondary trauma from exposure to someone else's triggered responses. In a positive scenario, students build a class community through their own courageous sharing and through garnering the respect of their classmates, but also through recognizing their own experiences as part of shared communal trauma and the emergence of solidarity as a way to connect to others.

## Addressing Race in the Classroom: A Trauma-Informed Communal Embodied Practice

Leah Thomas, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary

In the classroom, topics of race/racism frequently arise, particularly in light of the ongoing social and cultural awareness of issues of racial injustice in the United States. Being a teacher at Christian seminaries for the past three years, I have yet to teach a course where the topic of race has *not* come up at some point in the class. No matter whether the conversations were planned or spontaneous, it became apparent to me that these conversations were frequently marked by palpable agitation, anxiety, and anger and sometimes the opposite, students withdrawing and/or shutting down. Some students had notable challenges with emotional regulation. Others would communicate helplessness, either verbally or through their body language. I also noticed the increased activation within myself when these conversations would ensue. As a white, cisgendered woman, I was extremely aware of my own embodiment, alongside the power afforded me as an instructor (and thus primary facilitator) in the midst of these conversations. As someone who studies trauma and trauma-informed care, my experiences with these classroom conversations led me to note a resonance between the effects of trauma in post-secondary learners and the reactions of students in my classroom on the subject of race. It also made me wonder whether a variation of trauma-informed somatic exercises that I had used in a variety of different settings might be appropriate in conversations regarding race.

### Trauma and Race

My instinct related to the presence of trauma in race-related discussions is confirmed by the work of Resmaa Menakem, a trauma therapist, and other scholars who note connections between trauma and white supremacy. In Menakem's book *My Grandmother's Hands*, he asserts that while we have valiantly attempted to address white body supremacy through cognition—through reason, principles, and ideas—"white-body supremacy doesn't only live in our thinking brains. It lives and breathes in our bodies."<sup>3</sup>

As teachers and scholars, we are likely aware of the harmful cognitive beliefs and values that white supremacy promulgates concerning people of color. Menakem pushes us deeper, prompting us to look at the embodied reactions that also accompany white supremacy. He

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<sup>3</sup> Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press, 2017), 4.

argues that white supremacy frequently creates a traumatic bodily reaction (that of fight/flight or freeze) that results from racism experienced as a trauma that has been passed down through generations (also known as intergenerational trauma). He suggests that both white bodies and the bodies of people of color experience these reactions. Black bodies “don’t feel settled” around white ones, due to a sordid history of enslavement, racial profiling and murder, coupled with the perennial stress brought on by discrimination, disrespect and microaggressions that characterize a white supremacist culture. White people, on the other hand, *also* have embodied responses that stem from ingrained trauma. These frequently include a fight, flee, or freeze response that seems to occur “out of the blue.” These reactions stem from generations of white supremacist culture that has presented the black body as a source of danger (and therefore threatening), as well as from the trauma that many European white people experienced at the hands of other white bodies on the European continent. Given these dual sources of trauma, Menakem notes that there has been “a confusion of fear with danger and comfort with safety,” particularly among white-bodied people. When a white body feels frightened by the presence of a black one—whether or not an actual threat exists—it may respond by lashing out at the black body in what it deems as self-protection.

To navigate these challenging conversations that can trigger traumatic reactions in bodies of color and white bodies, Menakem, along with other scholars from the realm of somatic psychology and pastoral care, recognizes that somatic tools can calm and harmonize bodies. These tools include insights from the realm of mindfulness, which can aid people in moving through the pain of trauma (see Pat Ogden, Bessel Van der Kolk, Carrie Doehring). As Stephens notes in the introduction to this section, affective and embodied knowledge are as important as cognitive knowledge in trauma-informed pedagogy. Yet the question remains as to how to work with bodies in the classroom in a way that is trauma sensitive and invites engagement.

### **Contemplative Pedagogy Meets Somatic Psychotherapy**

Much has been written about the use of contemplative pedagogy in the classroom, a technique that facilitates engagement not only with students’ cognitive, affective, and somatic habits, but also critical reflection upon course material and the world. Many scholars highlight the benefits of properly contextualized contemplative pedagogy, which include (without limit) allowing students to explore their deeply held thoughts/feelings and beliefs, enabling the development of empathy, fostering agency and resiliency, incorporating experiential knowing, and allowing there to be a dialogue between “critical first-person” knowledge and “third-person” knowledge.

There are some scholars, however, who advocate against the use of contemplative pedagogy in the classroom, citing ethical concerns of respect for cultural/religious diversity and informed consent of students. These scholars recognize that practices that have historical and ongoing associations with religion must be presented and situated as such, rather than as “secularized” practices which themselves can risk cultural appropriation and imperialism. In classes where somatic practices may be used, I find it important to situate these practices within their religious and cultural history. Teaching in a seminary, however, students expect not only to be taught about religion but also to perform religious practices. This context addresses some of the



concerns of these authors who maintain that students in a state university may feel uncomfortable undertaking certain contemplative practices for religious reasons. Regarding the issue of informed consent, the values of trauma-informed pedagogy that surround this exercise (notably the primacy of choice and the empowerment of students) allow students to honor their experience and freely opt in or out of exercises at any time without penalty.

Contemplative experience is a central tool in the realm of somatic psychotherapy. Ogden uses the term “directed mindfulness” to explore the “five building blocks” of present experience: cognition, emotion, five-sense perception, movement, and bodily sensation. Within this, she suggests that the notion of “directed attention” is particularly helpful in working with those who have been affected by trauma. By “directed attention,” she refers to the practice of “deliberately selecting particular elements of present-moment experience on which to focus.”<sup>4</sup> This practice can actually help us to “rewire” the brain toward new habits and/or patterns (referred to as neuroplasticity). For a person experiencing heightened anxiety, directed attention might choose to focus on the feeling of one’s feet grounding into the earth rather than the direct sensations of anxiety. This practice allows people to reorient their attention toward building blocks that are resourceful, while also enabling them to create space between their impulse and their response. Menakem addresses using these activities in a group setting. He notes that there are certain activities that “harmonize” groups of people; he maintains that healing is a communal endeavor and that a settled body invites others to settle as well. Some of these harmonizing activities include singing or humming together, breathing together, rubbing our stomachs together, rocking back and forth, and washing each other’s feet.

A combination of insights from contemplative pedagogy, directed attention, and harmonizing allows teachers to create trauma-informed exercises in the classroom, particularly in the midst of an activating conversation, such as one about race.

### **Trauma-Informed Communal Bodily Practice to Address Race**

Below, I offer an example of an exercise that allows students to pause and tap in to bodily awareness in the midst of a highly activating conversation about race. This exercise attempts to incorporate the core values of a trauma-informed pedagogy enumerated in the introduction to this section: safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment.

While the benefits of somatic exercises are many, a commitment to trauma-informed use of these exercises must both recognize and name the potential drawbacks of using somatic exercises in the midst of trauma. For example, consider those who may be struggling with body disassociations as a result of severe trauma. They may not be able to engage in mindfulness and/or follow their own awareness due to the depth of their traumatic experience. A teacher who endeavors to lead this practice must create safety by naming this reality. It follows that there also must be resources for the students should they not be able to engage in mindfulness. This can take the form of grounding and orienting resources such as connecting with the weight of the lower body, feeling the feet grounding into the floor (stomping them if necessary), imagining

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<sup>4</sup> Pat Ogden and Janina Fisher, *Sensorimotor Psychotherapy, Interventions for Trauma and Attachment* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2015), 161.

a safe place/person and/or orienting to external stimuli (either through finding something pleasing to gaze at or finding something tactile to squeeze/stretch). The instructor must also communicate that students have choice: they can engage in the exercise, but also they may return to these grounding/orienting resources at any point. Ultimately, participants must also be empowered to trust their own experience, to recognize that slowing down and/or even disconnecting from the activity all together are options that can be exercised without penalty. Naming these realities, coupled with offering resources should dysregulation occur, establishes an environment of trustworthiness.

Instructors must also recognize that what functions as a resource for one person may be de-resourcing for another. Thus, it is essential that teachers experiment with a variety of somatic resources—ones that include not only stillness but also postures, movement, and gestures. The instructor needs to be aware of the potential repercussions of the particular somatic work they have chosen to offer.

The following, adapted from “Guidelines for Working with the Body” in *Somatic Psychotherapy Toolbox*, is one such exercise that privileges grounding and a gentle exploration of bodily sensations in the midst of a highly activating conversation, such as one about race.<sup>5</sup> I have used these techniques in a variety of classes, particularly when I notice signs of activation/hyperarousal in the classroom (students becoming angry, anxious, and overwhelmed) as well as hypoarousal (those becoming disconnected, passive, and shut down). In race-related conversations, I have found that these types of reactions are most apparent when students who are not African American offer advice to African Americans regarding “appropriate” cognitive, emotional, and spiritual responses to racism (notably on topics like forgiveness, anger, and the like):

1. I informed the class that I’d like to offer a somatic exercise, but did this in a way that included choice and permission: “With your permission, I’d like to take a pause. I’d like to explore an exercise that will allow us to come back to our bodies.”
2. I explained that we would be doing an exercise that would help us to ground and reconnect with the sensations in our bodies. I also expressed that if this increased their anxiety or was in any way overwhelming, that they had the option to slow down and/or opt out of the exercise all together.
3. I offered resources for safety. I invited the students to feel their feet on the ground and let the ground support them. I then asked them to connect with the feelings of themselves sitting, to notice the weight of their body in the chair. I invited them to orient to the room, to find something that was pleasing to look at, and allow themselves to drink it in. I asked them to connect with something they associated with strength/wellness, whether in their body or otherwise. In this way, I provided resources for safety and strength—both bodily and otherwise—that they could return to if needed.

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<sup>5</sup> Manuela Mischke-Reeds, *Somatic Psychotherapy Toolbox* (Eau Claire, WI: PESI, 2018).

4. I invited them to bring attention to breath, giving them the option to keep eyes open or closed (whatever was comfortable for them). I followed this with an offer to notice any sensations in their bodies. If anything felt too distressing, they were invited to bring focus back to grounding sensation or to keep 90% of attention on their bodily sensation(s) and 10% on grounding.
5. I offered students resources of support for any places of constriction in their bodies. I invited them to put a hand over the part of their body where they felt tension or constriction. I also presented options for a self-hug, and/or one hand over heart and one hand on belly. I repeated options to slow down and reconnect with grounding at any point.
6. Slowly, I asked them to come back to this space, to open their eyes if they were closed, and to take a few deep breaths together to harmonize our bodies.

After the students participate in this exercise, they usually are more able to be present to one another and the material at hand. I frequently notice signs of release—they have space to take deeper breaths, and anxious energy seems to have settled a bit. After this exercise, I invite students to consider the conversation that we were having before the exercise, and to notice whether they have a contribution that they would like to offer. I also ask them to critically engage with resources we have read for that class. While this does not preclude expressions of emotion, the contributions that are shared are largely more thoughtful and intentional, and less reactive. The class is usually able to continue the classroom conversation, a conversation that risked being shut down due to intense emotional reactivity that signaled the presence of trauma.

When working with trauma and race, it is also important to engage in contextual analyses alongside exercises like the one above. While white students and students of color may both be experiencing reactions that point to the role of trauma, these reactions are rooted in drastically different experiences of white supremacy ... social location matters! Menakem addresses this by offering different exercises for people of color and for white people. When using these techniques in a race-related context, it is important to offer students the opportunity to reflect on their social location as a complement to the above exercise. I usually ask them to consider the social/cultural messages they have internalized due to their race, gender, class, sexual orientation and to write about these. In a guided meditation, I invite them to explore the embodied sensations that accompany these messages. After offering grounding/orienting resources should the exercise feel overwhelming, I ask them to identify their embodied sensations and invite them to connect with a safe/healing place or person (this could also be an image of the Divine), and imagine that place/person “keeping company” with any areas of discomfort. I then have them talk with each other about the presence of racism (and sexism and classism) in their own lives. Students who have undertaken exercises like these report that it has helped them to engage with the ways that dynamics such as those above have become embodied. While this exercise usually follows a cognitive analysis about the presence of racism, sexism, and classism in the current context, the addition of attention to embodiment allows them to connect these cognitive realities to a “first-person experience” of these dynamics in their lives.

This ultimately enables them to better empathize and engage with one another, both in the moment and in subsequent classes.

As Meredith McGuire, a sociologist of religion, reminds us, “bodies matter.”<sup>6</sup> Bodies matter because our spiritual and intellectual practices—individual and communal—only occur in and through bodies. And bodies matter because social and cultural constructions of race and gender impact bodies, as well as heart and minds. To truly engage with these concepts, we need to be attentive to our bodies, as well as our minds and spirits. When the presence of trauma rears its head, particularly in relationship to an issue like race, it is essential that we offer a trauma-informed pedagogy that can both recognize this reality and provide resources to begin to address it. Since trauma is stored in the body, it is important that we address this trauma on a bodily level. Practices from the realm of mindfulness and somatic psychotherapy provide resources of time, space, and awareness in the midst of traumatic reactions. Since choice and empowerment are part of this exercise, it offers students the freedom to engage/disengage as they feel comfortable, while also addressing trauma on the embodied level.

### Select Recommended Resources

Barbezat, Daniel P., and Bush, Mirabai, eds. *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education: Powerful Methods to Transform Teaching and Learning*, San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, 2014.

Levine, *Healing Trauma: A Pioneering Program for Restoring the Wisdom of Your Body* Boudler: Sounds True, 2008.

McGuire, Meredith. “Why Bodies Matter: A Sociological Reflection on Spirituality and Materiality,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, vol. 3 no. 1, 2003, p. 1-18. [doi.org/10.1353/scs.2003.0017](https://doi.org/10.1353/scs.2003.0017).

Menakem, Resmaa. *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending our Hearts and Bodies*. Las Vegas: Central Recovery, 2017.

Mischke-Reeds, Manuela. *Somatic Psychotherapy Toolbox*. Eau Claire: PESI, 2018.

Ogden, Pat and Janina Fisher. *Sensorimotor Psychotherapy, Interventions for Trauma and Attachment*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2015

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<sup>6</sup> Meredith McGuire, “Why Bodies Matter: A Sociological Reflection on Spirituality and Materiality,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 3 no. 1, (Spring 2003): 1–18.

## We Have to Tell the Truth: A Liberative Approach to Trauma-Informed Pedagogy

Oluwatomisin Oredein, Brite Divinity School

### Starts and Fits

Black skin taught me a lot about education, mainly that it is designed to best suit and work with a colonizing mind (the minds and skin tones of the United States's most famous settlers). I first learned this lesson in a small, white Southern Baptist private school my siblings and I attended. I thought it strange that my class contributions were unwelcome. My siblings, myself, and the other two Black kids in the school were constantly punished for fabricated violations. At age six, I realized that the real education—for the entire school, not only the kids of African descent—was in our, often public, punishment. We were the examples of how not to be, or perhaps “who” not to be. I learned that education was not fully *for* us, not designed for our advancement, but that it could be used to keep us stagnant and doubting our ability. Although relieved by a shift to public school, the lesson had already been cemented in me: for many students like me—especially curious Black girls who preferred palaver to pacifying—education was to be endured; it was not something to feel connected to nor enjoy.

Educational disparities can concretize a marginal existence in the hearts of many non-white students. They sadly believe and accept difficulty within the education system to be their lot.<sup>1</sup> Disadvantage roots their educational experience in trauma: they may learn something, but it will be a painful, arduous learning. It will be learning that goes against the grain of their bodies, personhood, and worldview.

### Teaching in Truth

This troubling reality should shatter any idea that education is objective. It should instead remind us that education is experienced—its shape best known through a learner's particular encounter with the system as a whole rather than simply the material presented; for material presentation is not the point of education, the commitment to *how who* receives *what*, is.

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<sup>1</sup> Oluwatomisin Oredein, “Pandemic Predispositions: Minority Trauma Responses in Higher Education,” in *Praxis: The Responsive and Expanding Classroom* blog series, Wabash Center, May 18, 2020, <https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2020/05/pandemic-predispositions-minority-trauma-responses-in-higher-education/>.

Therefore, it is safe to say that we teachers create experiences. It is riskier to say that we are part of the experience—how teachers *are* teaches as much as the material. Pedagogy is not a decision, but that which spills forth from us. How we teach is an overflow of who we are and what we care about. Pedagogy is character-reflexive. The scary part of naming pedagogy in this way is that it quite bluntly reveals how potentially unimpressive and uninteresting a number of pedagogues, a number of *us*, actually are.

Pedagogies divulge secrets. I think this radical vulnerability a strategic strength in itself. The outbreak of the coronavirus and the subsequent COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 have illumined many core truths about higher education. But what it has revealed *about educators themselves* is more concentrated: many instructors are being forced to examine whether and if the material they have spent significant time specializing in matters to the moment. And what the moment has doused every global citizen in is trauma.

Teaching in a traumatic today invites pauses and complete reorientation. We teachers must sit in our breath and our fears and understand that students feel this pressure exponentially. They are wrestling with how to please us with their academic performance in a pandemic. We must call this out as a ridiculous absurdity and instead get on the ground. We must strip our teaching of all pretense and performance and understand that “at best” we are trying to ensure that something we offer in the classroom sticks with our students. If it is our kindness, so be it. If it is scholarship, how fortunate! But if we are so wedded to the white Western performance of intellectual rigor, some of which has traumatized us in the past in our own intellectual formations, we have lost ourselves and our students; to be frank, some would not have been with us in the first place.

The pretense has to go. We must reorient, make ourselves softer, more human(e).

We must see differently, become *most* interested in the students who are *not* interested in performing well for us or being our clones. Those who are trying to make meaning of why they should care about what we are presenting should catch and hold our attention. They are the ones inviting us to answer why we are even doing this in the first place, for whom we are even doing this. We must accept their challenge to pause to re-evaluate our standards and thus our understanding of what a “sound” performance looks like.

But first we must abandon pretense. It does not work anymore. It frankly has only “worked” for a certain segment of the population anyway; but power is not the name of the game anymore, applicability is.

The educational experience must be about authenticity in process, in practice, and in performance. We must tell the truth about the academic world we have made homes within, about what information lands where and transforms people for the better. We must be honest about whether our work matters in any way outside of fortifying the delusion tiers of “intelligence” out-of-touch Western voices have created. We must be honest. Hierarchy is not that creative.

In a trauma-filled world, the truth is a balm; it is *the* way that the possibility of life overpowers a world obsessed with death (yes, even death that reflects pointless recitation as a reflection of intelligence).

Teachers are in an era that requires emotional intelligence. Practicality, not imperviousness, is the “new” intelligent. It either helps academic categories mean something or exposes those categories which it would be best to pause and re-evaluate for their practical efficacy.

### **Pedagogical Honesty: Approaches**

Education has to have a point, so for the fall 2020 semester I decided to do some interactive revamping and assignment de-ornamenting. It is new and in process, but given we are living through the COVID-19 era, pedagogy that fits the moment should be most pressing.

In my mind, each part of students' learning has to sharpen something; if not, it is pointless and a waste of time. In order for students to feel the weight of their questions or confusion or excitement or curiosity with the material, in fall I made some pedagogical shifts to the classroom culture and our interactive habitus through welcoming diverse means of expression including oral assignments and allowing current events to impact the classroom space.

#### Language

It has always been welcome, yet typically unspoken, but this time I made it part of the classroom ethos: I am inviting authentic cultural linguistics into synchronous conversation, asynchronous work, and into assignments. No more code-switching for marginalized students: Every single person taking part in the course can be who they are.

I want my students to “speak how they speak.” If a non-white student uses a term or expression that white culture has deemed technically incorrect or that they may not know, I welcome it. It makes absolutely no sense to ask my marginalized students to adopt a voice and tone they may hardly or never use in order to fit into the environment of a divinity school. I do not want my students to leave who they are at the doors of the institution for three to five years, but I want them to bring who they will be in their respective communities into the classroom. I want my students to sound like their respective communities, but first and foremost, I want students to sound like themselves. Time is too precious to lose one's voice in a space of learning. A space of learning should instead help students hear and articulate their heart and the heart of their community's concerns and joys, well. What a waste it would be for students to not know how to use what they learned because they could not process it as themselves.

Within the classroom, I want our practice to be about students bringing every aspect of who they are so they can mold it for the contexts in which they will be in the future. The classroom as a space of “practice” is a key concept in how I teach—dear students: practice in class who you are going to be in the world! But you cannot do this if your institution requires your code-switching as a sign of progress. It is not progress nor admirable; it is suffocating, a waste of time and energy, and a suppression of personhood.

#### Oral Assignments

I also included oral assignments as an option for students who are masters of the tongue but who may not feel their strongest or most themselves with the pen. Unfortunately, writing has been the main marker of marking intellectual engagement. How unfortunate many of us within the academy speak of recognition and honor but do not honor that multiple intelligences exist in the world. Justice must be a critical aspect of trauma-informed pedagogy; teachers must recognize the different means of processing information within their classroom. Oral assignments are a way to begin evening the playing field when it comes to students' various means of synthesis, analysis, and processing. It would show a teacher's commitment to Western-bias to only measure a student's progress or intelligence by writing assignments alone.

### Current Events

One of the most sure-fire ways to ensure students are traumatized is to ignore what is happening in the world around them. Current events are so impactful on so many lives that I argue it the "startling curricula variant." Whether one callously and incorrectly chooses to think it not impacting themselves or their students, current events will make its way into a classroom, invited or not. It therefore makes the most rational sense to treat current events like relevant material—material that may alter the affective or lesson-driven direction of the day.

I try to allow current events to impact the rhythm of my class. Students do better allowing what is on their hearts and minds to enter into classroom space—a space of "practicing" sharpening voice—than not. In allowing current events to take up the room they deserve, I am demonstrating that everybody in the class, myself included, will be treated justly and humanely. I am naming that whatever affects one group is important enough to recognize and sort through. It is trauma-inducing and unjust to require students of African descent to perform studenthood in the midst of racial crisis, for (a too common) example. No, trauma-informed pedagogy reconfigures the classroom space to allow total room for Black (or other marginalized groups) to fully exist in their bodies and realities, even if it "inconveniences" the lesson for the day. These students are invited and encouraged to be present to themselves. Minoritized faculty must be given this same opportunity as well. If students are honored with space to process the world in process, marginalized teachers must be able to model that they deserve the same courtesy.

We must remember, many students are watching their teachers *to learn how to be*. If trauma-informed pedagogy is about truth-telling, those who are teaching impacted by current events, just as much as their students, can illustrate how they honor *themselves* by shifting the classroom focus for the day or demonstrating other ways of self-care and humane treatment. Teachers from marginalized communities model how the world should treat them by how they treat themselves. Of course, their administrations would do well to combat injustices such as racism, sexism, classism, queer-phobia, etc., by including this measure, a measure of self-care, in institutional policy as well.

### **A Charge for Care-full Teaching**

Trauma-informed pedagogy at its core treats people—students *and* teachers alike—like humans. It slows down or stops rushing down the predetermined pedagogical path, showing students that their pain or the teacher's pain is worthy of an appropriate, grace-filled response.



I know it may not always feel like it, but dear teachers: *we get to be people*.

It is a shame that the classroom environment is a place where the full humanity of all persons is constantly in question or jeopardy in the first place. The educational institution is supposed to prepare students for life in the next stage; what is more pedagogical than seeing, reflecting upon, and thinking critically (honestly) about the shared and injured parts of humanity.

Trauma pedagogy then is reframing responsibility. Teachers are responsible for the humane treatment of their students and of themselves. This is teaching of the rarest sort, yet the highest order. We teachers teach/show students how to be in the world; our first task should be respect for the humanity of all, not an impossible assimilationist project.

Western education has built up an unkind awareness: many students will fail the assimilationist project. And instead of thinking it our responsibility to redesign the classroom environment, many teachers misread, sometimes proudly, the failure of students to survive an inflexible setting a mark of their teaching pedigree. They see students having difficulty in their class as a reflection of their superior knowledge when in fact it is a grave sign of their callousness and lack of care.

This is what I am asking for: I need teachers to care—not care in the vague “I have a minimal awareness of race, or economic status, or disability, or gender” sense—but care for students through revising the features of the classroom experience. Care is a means of liberating the educational experience to be meaningful to marginalized and majority communities alike. Trauma-informed pedagogical care charges teachers to center non-white students; it reflects how a teacher is moving towards an embodied awareness of what both materials in the course and the materials of the current moment mean for their students. Care in this way forces us teachers to see where we have been willfully ignorant and unnecessarily unkind to our students’ realities. It forces us to change how we view the world, to be perpetual students of the world around us from the perspective of those whose present and future have been most determined by a Western world.

Last year I recognized my willful ignorance. I had students employing language in their work that was *just* outside of its proper use. What was the cultural use of certain words my theological training helped me deem “incorrect writing.” I thought about what was nagging me about the corrections I was making on these writing assignments and realized what was bugging me was my own traumatic history. She had been rekindled and I had helped resurrect her. My classism was the problem, not students’ grasp of and impressive engagement with the material. I made the decision right then and there to drop pretenses around “proper” writing or “appropriate” engagement in the Western sense. I decided not to give my trauma or other’s trauma with Western education another platform. I was never interested in being molded in white-male-leaning thinkers; neither were many of my marginalized students. No one wants this except white males.

If the power of “the West” is stripped from education, a number of us teachers will be exposed as being not that impressive. We must tell the truth about ourselves and realize that we can, however, be impactful. We can either be the antagonist of a student’s traumatic classroom

experience, the neutral do-nothing, unmemorable teacher, or, through our creativity, awareness, and care be the protagonist pedagogue who courageously shows students, especially minoritized students, that this world has *always* been for them.

Trauma-informed pedagogy requires Western-focused teachers to do the hard work of transforming themselves, it requires teachers who only talk about liberation in the class to do the even harder work of *actually demonstrating it*, and it *needs* teachers whose goal has always been liberation to *first* care for themselves in order to extend that same energy in the classroom.

## Passing by/through/in Written Word

Alexiana Fry, Stellenbosch University

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a traumatic time for all of us regardless of age and background. Beyond the pandemic, students may have faced and will continue to face trauma that can be both generational or a singular event—trauma can also be something that is insidious, besetting most of our BIPOC students. Yet, the pandemic in specific has brought to light an awareness that the world is ill-informed on what traumas many face may look like as it shows itself differently depending on context; and due to this, the world is also, simultaneously, ill-equipped to manage and/or work through what is heavy and held bodily each day.

In the midst of much change and much trial, to shift in order to continue what the normalized timeline is for schooling and education, many teachers are facing their own trauma as well as their students' trauma. The struggle to maintain focus and meet a presupposed goal or result on schedule feels entirely unobtainable, and it probably should be. A trauma-informed pedagogy is willing to prioritize the overall health of students, moving learning as a whole into a more fluid and flexible space that shifts power, creates mutual trust, and acknowledges the embodied needs and nature of learning.

We are never to glorify the immense suffering that trauma in general has brought for both ourselves and our neighbors, and that includes moving away from the praise of resilience. This can be difficult, especially for those of us who teach in religious or theological-education settings have differing views on suffering. In some cases, teaching in theological settings involves a bit of unlearning and relearning of how to perceive and work through trauma. The ideas can be as difficult as “God has done this to you for a reason,” or notions of forgiving and forgetting, spiritually bypassing what the body will *not* forget. However, teaching while trauma-informed allows for great opportunity to change an exercise or assignment into something that offers a new way to process through trauma as well as into something that is spiritually formative.

### Background and Theory

Ultimately, the choice to help students understand trauma and the concept of trauma narratives, the point of this article, is to restate a very human reality: we are meaning-making, story-telling beings. While some argue that trauma is something that cannot be told through words, especially if the memory is repressed, trauma will always find a way to express itself. We are often aware of the more disruptive effects, but trauma can also show up in your most well behaved students who perform perfectly; resilience is a necessity to survive for those who do not experience the base level of safety in a space that is often unjust and inequitable. Granting

the space to feel and process is humanizing in a world that consistently engages in dehumanization.

This concept of trauma narratives is not new, nor is the idea that this kind of processing can be a healing one. Sonya Andermahr and Silvia Pellicer-Ortín write about a phenomenon coined by Suzette A. Henke called “scriptotherapy,” defined as, “the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic re-enactment.”<sup>2</sup> Hilda Lindemann Nelson has also written on trauma and repair through narrative, calling it literally, “narrative repair;” and Kathleen M. O’Connor created the acronym PTLI, or post-traumatic literary intervention, in her own studies on trauma.<sup>3</sup> Janet Rumpfelt, in reckoning with Nelson’s narrative repair with war and psychic trauma states, “where trauma unhinges victims and their loved ones from existentialist ground of their being, narrative offers the promise of repair.”<sup>4</sup> Andermahr and Pellicer-Ortín continue to explain this process as one that helps those in the wake of trauma to begin to not only name the reasons behind why they might be feeling these disconcerting emotions and effects, but in doing so, begin to deal and cope with the trauma itself.

One of the main goals of “writing through” a traumatic experience would be, then, to articulate an unbearable psychic wound that the subject or group is not able to communicate or exteriorize, that is to say, what cannot be spoken may be at least represented and mediated through cultural practices.<sup>5</sup>

It is not only the individuals processing through the trauma that matters but also the community’s response. A trauma-informed pedagogy must go beyond a one-time activity in order to usher in students who are also trauma-informed. The opportunity within a trauma-informed classroom lies in not only peers receiving the narrative, but also responding to it in a way that can even resolve it—which can often be done by empathizing. This also, in turn, creates ripple effects toward a compassion-based pedagogy, as well as being transformative for students. Sharing these narratives with others is, as Judith Herman shares in her book on recovery from trauma, “a precondition for the restitution of a sense of a meaningful world.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Suzette A. Henke, *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998): xii, as found in Sonya Andermahr and Silvia Pellicer- Ortín, *Trauma Narratives and Herstory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan) 3.

<sup>3</sup> Hilda Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001.), and Kathleen M. O’Connor, “How Trauma Studies Can Contribute to Old Testament Studies,” in *Trauma and Traumatization in Individual and Collective Dimensions: Insights from Biblical Studies and Beyond*, eds. Eve-Marie Becker, Jan Doehorn, and Else Holt (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht), 210–222.

<sup>4</sup> Janet L Rumpfelt, “Reversing Fortune: War, Psychic Trauma, and the Promise of Narrative Repair,” in *Interpreting Exile: Displacement and Deportation in Biblical and Modern Contexts*, eds. Brad E. Kelle, Frank R. Ames and Jacob L. Wright (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 325.

<sup>5</sup> Sonya Andermahr and Silvia Pellicer-Ortín, *Trauma Narratives and Herstory* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 70.

While this level of vulnerability cannot be something that is forced upon neither the one who has been traumatized nor the community, the exercise itself could be one that provides a coping mechanism that can continue to be used throughout the student's lifetime. The classroom and classmates may not be who the student chooses to share with, but beginning to become comfortable with a level of vulnerability to oneself in writing a trauma narrative is a great first step. As connection is something that is fractured in the midst of a traumatic event, consider offering to students who don't want to share an opportunity to take time to share it with their God, or in their own way, to put it out into the universe.

### Teaching Exercise

My main teaching positions have been in undergraduate or nonprofit arenas with students who more likely than not identify as Christian. In all of these settings, I have the joy of teaching what is called biblical hermeneutics, as well as introductory classes to using those tools in the actual sacred texts. In other words, I teach students how to comprehend ancient texts for themselves, rather than reserving hermeneutics as a tool that only the elite or those who have much greater authority can alone employ. I also teach how these texts can move us from a space of greater understanding of the text to practice; after all, how we read is how we live. We deal with the basic premises in hermeneutics, both historical and literary. Yet, what has also been a shift in thinking is taking a step backwards from even *those* lenses—my personal specialty and research dealing with both the sociological and psychological lenses necessary to attempt to understand. With that in mind, I teach explicitly about trauma, viewing many texts in the Bible as trauma narratives after considering the history from which the texts come from. Those who study and even receive these texts as sacred have been reading the words of authors working through their own communal and individual traumas. Recognizing that the texts I am teaching are potential trauma narratives helps to share with students how entering into biblical narrative from the student's own context can also be a helpful practice to work through their own trauma. Not only this, but having students see that trauma narratives were also used as a way to connect with their communities and their God can be relieving to those experiencing great disconnection. For these reasons, I assign students in my class to write their own trauma narrative. Let it be known that during this time period of great disruption in multiple spheres of both the educator and student alike, if this is to be assigned as an exercise, it should be in place of a different assignment, and not an additional task. While this can be a form of self-care, students should also be able to dictate what their self-care looks like, a beginning foundation of agency.

The formative pieces of understanding sacred texts as potential trauma narratives should already be in place, and this exercise should happen more likely midway through a course. By this time, students will be able to recognize the variety of forms that trauma narratives can take; in this way, trauma narratives themselves allow for a great deal of agency as they are only defined as such due to their context and content: Trauma narratives can be explicit in nature, granting healing by telling the whole truth of their situation, or they can be far removed, using symbolic language as a way to create safety and distance while still working through what may be experienced. Trauma narratives can be a brand-new creation or a twist on a folklore, taking pieces of what may already be known in order to describe something different. Trauma

narratives can be fiction, memoir, or even poetry—rather, prayer. Trauma narratives do not have to have perfect theology, great grammar, or socially acceptable emotions. There is room for the “messy-self,”<sup>7</sup> and complexity. Importantly, trauma narratives can be done alone as an individual, or communally. In assigning the creation of their own trauma narrative, with the boundaries being as open and vast as the ones outlined above, they can be as detailed as a journal entry, or as short as a haiku. Although the exercise will be framed by simply asking for students to write their own trauma narrative, dependent upon your students, the assignment can be reworked even in a role-play type scenario, posing the question of, “what might a trauma narrative say if it was written in this current context?” This, once more, allows students an additional step away for distance from the situation, either in their own voice, or through the voice of any biblical author.

After the assignment is completed, it is important to make space to share these narratives with one another. Here, students can dictate their level of engagement, as the creations could be triggering or retraumatizing dependent upon what is written and shared. Self-disclosure is something that is argued relentlessly on all ends of the spectrum, and it should be wrestled through personally. As an instructor, there are things I am more than comfortable sharing that can be an avenue for further vulnerability for others, demonstrating for students to see how trauma does not have to be the final word. Yet, there are also many traumatic events I will not share with students, and while mutuality and a dismantling of power structure is incredibly important in the classroom, ensuring that I as teacher am still a safe place is crucial, and I cannot be that if I retraumatize students.

Creating that safe space in which these are offered would begin with a covenant that creates spaces of safety, rules for responding to these creations, and a code of confidentiality. If healthy boundaries are not established and agreed upon by every member that receives these trauma narratives, the space will not be as effective as it should, and it could be potentially harmful. I have done this exercise in large group formats, and they can also be done in small groups, which is easy if the students have been together since the start of class because a level of community may have already been established. All of these details would need to be discussed at length in preparation, in a syllabus or schedule handed out at the beginning of class, so it is not one of complete surprise to an extent. However, there is room as well for this exercise to be one that happens at a flexible time, and it can be shifted depending on what is sensed of the needs of students in the class.

The saying is true and trustworthy: we must shift our focus as educators, and humans alike, from rewarding “success” to rewarding arrival.<sup>8</sup> The outcomes of this exercise can be that no

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<sup>7</sup> Taken from Michelle Mary Lelwica, “Embodied Learning through Pedagogical Promiscuity,” in *Teaching Sexuality and Religion in Higher Education: Embodied Learning, Trauma Sensitive Pedagogy, and Perspective Transformation*, eds. Darryl W. Stephens and Kate Ott (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020): 17–29.

<sup>8</sup> Taken from Paul Ollinger, “Your Only Goal Is to Arrive,” *Forge*, April 13, 2020, <https://forge.medium.com/to-survive-the-quarantine-change-your-metrics-e345d79be14b>, as found in Oluwatomisin Oredein, “Pandemic Predispositions: Minority Trauma Responses in Higher Education,” *Praxis: The Responsive and Expanding Classroom* blog series, Wabash Center, May 18, 2020,

one wants to share, and the class reserved for sharing is one where you allow your students to care for themselves; or that everyone shares with vulnerability and respect, becoming a close-knit community. Nonetheless, encouraging your students to even acknowledge their trauma is a step that some have not taken before, and the simple act of showing up in that space is painful. Trauma of any kind, however, cannot and will not be unaddressed; the way out is through.

## Conclusion

A trauma-informed pedagogy is one that advocates for a more holistic way to approach the basic knowledge of how learning best happens when the students in your classroom are moving towards health in all forms. As an educator yourself, considering what it means to be part of a community entrusted with sacred trauma narratives from a typically intellectual space re-places what may be currently disembodied and even virtual into a more embodied and creative experience that can make room for the transformative—ultimately, closer to the ultimate goals of a theological education for both student and teacher alike. The goal, as stories are employed as ways to learn, hear, and heal from one another, is that students move toward the other, and hopefully, toward justice, both inside and outside of the classroom.

## Select Recommended Resources

Boase, Elizabeth and Christopher G. Frechette, eds. *The Bible Through the Lens of Trauma*. Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016.

Herman, Judith, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic Books, 1997.

Langer, Ellen. *The Power of Mindful Learning*. New York: Perseus, 1997.

Menakem, Resmaa. *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*. Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press, 2017.

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## Getting Comfortable with Being Uncomfortable: Reflections on Running and Teaching<sup>1</sup>

Elizabeth T. Vasko, Duquesne University

I have been running long distance for almost three decades. I am not an elite athlete or a running expert. I have never won a race or placed in one. Most of what I know about running comes from lacing up my sneakers and stepping outside. I run to claim time and space for healing and recovery. When I run, no one has permission to bother me. Something akin to meditation happens, as I tune into the rhythmic sound of my breathing and footfall on the pavement.

This has not always been the case. There was a period in my life when I let the numbers on my GPS watch dictate whether a run was successful and how I felt about myself. If I ran faster and farther than previously, I had achieved my goals. If I was unable to keep pace or finish a run, I was miserable. Most of my training goals were directed toward running farther and faster. I measured success in comparative and competitive terms. It was as if I had forgotten all of the other aspects of running, like playing, transportation, or being outside with friends. This is not surprising given the emphasis placed on individual productivity in Western culture, including higher education.

I had been running toward the “wrong” goals because I refused to accept the ways in which my life and the world around me had changed. I was a new mom working toward tenure. At that time in my life, I was so tired I could barely even find my sneakers. I was struggling to adjust to my new identity as a parent and the demands it placed on my time. All I wanted was to feel “normal” again. One way I thought I could do this was by running. Translation: I wanted to be able to run as if I was a decade younger and had not just given birth to a baby. So I set training goals appropriate for my former twenty-year-old self. There is nothing wrong with wanting to run faster and farther. Running fast is really fun. The problem was that faster and farther ignored the concrete embodied circumstances of my daily living. No amount of goal-setting or goal-striving could alter this reality.

Authentic goals arise out of a connection to our current embodied circumstances and lived history. Those that ignore the concrete circumstances of daily life (or what Latinx scholars describe as *lo cotidiano*) lead to frustration, disconnection, and failure. I am reminded of this experience today when I hear the desire to return to “normal” echoing throughout our

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<sup>1</sup> Special thanks to Autumn Greba (@runnergrebs) for critical feedback on this essay.



campuses. Concerns about the transmission of COVID-19 and social distancing measures may not shape our educational practices a few months or a year from now, but there is no return to “normal.” The pandemic has widened longstanding racial and economic inequities in the United States. Black and Indigenous Persons of Color (BIPOC) have suffered record numbers of job loss in the COVID-19 recession. Further, BIPOC workers are more likely to be classified as essential workers than are White workers, thus limiting their options to reduce exposure to COVID-19, secure childcare, and maintain economic security. The situation is exacerbated by longstanding gaps in wages and benefits.<sup>2</sup> No teaching tactic, classroom exercise, or goal-striving is going to change this reality. This can be particularly difficult for White people, like myself, to accept because it demands radical honesty about social inequity within higher education and cultivating new identities as educators.

Distance running requires learning how to deal with being uncomfortable for sustained periods of time. Cultivating this kind of stamina does not happen by accident. It requires making deliberate decisions to cultivate habits of mind and body. There is wisdom in this, especially for White cisgendered educators like myself. We need to develop praxes that help us get comfortable being uncomfortable in educational space. Toward this end, I offer three praxes for educators based upon distance running. While my remarks are directed toward White cisgendered educators, others may find them useful.

### **1. Practice Mindfulness.**

Running requires patience. There can be miles of mind-numbing boredom, which quickly turn into self-doubt, self-criticism, or anxiety. Running can also be physically uncomfortable. I am amazed at how relaxed the bodies of elite runners are when they are running at top speeds. Holding unnecessary tension in the body takes energy away from the task at hand. Therefore, the trick to distance running for me has been to train my body how to recover while running, to slow down and relax. One strategy I use is mindful breathing. Breathing exercises not only calm the mind, but they also initiate physiological responses that help the body relax, bringing more air into the lungs and lowering the blood pressure.<sup>3</sup>

Mindfulness is also important for professors, especially within contexts marked by trauma, as it helps restore a mind-body connection. Teaching can be stressful and is not always incentivized within higher education. I often find myself scrambling to get things done. While teaching, I struggle to focus on what is happening in the moment, instead thinking about what I need to do next. While I had already been incorporating mindfulness practices into my classroom, educators like Patricia Jennings have also suggested integrating mindfulness practice into class preparation to help manage stress and emotions.<sup>4</sup> As practitioner Resmaa Menakem explains,

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<sup>2</sup> Valerie Wilson, “Inequities Exposed: How COVID-19 Widened Racial Inequities in Education, Health, and the Workforce,” Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor, Economic Policy Institute, June 22, 2020, <https://files.epi.org/pdf/203287.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> “Meditation for Running,” Headspace, last accessed February 26, 2021, <https://www.headspace.com/meditation/running-meditation>.

<sup>4</sup> Patricia Jennings, *Mindfulness for Teachers: Simple Skills for Peace and Productivity in the Classroom* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2015).

white-body supremacy is sustained through white fragility when white-bodies avoid pain or discomfort when faced with the history of their participation in racial trauma.<sup>5</sup> Mindfulness is helps me, as White professor, deal with my own emotional discomfort.

Prior to each class, I do a short breathing meditation. I set the timer on my watch or phone, plant my feet on the floor, close my eyes, and focus on my breathing (adapted from Menakem, 2017). While three minutes is not enough time to work miracles, it is a place to start. As a parent of an elementary-school-aged kid, doable matters right now. Like social change, mindfulness does not happen overnight. It requires commitment and practice. After several months, I have found that I am better able to let go of expectations about what I think my students should be learning and able to pay attention to what they actually need. Over time, I found myself asking questions, such as: Why is there a penalty for handing in late work? Will my students learn better if I assign less reading and more podcasts? Does this assignment make me personally feel better, like I am accomplishing something in the classroom, or does it actually achieve its intended learning outcome? Is there a more inclusive way to teach this material?

## 2. Redefine Success.

If you want to run faster, you have to rest. While it might sound counterintuitive, the best preparation does not always involve running more miles. Athletes who do not rest between intense training sessions will overtrain or risk injury. For many athletes, slowing down or sitting out can be more miserable and uncomfortable than running itself. In part, this is a reflection of unattainable athletic ideals: a runner must run all the time, or a runner is trim, quick, and athletic. Those who do not fit the paradigm are often excluded. Ultrarunner, educator, and writer Mirna Valerio (@themirnavator) is redefining both what a runner ought to look like and the purpose of running itself. For Valerio, running is not primarily about health, fitness, or racing. It is about activism and building community. Valerio's counternarrative creates space and invites new people in.

This concept translates to higher education. Rarely is achievement or success measured in cooperative terms. Most faculty, staff, and students struggle to balance personal and professional responsibilities while managing expectations in a hypercompetitive environment. This has intensified over the past decade. Faculty are expected to produce more with fewer resources. The same can be said of students. Many are trying to balance full-time employment, family relationships, internships, and their class work. The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting financial crisis has intensified the situation. In this context, finding new markers for success is an essential part of healing.

One way I do this in the classroom is through an “anything goes” assignment in my introductory undergraduate theology classes. The purpose of the assignment is to change the conversation on what it means to be valued in an educational environment. In this assignment, students have five minutes to teach something that they enjoy: *I have learned how to frost a Dunkin’ Donut; meditate with chakras; conduct in 4-4 time*. While some students are initially skeptical about the

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<sup>5</sup> Menakem, Resmaa. *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*. Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press, 2017), 108.

assignment, it has opened the door to a broader conversation about what markers are used to define success in the classroom and beyond. For example, many of my students feel that to claim a skill or talent in public you have to have to be an expert, the best of the best. It is important to create space for counternarratives in the classroom and publicly within the broader sphere. As a faculty member, redefining success has meant critically reflecting on the goal of education and what steps I am taking to work toward the actualization of this goal within the institutions with which I am affiliated. For example, whose voice do I endorse and whose do I overlook in defining what counts as teaching and learning, and why? When I see microaggressions, macroaggressions, or bias against BIPOC leaders or people with marginalized identities on campus, I say something. When BIPOC and LGBT members of my community share their experience and perspectives, I believe them. I believe them when it contradicts my own experience. I believe them when it is difficult for me to hear.

### **3. Show up.**

One Saturday morning, I attempted to join a local running club on their training run. However, while using the restroom, I missed the group leader's announcement about pacing and course maps. As a result, I spent most of the morning huffing and puffing, trying to keep up with the group so that I would not get lost. At the midpoint, I gave up and made my way back to my car, feeling sorry for myself. I felt cold, frustrated, and defeated. Regretfully, I let that single experience negatively taint my perception of other running groups, and it was years before I tried another. That's on me. While the event could have been better organized, the real problem had to do with *the way* I showed up and *how* I interpreted the experience.

A key aspect of showing up as an educator is being conscious of how identity shapes our interactions with others. Our interactions with others disclose who we are to ourselves and to others. They provide us with important information about our core beliefs, insecurities, and the ways in which we have appropriated cultural norms. White, cisgendered people tend to ignore this fact and focus on external attributes when interpreting situations. In the example above, I was frustrated and freezing cold. I projected my feelings of discomfort onto the leaders of the running group without knowing what was going on in their own lives. In retrospect, most people ran in silence for the first few miles. Perhaps the pace was too fast for them as well. Had I taken the time to reflect on the situation or gotten to know the other runners, the outcome could have been different. Instead, I quit before the work had even begun.

Inclusive and transparent communication takes time. Yet, it has never been more important to take the time to do so. Similar to the way that "pandemic pods" have exacerbated educational disparities between White upper- to middle-income families and Black low-income families, efforts to maintain social distance have deepened patterns of social isolation and segregation on college campuses. For example, when families form pandemic pods in an effort to maintain social connection without spreading the COVID-19 virus, they dip into existing resources within their social networks, thereby maintaining relatively homogenous environments and isolating others. In a college environment, where opportunities for connection have been drastically reduced by the pandemic, students who face social and academic barriers (such as international, commuter, and differently abled students), have also been isolated. Therefore,

establishing equity in higher education means that all involved (not just student life staff) have a responsibility to actively create opportunities for connection. Professors can do this by building community in the classroom through the inclusion of synchronous sessions, structured small-group discussions, and an explicit focus on social identity.

It is easier to go to the people we know in setting committees, designing curricula, and facilitating class discussion. They might be more likely to affirm our ideas or work, we think. While personal affirmation and achievement might feel good, they are not the goals of higher education. Personal affirmation and individual achievement are not indicators of excellent teaching. White cisgendered educators often fall into the trap of calling upon those who feel familiar, look familiar, and sound familiar for validation because we can. By and large, higher education remains White-dominant in the United States.

Showing up means doing the necessary inner work and making a tangible, concrete, daily investment in community-building. This is easier said than done. As White educators, we need to remind ourselves that our own avoidance tactics reveal more about who we are than about the situation at hand or our students. This means we cannot be afraid to ask questions or say something if an injustice has occurred, and we must create opportunities for our students to do the same. Instead of constructing committees in ways that minimize conflict, we need to participate in authentic dialogue across and within difference. Instead of complaining about being overworked and undervalued, White educators need to share resources and let others lead.

## Conclusion

Sometimes, White cisgendered people are quick to dismiss ideas on the grounds that they are too much work, require too many resources, and would take too much time. The trauma we encounter in the classroom and in our communities demands much of us. Yet, White cisgendered educators cannot be so fearful of change that we never begin. Perfection is not expected nor is it needed right now.

Watching the latest vlogs, listening to podcasts, downloading training programs, or running a certain pace may guide and inform my training, it does not make me a runner. I am runner because I lace up my sneakers, step out the front door, and run. As an educator, you have what you need to begin and you are not alone. The real question is: when are going to lace up your sneakers and step out the front door?

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## **Trauma-informed Pedagogy of Courage, Connection, and Celebration: Using the Narrative Exercise of the “Tree of Life”**

AHyun Lee, Wesley Seminary at Indiana Wesleyan University

In this article, I focus on the narrative exercise of the “tree of life,” which I facilitate in the course “Pastoral Care and Counseling in Intercultural Contexts.” This course is offered for students who seek their career as a pastoral caregiver, a pastoral counselor, or as a professional clinical counselor. This course has learning objectives that acknowledge human experiences cannot be separated from cultural, historical, and intergenerational trauma because of wars, colonialization, slavery, immigration, etc. At the same time, this classroom becomes the experimental space of self-awareness, where students acknowledge how they have been influenced by their trauma. Students develop an individual cultural competency to engage with empathic listening and a caring presence to the complexity of trauma of each human person's unique blend of race, class, gender, age, spirituality, religious belief, ability, sexual orientation, life experience, national/regional identity, and power differential.

Learning and teaching intercultural pastoral care and counseling is the ongoing reflective process of forming and reforming who a pastoral caregiver is with people in the time of crisis and trauma. My relationship with students often becomes a hypothetical therapeutic relationship where we both seek healing, growth, and transformation by realizing individual and collective trauma and resisting re-traumatization, and by responding and recognizing the presence of strength and resilience.

### **Teaching Strategy**

I design my course of intercultural pastoral care and counseling based on a trauma-informed pedagogical approach with three key values: courage, connection, and celebration.

Creating a safe space is essential preparation. My teaching strategy begins with deconstructing the myth of the classroom as a safe space and promoting the safe space as a brave space. It involves a movement from being secure to vulnerable, protected or guarded to curious, and persuasive or intellectual to ambiguous and emotional. Students need to be open and decide to create a safe space with courage; the classroom becomes a brave space where they hold each other's scars and wounds while creating a safe learning community. It becomes the foundation where students can explore the prevalence of trauma individually and collectively and empower the presence of strength and resilience. I invite students to join in reading the poem “An

Invitation to Brave Space," by Micky ScottBey Jones at the end of the first class.<sup>1</sup> This activity helps students prepare to open themselves and increase their ability for self-regulation and self-efficacy.

Based on the shared commitment to creating a safe space with courage, I invite students to experience the connection in small- or whole-group discussions where students develop their listening skills. The discussions in this course include difficult topics such as racism, the objectification of women's bodies, intersectionality, whiteness, or interconnected oppression. For example, the discussion about race can allow students to share their experiences with race, racial identity, and ethnicity and understand why racism is a traumatic experience. Students can learn how to listen and to be listened to by sharing their experiences and appreciating the raw emotions of others. Rather than suppressing anger, listening practices in the discussion allow students to embrace raw emotions when they come up, address the psychological significance to be aware of those emotions, and to connect to each other by sharing unifying and liberating experiences.

Each listening practice becomes a powerful way to connect with the traumatic experiences of others and build up the learning community. It provides opportunities for students to form individual and collective wisdom to regulate stress by narrating their traumatic experiences and by recognizing different coping skills while fostering support systems with classmates. Students experience the acceptance with nonjudgement and without prejudice or bias by intentionally creating a safe space with courage. They increase the sense of community and relational connection. Listening practices in small and group discussions become a small trauma-informed care community where students practice collaboration and develop their resilience from trauma through relational connections and a sense of belonging toward inner and collective growth.

I have found students experience solidarity and bonding as a result of this exercise. Students begin to understand themselves as allies and advocates for each other. They learn to recognize how people bring their strength and resilience into the pastoral care relationship and not to pathologize people with the problem-based assessment. They also put knowledge and theoretical concepts of cultural studies into counseling practices by engaging in courageous cultural conversations. Further, they begin to resist problematic narratives of retraumatization by drawing from cultural resiliency and connecting to the collective healing wisdom of each other.

Then, a trauma-informed pedagogy shouldn't dismiss the importance of celebration. A teacher and students need to affirm and appreciate that they have worked together to build the learning community. This leads students to increase their growth and capacity to understand themselves in positive ways. Also, their collaboration and empowerment within the learning community needs to be celebrated in the classroom. It is crucial to have visual documentation of celebrations for people who recovered from traumatic experiences and restored their sense of self by improving their health, wellness, and flourishing with their strengths and resilience.

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<sup>1</sup> Micky ScottBey Jones & The People's Supper Samily, *Collective Care in the Face of Violent Trauma*, June 2017, 6, [https://episcopalchurch.org/files/documents/collective\\_care.pdf](https://episcopalchurch.org/files/documents/collective_care.pdf), (Accessed September 5, 2020).

I use the narrative exercise of the “tree of life” to create the visual documents for celebration. This exercise is to honor students' collaborative works building up the learning community in the last class. This exercise reaffirms the student's voice, choice, and agency for resisting and responding to trauma in intercultural contexts. At the same time, students share their future accountability extending their works as a pastoral caregiver toward social justice for the community. They share the commitment of empowerment and collaboration.

Here is the guideline for this class activity with the “tree of life.” Imagine drawing a picture of a large tree. This visual metaphor of a tree represents the individual's life and the various elements that make it up—past, present, and future throughout this course. It includes the roots, the ground, tree trunk, branches, leaves, fruit or flowers, and storms or bugs. Each student draws their tree based on this guideline about where they have grown and transformed.

1. Roots are a metaphor for where you are from, who impacted your choice to take this course, when you decided to be a pastoral counselor, etc.
2. The ground is a metaphor for writing on the course topics and concepts for each lesson.
3. The trunk symbolizes your skills and abilities as a pastoral caregiver. You write the values at the base of the trunk going up, transitioning into listing your skills with cultural competency learned through the course. This illustrates the growth as a pastoral caregiver in intercultural context during the course from roots to values to skills.
4. Branches represent your hope. In the course introduction, you shared the reason you chose this course. At the end of this course, you list your learning outcomes, which give a glimpse of what you have learned and achieved.
5. Leaves symbolize who helps you grow and what comments or feedback inspired your learning process.
6. Fruits or flowers reflect the specific next step you are planning to take as a result of this course.
7. Storms or bugs illustrate the moments you feel intense or uncomfortable and what have you taken and reflected on from those moments.

Each student draws their tree of life before the last class and brings it back to the class. There, students share their stories of the process of learning, the learning achievement, and the next steps they take from the course. Then, the trees the students drew are displayed on the board. After all the students have completed the exercise, there are many trees that illustrate a forest symbolizing the learning community.

In the virtual setting, a teacher can use different approaches. One way is to use a Prezi program. I ask to upload them to the online course systems. Then, I collect and use a Prezi program which is effective in visualizing each tree and all trees like a forest. The other is to use a Zoom setting. Each student shares their tree drawing on the screen, and all students show their trees on the screen and take a group picture with all trees.



This class exercise helps a teacher to offer trauma-informed care, which allows students to exercise and regain their strengths and agency to choose which story they like to share while creating a learning narrative in the present. This exercise provides the safe place with courage where they can talk about their struggles and pains, and where they are not retraumatized, but rather feel connected, healed, and empowered as the author of their stories for recovery and transformation.

## Background and Theory

There are two reasons I chose the narrative exercise of the tree of life for trauma-informed teaching and learning in theological education and religious studies. First, this narrative exercise has proved useful and helpful to provide trauma-informed care and is used in a wide range of countries across Africa, and also in Australia, Brazil, Canada, Russia, Nepal, the United States, and elsewhere. The narrative exercise of the tree of life<sup>2</sup> was co-created through a partnership between REPSSI in Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Dulwich Centre Foundation in Adelaide, Australia.<sup>3</sup> It is grounded on the narrative therapy theory developed by David Denborough and Michael White at Dulwich Centre Foundation. Ncazelo Ncube, a child psychologist, and David Denborough, one of the founders of narrative therapy theory, initially develop this tree of life exercise. The purpose of this exercise is to help colleagues who work with children who are affected by HIV/AIDS and experienced the traumatic loss of their parents.

This exercise has served various populations in many different contexts, including people with traumatic experiences of immigration or refugee status; children within Indigenous communities; communities that suffered natural disasters; young people who have been expelled from school; and children who have been subject to domestic violence, neglect, physical or emotional abuse within their families.

Secondly, narrative therapy theory places emphasis on strength and the agency of people's stories, not focusing on the problem. It underlines how people tell their stories and whose stories shape people's identity. Through making a choice which story a person likes to share, they experience a sense of agency to resist retraumatizing experiences. A narrative therapeutic approach helps students externalize their problems, not only their inner struggles but also the outside structural and cultural challenges. People seek to create their preferred stories about themselves and find the meaning and value of their stories. People are the experts of their own life stories and have the agency to lead to positive change and transformation.

The narrative therapeutic approach emphasizes the process of meaning-making and creating alternative narratives with positive change. It relies on the value of who a person is and what a person wants to become. When a person experiences trauma and feels disempowered by the threat of trauma, they engage in emotional, behavioral, cognitive, developmental, and social/interpersonal survival psychological reactions. Traumatic stress and anxiety bring a sense

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<sup>2</sup> David Denborough, *Collective Narrative Practice: Responding to Individuals, Groups, and Communities Who have Experienced Trauma* (Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications, 2008), 71–98.

<sup>3</sup> Regional Psychosocial Support Initiatives (REPSSI), <https://repssi.org/>.

of loss, including a loss of agency, a loss of relational intimacy, a loss of social functions, a loss of a profound sense of power, etc. Prolonged traumatic experiences increase the risk of mental health issues. It affects the sense of being, the sense of others, and the sense of the community and the world. The narrative exercise, a tree of life, is used to restore a more accurate and positive self-narrative. Students create a positive future picture of themselves and their relationship with others. Also, it affirms a communal narrative with collective wisdom as a support system in the learning community. It can be modified to any general education course, not only for PhD students who work at integrating theoretical research and cultural anthropology, but for an undergraduate who wants to improve their health and wellness, live their life with agency, and flourish with their full potentiality.

### **Conclusions and Extensions**

In sum, a trauma-informed pedagogical approach with the tree of life exercise is about underlining three core values of courage, connection, and celebration. Creating a safe space with courage is the foundation for recognizing the signs and symptoms of trauma, regulating stress and anxiety and resisting retraumatization. So, students and a professor can navigate the process of recovery and healing by learning from and with each other. A trauma-informed pedagogical approach is about restoring and recovering relational connections. Having a sense of connection leads students to learn different coping skills from each other and establish support systems as the resources of the collective wisdom. Lastly, a trauma-informed pedagogy shouldn't dismiss the importance of celebration. A teacher and students need to affirm and appreciate that they have worked together to build the learning community. This leads students to increase their growth and capacity to understand themselves in positive ways. Also, celebration reveals their collaboration and empowerment.

A trauma-informed pedagogy helps students to extend their identity by becoming allies and advocates for each other, empowering people by enhancing an agency toward cultural and social transformation for social justice and collaborating to remove barriers and promoting accessibility to resources and power with choices. When a teacher and students appreciate a trauma-informed learning process, the classroom becomes sacred where students and I experience mutuality with a sense of dignity and equity as we engage each one's trauma with the radical action of love through listening to and being listened to, and learning from and with each other for healing while transforming ourselves, others, and the community.

### **Select Recommended Resources**

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## **Fostering Collaboration and Agency in an Antiracist, Trauma-Informed Classroom: Creating Community Learning Agreements through Reflective Practice**

Ryan Rideau, Tufts University

I began my current position as the associate director for teaching, learning, and inclusion at the Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching at Tufts University in 2018. As I began this position, I met with several faculty members across the campus to learn about their experiences and ways I could support their work. One of the common concerns I heard was the need for faculty to find a space to talk with others about the challenges of teaching courses on race and racism in predominantly White classrooms. Some of these challenges included discussing race and racism in a manner that acknowledges the potential experiences of racial trauma for BIPOC students, and navigating the reality that many White students often lack experience and are uncomfortable talking about race and racism. In an attempt to address the concerns of the faculty members I met with, I convened a faculty learning community for instructors who taught courses that centered race and racism. This was an opportunity for participants to build upon their collective wisdom to brainstorm solutions and resources to address these challenges in their own courses. Throughout our conversations, we identified a common assumption that underlined all of our pedagogy: students' experiential knowledge was essential to learning. However, we recognized that for students to share their experiential knowledge in these courses, we needed to foster an antiracist, trauma-informed, and empowering shared learning environment. But this type of environment will not occur on its own. As such, we spent significant time discussing how to lay the groundwork for this to happen.

Religious studies classroom can be particular sites of racial trauma for students. Whether it is discussing Islamophobia in a world religions course or examining the role of religion in colonization and empire, there are a myriad of topics and discussions that could be sources of trauma and re-traumatization for students. As such, when teaching religious studies courses, the process of creating community-learning agreements can be a beginning step toward fostering an antiracist and trauma-informed learning environment. Community-learning agreements are collective values for how all members of the learning environment can support each other's learning. If done in a truly collaborative manner, creating community-learning agreements can be an important part of fostering a trauma-informed classroom by allowing students to determine the conditions for their interactions with each other and how they engage

with course content.<sup>1</sup> It is about students indicating what is needed for them to be able to bring their “full selves” to the learning environment. But if done incorrectly, creating community-learning agreements can lead to re-traumatization for students through a reproduction of dominant forms of oppression. For example, a particular challenge to creating community-learning agreements in classrooms where the majority of students are White is that the final list of agreements may prioritize the safety of White students at the expense of BIPOC students.<sup>2</sup> I have seen this situation play out several times. It leads to BIPOC students feeling marginalized in the classroom and unwilling to share their experiential knowledge because they do not view the classroom as a supportive space. As such, faculty must be intentional and design a process for creating community-learning agreements that centers the empowerment of BIPOC students.

I recognize that community-learning agreements are frequently used as a pedagogical tool, particularly in discussion-heavy courses. But too often, these guidelines are either dictated from the instructor, or if they are student-generated, include broad, meaningless statements such as, “maintain respectful dialogue.” But to create an antiracist and trauma-informed learning environment, the process of creating community-learning agreements requires deep and rigorous reflection and collaboration. If not, students will revert back to generating superficial agreements that they have seen in other courses.

I suggest that the process of creating community-learning agreements begin with reflection. Prior to the start of the course (or on the first day of class), I encourage instructors to send students a set of four questions, asking them to reflect upon their social identities and knowledge of race and racism. These questions are as follows: What were you taught about race and racism? How often did you engage in conversations about race and racism growing up? How did your learning (or lack thereof) about race and racism relate to your own social identity? How do you think your experiences discussing race and racism may impact how you engage in this course? Students should write brief anonymous responses to these questions. In the instructions, instructors should make clear to students that they do not need to write any information that they do not feel comfortable sharing so as to not place a burden on students to reveal traumatic experiences. These reflective prompts draw students’ attention to consider the ways social identities impact lived realities and the types of knowledge they and their classmates bring to the course. Some students may struggle to answer these questions, particularly those who have not had to think about race and racism. However, I believe this is a useful exercise because it primes students who haven’t previously had to think about why they haven’t had to engage in these conversations. It also provides the instructor with information for how to best support students.

After students have completed this reflection, in the following class, it is important to debrief with students their thoughts about engaging in these reflective prompts. This provides a forum for

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<sup>1</sup> Shannon Davidson, *Trauma-informed Practices for Postsecondary Education: A Guide* (Education Northwest, 2017). Retrieved from <https://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/resources/trauma-informed-practices-postsecondary-508.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo, “Respect differences? Challenging the Common Guidelines in Social Justice Education,” *Democracy and Education* 22, no. 2, 1–10. Retrieved from <https://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol22/iss2/1>.

students to process the exercise with others. This debrief can be through open-ended prompts such as what new insights they gained from this reflection? Where did they struggle? Most important is that this process be open and flexible. Following the debrief, the instructor should share common themes and anonymous quotes from students' written responses to the reflective prompts. Providing an overview of responses serves three goals. First, it signals to students the importance of considering the learning needs of others in the course. Second, it highlights the active role students play in shaping the environment. Finally, from my experience, it is a way to have White students reflect upon their "White immunity," where they have been immune from having to think about race.<sup>3</sup> It has potential to demonstrate the limitations of their knowledge about race and racism and the need for them to listen to the voices of those with this experiential knowledge. If you as an instructor identify as White, this may also be an opportunity for you to share your experiences discussing race and racism, the ways you benefitted from White immunity, and the ways you push through your own discomfort in order to engage in antiracist practices.

After discussing and sharing the responses, the class can then move into the process of establishing community-learning agreements. Instructors have different processes for creating these agreements. I prefer creating community-learning agreements through a three-step process, where students move from individual reflection, to small groups conversations, to a large class discussion. First, students will be asked to individually write out agreements that they would like to see for the class. For each agreement, students should think through why this agreement is important and what it may look like in the classroom. Second, after students have written their ideas, they should move into groups of four to share their ideas. In these groups, each student shares their agreements and why they believe each agreement is necessary. As a collective, group members will reflect upon each agreement in relation to the following questions: Does this agreement support learning? Is the agreement precise in its language so that everyone is clear about its meaning? Are there instances where the agreement may hinder learning? Are there ways that the agreement may silence individuals from minoritized identities? The purpose of these questions is to have students think about how each agreement will support student learning and to consider if it is reifying dominant discourses of race and racism that center whiteness at the expense of minoritized populations.<sup>4</sup>

Continuing in small groups, students should then decide if they think each agreement is worth adding to the final list. If there is some disagreement about adding an agreement, students work together to make amendments to suit their needs. However, students should be responsible for handling disagreements in any manner they choose, so long as it is consistent with the goals for the course. This is to provide them with an initial guide and model for how they can work together to support each other in future conversations.

Finally, after each group comes up with their list of agreements, this process is repeated as a large class. A student from each small group will share with the class their agreements and a

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<sup>3</sup> Nolan L. Cabrera, "White immunity: Working through Some of the Pedagogical Pitfalls of 'Privilege'," *JCSORE* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2017), 77–90. [doi:10.15763/issn.2642-2387.2017.3.1.77-90](https://doi.org/10.15763/issn.2642-2387.2017.3.1.77-90).

<sup>4</sup> Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2014.

rationale for why each agreement is important. Students then work through each agreement as a collective, reflecting upon the same prompts as those in the small groups, and ultimately coming up with an initial list of agreements. Throughout this process, one student in the class should be responsible for typing each agreement into a comprehensive list. This list should then be posted to the learning management system and shared with all students.

After these agreements are posted, students should reflect upon them overnight. Instructors should also provide an optional electronic form for students to submit any anonymous comments about the in-class process of creating the agreements. While students can submit any comments they choose, because students are given freedom in small groups, this is primarily a space for students to indicate if there was a particularly traumatic or problematic encounter that they experienced in groups.

In the next class session, students will have the opportunity to voice any outstanding concerns about the agreements. If there is a new disagreement, students will discuss that agreement again as a class and make a final decision about it. Once there are no concerns, students will sign a printed copy of the list of agreements. At the end of this process, students will have a final list of agreements and a structure for how to engage with each other in the course that they collaboratively created. This should be a living document and subject to revision at any point throughout the semester as the needs of students change. This is important, because as students' experiences change over the course of the semester, it will be important to adapt to their evolving needs.

This process takes a great deal of time. In my experience, it takes about two hours of class time. It can take more if students are particularly passionate about certain agreements. Sometimes, students can become frustrated by the length of time it takes for this process. Despite the time involved, I believe this process is well worth pursuing. It prioritizes the classroom as a community of care. It is an antiracist practice by focusing on the potential needs of BIPOC and other marginalized students. Additionally, through constant reflection, it prompts students to consider ways to decenter whiteness. This is also a trauma-informed practice by initiating a collaborative process where students who have experienced racial trauma have agency in shaping the learning environment in a manner that is beneficial and supportive of their learning and well-being. Finally, this process initiates a way for students to build relationships with one another, a key element to supporting student learning. So, while this exercise takes considerable time, it has tangible benefits for students' success in the course.

Learning science has taught us that cognition and emotion are inextricably linked.<sup>5</sup> Our experiences and feelings impact our ability to learn. Across the world, we are grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic. In the United States, we simultaneously continue to witness the death and harm of Black people through police violence. Our students are entering our classrooms with increased anxieties, fears, and trauma. In my work at Tufts at the Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching, one of the common mistakes I have seen from instructors is ignoring these issues. Ignoring them will not make your students anxiety go away or even support their

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<sup>5</sup> Sarah Rose Cavanagh, *The Spark of Learning: Energizing the College Classroom with the Science of Emotion*, (Morgantown, West Virginia: West Virginia University Press, 2016).

learning. I am not suggesting you assume the role of a therapist. In fact, I strongly discourage this. But in our teaching practices, we need to acknowledge the role that trauma plays in our students lives and develop a pedagogy that is cognizant of the lived experiences and emotions of our students. Instructors cannot be so caught up on “delivering content” that little time is spent on shaping the environment for learning. The process I outlined above for creating community-learning agreements through reflective practice is one tactic for how to do this. This approach will not work for everyone or in every course. In fact, I recognize that this process is far from perfect, and I continue to modify and make changes as necessary. However, I encourage faculty to experiment with what works for them to bring trauma-informed principles into their courses. This will indicate a level of care for our students to help them thrive inside and outside of our courses.

### Select Recommended Resources

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## Breathing | Being | Praying Meditations: The Generative Possibilities of the Arts

Yohana Agra Junker, Claremont School of Theology

As I write this piece, most of us have spent 2020 attempting to mitigate the effects of a global pandemic and its ensuing consequences. Nothing about this experience has been stable, predictable, or encouraging. We have been attempting to adapt to a fast-changing reality that has been overwhelming, disrupting, and marked by so much loss and grief. Students and teachers have begun to populate virtual learning spaces with bodies that are carrying an overlay of stories, experiences, memories—and trauma. From personal losses, to grief, to struggles to remain alive, to catastrophic environmental collapses, the brutality of white supremacy and anti-Black racism, the effects of settler-colonial extractivism and capitalism, the rise of anti-immigration populism, so much is circulating our bodies right now. As adrienne maree brown puts it, “the crisis is everywhere, massive massive massive. And we are small.”<sup>1</sup> She argues that if we begin with small actions and connections, we might be able to transform the crisis of our time.

Sonali Sangeeta Balajee argues that we are at a societal juncture in which the integration of trauma-informed work, power analyses, healing, the arts, and embodied belonging is most urgent.<sup>2</sup> In her essay “An Evolutionary Roadmap for Belonging and Co-Liberation,” she proposes a framework for addressing our urgencies and angsts through small actions and connections: by constructing spaces of belonging rooted in *love*, *stillness*, *beholding*, and *becoming*. Through the work of *love*, we are able to cultivate affection and openness as ways of expanding care for our bodies, communities, and land. Through the practice of *stillness*, we can begin to slow down our nervous systems—sustaining our capacity to be whole as we continue to do the work of disassembling the massive, massive crises we are living through. By *beholding* we can begin to expand our small circles of care into larger ones. Capitalism and supremacy cannot take root in decolonial spaces where deep witnessing exists. This exchange of deep, intimate regard allows us to identify where violence circulates, where power is hidden and misused to exterminate, to other, and to exclude. Small practices of *becoming* also support emergence, mutuality, an orientation towards creative wonder.

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<sup>1</sup> adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Sonali Sangeeta Balajee, “An Evolutionary Roadmap for Belonging and Co-Liberation,” in *Othering and Belonging Institute*, August 2018, <http://www.otheringandbelonging.org/evolutionary-roadmap-belonging-co-liberation/>.

Our bodies have, indeed, experienced too much, too fast, and too soon this past year. And I ask myself how much the design of classes and pedagogies could benefit from engaging with Balajee's framework as an attempt to respond to the profound and collective shifts, disempowerment, and trauma that COVID-19 has imparted on us. How might we incorporate experiences of presence, love, stillness, witnessing, and becoming in our classes? Perhaps, a first important step would be to acknowledge that many of us are dealing with experiences of helplessness, anxiety, withdrawal, grief, and preoccupation. In short, we are metabolizing trauma. We are dealing with fear, anxiety, various forms of material and spiritual insecurities. And by choosing to employ trauma-informed pedagogies we can begin to design learning spaces premised on regard and beholding, even in the face of continued pandemic, white supremacy, militarism, anti-Black violence, war, and elections. A trauma-informed approach would not only affirm that suffering, pain, and distress are proliferating among us but would also seek to actively mitigate and address these realities.

In *Pedagogy of the Heart*, Paulo Freire reflected deeply on his experience with trauma. Brazil's coup d'état in 1964 forced Freire into exile for several years. In this book, he describes his longing to return to his places of belonging, of affection, of regard, and of becoming. Finding stillness in his writing after the expulsion from his homeland, he understood trauma as having deep implications in people's ways of being, becoming, sensing, and moving in the world. To Freire, trauma needs to be deeply felt, acknowledged, and suffered—it is not just an intellectual process, it is an embodied one.<sup>3</sup> For him, one of the ways to process social-historic trauma is to undergo a process of individual and collective *conscientização*. In doing so, we become keenly aware of the ways systems of oppression affect us while becoming implicated in each other's co-liberation through an exercise of presence, solidarity, and communion. Both Freire and Balajee acknowledge the challenge of experiencing various forms of oppression and trauma. Continued exposure to abuse and violence wounds us deeply. Tending to the ways in which these traumas interact and show up in our communities and classrooms is a way to design learning experiences that take seriously the impact these realities have on our *bodyspiritplacetimes*, as Patrisia Gonzalez puts it.<sup>4</sup> As Resma Manakeem points out, our bodies and brains have this great capacity to learn, undergo transformation, to grow, and to heal. "While trauma can inhibit or block this capacity," he writes, "once trauma has been addressed, growth and positive change can become possible again."<sup>5</sup> Just as trauma and viruses spread, so too can affection, regard, and presence.

Though Freire wrote to process his trauma, it is difficult to articulate it through word alone. And because of art's power to evoke, create, and reveal various patterns, thoughts, and meanings, I have found the act of drawing to be incredibly helpful in elaborating anxieties that emerge from the various threats to my existence. In my classes, besides required readings, I have also woven into the curriculum a compendium of sources such as poetry, podcasts, documentaries,

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<sup>3</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Heart* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 67.

<sup>4</sup> Patrisia Gonzales, *Red Medicine: Traditional Indigenous Rites of Birthing and Healing* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2012), xix.

<sup>5</sup> Resma Manakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press, 2017), 55.

and the visual arts in an attempt to co-create more expansive and generative learning experiences. These pedagogical choices lean more into instability and unlearning, affirming embodied educational spaces that resist “the worst muck of racialized, ableist heterocapital” settler-colonialism, as Alexis Pauline Gumbs names it, while being aware of how our bodies responds to exhaustion, heartaches, and indignation. These works remind us of our inherent capacity to be at once “problematic and prophetic.”<sup>6</sup>

Art has a tremendous power to connect, reverberate, disclose to us that which is hidden in our interior recesses in embodied, striking, and visceral ways. It can help us educate our affections, as Freire puts it, while inspiring us to resist, heal, connect, conjure, and tend to all our relations. The visual arts, in particular, are generative tools for speculative imagination, for integration of embodied and intellectual knowledge. It is a site for world-making, for dreaming, rehearsing, and choreographing new possibilities of being and intervening in the world. When we immerse ourselves in acts of drawing, we sometimes access the visceral, the somatic life of the body, its reflexes, limits, intuition, responses, desires, and needs.

This has become evident in the art series I created entitled Breathing | Being | Praying meditations. This was my attempt to become more keenly aware of the dimension of the trauma, grief, and angst I experienced due to COVID-19. Throughout several months of 2020, I invited co-learners and co-teachers to share this practice in various contexts: from graduate seminars at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, to workshops given through the Instituto Rubem Alves in Brazil, to online worship spaces in Argentina, Brazil, and Southern United States, to the Divine Wisdom Festival organized by Dra. Lis Valle, Assistant Professor of Homiletics at McCormick Theological Seminary, to the Center for Whole Communities. The meditative drawing exercise—or doodle therapy as some have called it—is an earnest attempt to be in touch with the cadence of our breaths, to excavate sensations within our bodies that are often unnoticed or sublimated. This exercise is also an attempt to en flesh feelings, to delineate the contours of our angst, the rhythm of our compassion.

We begin by finding a quiet enough space where we can draw, breathe, and be. We light a candle and breathe in and out as deeply as we can, repeating it until we feel ready to begin the drawing. We then identify a sensation, a thought, an emotion that is transpiring into our awareness, one that seems most urgent, most pressing. As a particular sensation or thought crystalizes, we write a word that gestures toward it on the center of the page. As we breathe in, we draw a line from one end of the page to the next, without judgement or a plan. We simply follow the direction our hands are wanting to go. As we breathe out, we draw another line on the paper. In this swelling and emptying of our lungs and chest, the movement of lines, the sound of pen to paper, we are able to sense and name that moment’s most urgent needs, the desires of our spirit, our body-prayers. We check in with our bodies. How does it feel? Is it activated? Is it tense? Does it feel grounded? As the air moves in and out, we sense the energy activating our bodies. And as we inhale and exhale deeply and widely, lines begin to fill the page and they tell us things of which we may not have been aware: our current patterns of being and breathing,

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<sup>6</sup> Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2020), 2.

our worries, burdens, and griefs—our heart frequencies. And we find ourselves right here, right now, present to the insurmountable complexity of the world’s suffering and our own—one breath deeper.

At the end of this guided practice, participants have reported being able to release anxiety, nervousness, and discomfort, name their angst, and what at once seemed formless and inaccessible became unclouded and surmountable. Many expressed being able to breathe more expansively, leading to an experience of wholeness, integration, and a sense of tranquility. By returning to our bodies, our sensations, our breath, and connection to our *bodyspiritplacetime*, we are able to create sacred moments of presence and witness little pockets of emergence, however small. As Lara Medina explains, these practices are like medicine that awaken our consciousness in order to sustain our well-being. It is “medicine that leads us to our inner refuge,” so as “to simply be.”<sup>7</sup>

Reflection, meditation, and contemplation are fundamental in co-creating communities of presence, belonging, liberation, and regard. And drawing practices such as the Breathing | Being | Praying meditations have a profound ability to put us in touch with a creative impulse, to offer us insights into our own interiorities, and to move us spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually. By externalizing and giving shape to sensations that are often suppressed, we are able to activate and exercise presence, stillness, beholding, and becoming. In doing so, we are also gaining access to an awareness of how traumatic events have impacted our flesh. As we draw, our hands obey nonverbal commands, which, according to Gantt and Tinnin, are influenced by unconscious and nonverbal intention as much as by conscious will.<sup>8</sup> The hand, in some ways, remembers what our intellect forgets.

This pandemic, the ensuing uprisings, the incapacity of governments to decently respond to the population’s most pressing needs interrupted our lives in unimaginable ways. We haven’t really recovered or adequately processed much of what happened in 2020. Perhaps, by breathing, being, praying, and drawing we may create spaces for presence, for deep witnessing, and for deep regard.

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<sup>7</sup> Lara Medina and Martha R. Gonzales, *Voices from the Ancestors: Xicanx and Latinx Spiritual Expressions and Healing Practices*, (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2019), 225.

<sup>8</sup> As cited by Paula Howie in “Art Therapy with Trauma,” in David E. Gussak and Marcia L. Rosal, eds., *The Wiley Handbook of Art Therapy* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 378.

## Critical Reflection Ensuing from Traumatic Events and Ideology Critique

Ella Johnson, St. Ambrose University

I have been teaching theology for around ten years now—first in a graduate setting, and now predominately in an undergraduate setting. Like my respected mentors and colleagues have modeled for me and taught me to do, I have worked to be critically self-reflective on my pedagogy. In the last few years especially, though, I have noticed a new and emerging pattern in my critical reflection: it becomes all-encompassing, far-reaching, and urgent during national and global traumatic events.

I vividly remember questioning and rethinking nearly all of my pedagogical assumptions and practices after the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown. The cycle continued after the 2016 presidential election and then again after Hurricane Maria in 2017, the Pittsburgh Synagogue Shooting and the Ford-Kavanaugh sexual assault hearings in 2018, ongoing reports of the clergy sex-abuse scandal, the Flint water crisis, and increased ICE raids. Presently, in 2020, the multiple pandemics of COVID-19, continuing and increased exposure to police brutality of Black and Brown people, and the increasing rate of poverty and unemployment seem to have forced every educator worth their salt to rethink their pedagogical assumptions and practices.

Of course, our students have been disoriented by these tragic and traumatic events as well. They came to the classroom in the fall of 2020 either virtually or, if in person, wearing masks and sitting at least six feet apart from their peers and professors. Many of my students also entered the fall semester on the heels of protesting publicly at Black Lives Matter rallies throughout the summer. My students of color report being more exhausted than ever by the ever-present target on their backs. Students, too, are critically rethinking the systems by which they have been formed and informed.

### Critical Reflection on Pedagogy and Ideology Critique: Background and Theory

The call for educational practitioners to be critically self-reflective is fairly well known. This is in large part due to the work of pedagogical theorists, such as Stephen Brookfield, who have challenged educators to routinely assess and hone our teaching practices. Indeed, since the beginning of my teaching career around ten years ago, I have been encouraged by mentors to reflect critically on my teaching through the four lenses Brookfield identifies: (1) students' eyes, (2) colleagues' perceptions, (3) personal experience, and (4) theory.<sup>1</sup> For example, I have been taught to regularly distribute Brookfield's "Critical Incident Questionnaire" (CIQ), which appears

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Brookfield, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* (San-Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995).

at the end of this article, to my students in order to reflect on my pedagogy through their eyes. I have learned that promotion and tenure procedures require annual visits to my classroom by my department chair, which provides me with my colleagues' perceptions of my teaching. I have received a lot of anecdotal advice about personal experience—e.g., “it takes three semesters of teaching the same class to really do it well.” And I have been told to read at least two new books each year on pedagogical theory.

However, the traumatic events in the last few years, especially those I listed above, have led me to think about critical reflection differently. Specifically, regarding the tragedies of 2016 through 2018, I remember reflecting on my pedagogy through the first and third of Brookfield's lenses and feeling it necessary to name national and local traumatic events in class. I would mention the tragedy at the beginning of class and give students space to talk about it as well, but then I moved on to the daily lesson plan.

Moving on to our regularly scheduled lesson plan after a quick period in class in which I acknowledged the tragedy or traumatic event felt necessary. But it also felt odd and disjointed, and I wasn't sure what else to do.

On the one hand, I had learned about “disorienting dilemmas” from educational theorist, Jack Mezirow.<sup>2</sup> So, I knew that these traumatic events can lead us to question our previously held beliefs and assumptions. It, therefore, felt wrong to expect students to keep scaffolding new concepts onto previously built cognitive frameworks that might, in fact, be crumbling.

On the other hand, I felt unqualified to teach about anything besides “systematic theology,” because that was the only subject in which I held a doctorate degree. I also had a responsibility to the course description and objectives; that is, to teach students about the theological methods and theories in which I have been trained. So, if I wanted to teach about anything that engaged in social or racial justice (which I desperately did), I would need to go back and get another PhD—this time in critical race theory.

Like so many others, the tragic events of 2020 have disoriented me to a point which I can only describe as being “shaken to the core.” The shootings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Jacob Blake, and so many other Black and Brown persons seemed to disorient many of us White professors, including me, to the point of realizing that we no longer have the privilege to *not* teach about racism—PhD in critical race studies, or otherwise.

With the tragedies of 2020, the fourth of Brookfield's lenses—i.e., theory—has become the most important lens for my and my students' critical reflection. In particular, learning about his own theory of ideology critique has helped me to let go of my previous belief that I need to be an expert to teach about racial and social justice. On the contrary, because every field of study has been effected by social inequity, every field of study needs to engage in ideology critique.

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<sup>2</sup> Jack Mezirow, *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2000).

## Teaching Students Ideology Critique

In the last few years, I have consciously decided to incorporate into my syllabi an opportunity for critical reflection ensuing from the traumatic events. I knew that if the integration of this piece into my course was to be effective and more than just a superficial mention of the tragedy, I'd need to connect the critical reflection with course content in a way that is responsible for the methods and objectives about which I am hired to teach (i.e., Catholic Systematic Theology). One of the most effective strategies I've tried has been to design a writing assignment based on Stephen Brookfield's theory of "ideology critique."

In short, Brookfield defines ideology critique as "part learning process, part civic action"; it "focuses on helping people come to an awareness of how capitalism, White Supremacy, patriarchy, ableism, heterosexism and other ideologies shape beliefs and practices that justify and maintain economic and political inequity."<sup>3</sup> As Brookfield describes it, ideology critique is helpful tool for framing discussions about the unjust beliefs and assumption that dictate the unequal ways in which society is organized: "(1) that apparently open, Western democracies are actually highly unequal societies in which economic inequity, racism and class discrimination are empirical realities; (2) that the way this state of affairs is reproduced as seeming to be normal, natural and inevitable (thereby heading off potential challenges to the system) is through the dissemination of dominant ideology; and (3) that critical theory attempts to understand this state of affairs as a prelude to changing it."<sup>4</sup>

As I understand and use his theory, the ubiquitous and dominant nature of unjust ideologies like racism demands that every subject area question its foundational assumptions in order to pave the way for real and lasting societal change. Assignments designed to teach ideology critique also help us model that habit of mind with our students and lets them practice it as well. In one of my introductory theology courses, for example, I have adopted the theory in an assignment designed for students to write a critical evaluation of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) most recent document on race, "Open Wide Our Hearts: A Pastoral Letter Against Racism," issued in 2018. In order to prepare students for the assignment, we spend a few class sessions analyzing the social realities of racism and white privilege, based on the work of scholars like Ibram X. Kendhi and Robin DiAngelo. We then turn to a Catholic theological perspective written by Bryan Massingale, a Black Roman Catholic moral theologian and priest, who also has recently come out as gay. I have students read Massingale's critique of prior USCCB documents and list both the substantial deficits and limitations that he identifies. To do this, they read a chapter from his groundbreaking book, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, which was published in 2010, eight years prior to when the most recent "Open Wide Our Hearts" document was written. Then, in their written assignment, I ask the students to apply Massingale's critiques of the prior USCCB documents to their own analysis of the current one.

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Brookfield, "The Concept of Critical Reflection: Promises and Contradictions," *European Journal of Social Work*, 12.3 (September 2009): 298-299.

<sup>4</sup> Brookfield, "The Concept of Critical Reflection: Promises and Contradictions," 298.

This assignment has been effective for a number of reasons. First, it allows students the chance to explore how racism has been embedded not just in economics and politics, but also in religion—something of which they are not always aware. In particular, they often identify how even a theological document that denounces racism is itself entangled with assumptions based in patriarchy, heterosexism, and White Supremacy. For instance, many times students remark on how the USCCB document is written by a predominately White group of people, all of whom are men. In recent student papers, two different students made this critique and bolstered it by mentioning how the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus (NBCCC) approved a statement in April of 1968 that described the Catholic Church as a “white racist institution.”

Second, it often leads students to see how theology and religion have the opportunity as ideologies to promote civic action, as was the case with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s religious convictions, but also how they can also be problematic—particularly if they promote reconciliation without justice. For example, a recent student’s paper made this critique by remarking on the 2018 USCCB document “Open Wide Our Hearts” in this way:

The violence of law enforcers is brought up early in the text and by the end it gets lost in the translation. This last document starts off strong but in the end reflects their past work. An example of not giving a bigger picture plan begins on page 23 where they claim, “To work at ending racism, we need to engage the world and encounter others—to see, maybe for the first time, those who are on the peripheries of our own limited view.” Broadening horizons is always a good sign, but in the long run this act will not rid the world of an entire system that oppresses minorities. One’s view that has been instilled in them since childhood will simply not go away because they begin interacting with others they usually wouldn’t. Things are easier said than done and it shows immensely in the writings released by the USCCB.

In a similar critique, about the same document, another student wrote:

The Catholic Bishops think that racism will be overcome by education, dialogue, and moral persuasion. They think that if everyone is educated on racism that it’ll just magically disappear, but it’s not that simple. . . Racism has been with us for many, many years now and it’s deep in our roots. It’s not something you can change overnight by having a different mindset. I wish it were that easy, but unfortunately it’s not.

Both students are recognizing that racism goes beyond an individual’s acts, and that it is also a widespread and deeply entrenched, systemic issue. One of these students went further in their analysis and considered why the Bishops might not have promoted real systemic change in their document:

I think that the Bishops might be concerned with not crossing any boundaries and having too strong of an opinion that would align themselves with a certain political party. The idea that there needs to be a separation of church and state has been a saying for a long time and people believe that it is an important part in democracy. This concern is valid but I also think that the idea of all people having equal rights is not only a Catholic belief and should be a belief held by both political parties.



Finally, and here's where I hope the assignment is most effective: the assignment teaches students to begin to develop and adopt for themselves a process of ideology critique outside of the classroom. For instance after discussing the widespread issuing of #BLM statements by nearly every retail company, with no real call to action, one student made a similar critique of the 2018 USCCB document as the "church's feeble attempt to get ahead of a problem instead of being deemed as ignoring the problem."

When students are able to identify how racism has been shaped and maintained in other documents, beliefs and practices, including but not limited to religious ones, I know the assignment has accomplished its objective.

## Conclusions

What I've learned these past few years is that when we, professors, and our students are experiencing the disorienting dilemma of questioning everything we've ever known, which seems to happen after every tragedy and traumatic event, we are yearning for civic change rooted in ideology critique and reform. Ideology critique should always be present in any discipline, but tragic events make it feel more urgent. Both professors and students seem to crave an opportunity for it.

Therefore, in these days in which we cannot watch the daily news without witnessing traumatic events on the national and global scale, it has made sense to me to regularly structure into my classes assignments that allow students to engage in and develop an ideology critique. I no longer feel like I'm performing an obligation to mention the tragic event or offering a disjointed and awkward space for the students to process it. Nor am I trying to balance the demands of the course content for which I am responsible with the demands of the students and contemporary society begging for ideology critique. In nearly every class I teach, and I would think in every discipline, an assignment in which the students are asked to critically evaluate the unjust assumptions that undergird the field seems to be necessary and effective—especially in the aftermath of national and global tragedies and traumatic events.

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### **The Classroom Critical Incident Questionnaire**

Please take about five minutes to respond to the questions below about this weekend's class. Don't put your name on the form - your responses are anonymous. If nothing comes to mind for any of the questions just leave the space blank. At the next class we will share the group's responses with all of you. Thanks for taking the time to do this. What you write will help us make the class more responsive to your concerns.

At what moment in class this weekend did you feel most engaged with what was happening?

At what moment in class this weekend were you most distanced from what was happening?

What action that anyone (teacher or student) took this weekend did you find most affirming or helpful?

What action that anyone took this weekend did you find most puzzling or confusing?

What about the class this weekend surprised you the most? (This could be about your own reactions to what went on, something that someone did, or anything else that occurs).

## In Defense of the Simple Writing Assignment

Liora Gubkin, California State University, Bakersfield

Practitioners of teaching in religious studies and theology are fortunate to have informal publications where we can look collectively and collaboratively at our pedagogical practices in close to real time. This seems especially pertinent now as many of us are teaching online, and many of our students are experiencing some form of trauma where our internal emotional and psychological resources are insufficient to respond to our external surroundings. But, as Crystal Silva-McCormick succinctly notes in her Wabash Center blog “Everything has Changed and Yet Nothing has Changed,” “Thanks to the pandemic, many in higher education are realizing what has always been true—that they must keep in mind the whole student while teaching.”<sup>1</sup> A blog entry by Mindy McGarrah Sharp published two years earlier provides a pedagogical strategy for responding to trauma as it manifests in a seminary classroom.<sup>2</sup> In what follows, I share a strategy I use in an undergraduate religious studies course on the Holocaust where traumatic subject matter and traumatized subjects collide. Three years ago, I developed an online version of “The Holocaust and Its Impact,” an upper-division general education course I had regularly taught face-to-face. I had the luxury of six months and a summer institute to reimagine the course, which had relied heavily on reading, reflection, and discussion for students to take on the subject position of engaged witnesses as they learned about this subject matter marked by trauma.

In my previous writing about the epistemological and ethical pedagogical challenges of traumatic knowledge, I concluded that “teaching for the engaged witness requires intentional focus on historical context, multiple subject positions, and issues of representation. The fourth essential component is space to express and analyze emotion as a source of knowledge.”<sup>3</sup> The online course uses quizzes and primary text analyses as assignments to meet the first three elements, but many students experience strong emotional responses to the course material and struggle with how to situate themselves in relation to this traumatic subject matter. Students also

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<sup>1</sup> Crystal Silva-McCormick, “Everything has Changed and Yet Nothing has Changed,” in Teaching and Learning During Crisis blog series, Wabash Center, May 4, 2020, <https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2020/05/everything-has-changed-and-yet-nothing-has-changed/>.

<sup>2</sup> Mindy McGarrah Sharp, “One-Layer Removed: A Pedagogical Strategy when Trauma Interrupts,” in Teaching and Traumatic Events blog series, Wabash Center, May 22, 2018, <https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2018/05/one-layer-removed-a-pedagogical-strategy-when-trauma-interrupts/>.

<sup>3</sup> Liora Gubkin, “From Empathetic Understanding to Engaged Witnessing: Encountering Trauma in the Holocaust Classroom,” *Teaching Theology & Religion* 18, no. 2 (April 2015), 116, <https://doi.org/10.1111/teth.12273>.

bring their own histories and experiences of trauma, named and unnamed, individual and collective, to the online space we share. In what follows, I focus on how short writing assignments strategically placed throughout the course allow students to recognize, name, and leverage as a source of knowledge the strong emotions that sometimes surface during the course. The knowledge pertains both to their relationship to the past and its impact upon them as a source of empowerment for the future.

### **Writing for Discovery**

While the online environment offers an enticing array of new tools and technologies for teaching, writing remains one of the most powerful tools at our disposal. Writing allows students to demonstrate what they know and to discover what they know, including discovery of the emotional aspects of their knowing. Putting pen to paper, or keyboard to screen, allows students to discover what they think and can create a space for professors and classmates to validate what students feel. The short writing assignments throughout this course have empowered students to synthesize thought and feeling into action, to give them some agency for coping with their strong emotions. “The Holocaust and Its Impact” is divided into five content units preceded by a brief introduction and final exam. Strategically placed throughout the course are three different types of writing assignments—journal, discussion board, and essay—that can help students identify trauma and position themselves in relation to it.

The course begins with a journal assignment. Students are asked why they are taking this course, and approximately ninety percent of the answers begin with some form of “to fill a general education requirement.” Students are then asked to consider what they already know about the Holocaust, what images it brings to mind, and what they want to learn in the course. The concluding instructions for the journal ask students to “think about which groups you and members of your family or ethnic group sometimes joke about or consider inferior.” This assignment serves several purposes. It invites students to move from a passive space of taking the course to fill a requirement to articulating their own learning goals. The journal can also alert me to potential connections students might have to the course material. One student wrote that he had just recently learned that his great-grandfather was a pastor in Germany in the 1930s and had a Jewish ex-wife. Another wrote about how his name was both Mexican and German and that he did not know how or why his German grandfather migrated to Mexico after World War II. A few students have reported connections through their Jewish heritage or communal identification. More often, students report a wide range of prejudices they encounter in family life and describe painful experiences of attempting to distance themselves from prejudicial discourse they witnessed or engaged in themselves. Regardless of what content is shared in this journal, students are told that knowledge is comprised of both the history they are studying and how it impacts them, whether that is in their emotional response or through their relationship to the world around them. In addition, they are told that their personal stories are relevant. While there is space later in the course for public writing, this assignment is shared just with me. My response to all students is to welcome them to the course and affirm that they have something important to contribute to our collective learning based on their previous experience.

Students write their second journal near the midpoint of the course. The writing prompt includes a quote from Orly Lubin's essay "Teaching Cinema, Teaching the Holocaust" where she notes that films about the Holocaust have potential to create "empathy, on the one hand, and the danger of creating numbness, disinterest, and loss of empathy on the other."<sup>4</sup> In the task of determining how films from the course have impacted them and how that compares to the impact of the reading, students have a space to reflect. Their responses can be deeply personal or more removed. I end the journal with the direct question: "How are you?" Many say "fine," or "fine, thanks for asking." Others will write about the difficulty of studying this material in relation to their lives, whether that is as a parent viewing the starvation of children, an immigrant learning how refugees were turned away, a DACA student anxious about their precarious status and fearful for their parents' safety, or a gay student still closeted to his parents. The journal allows students, to the extent they choose, to reflect on the emotional impact of material. Again, I reply individually and affirmatively to each student. I may also share mental health, immigration, or other wellness resources available at the university. In addition to responding to each student individually, I provide a collective snapshot to the class of the kinds of responses they submitted. The summary, given without names attached, is important as it helps normalize what some of them experience as isolated, intense emotions.

In units without a journal assignment, students post to discussion boards. These prompts ask them to respond to what they are learning about the past and to consider possible connections to the present. For example, in their unit on creating the Nazi state, students read about the practices that solidified insider and outsider status. After identifying those practices from the 1930s, students answer the question, "What similarities and differences do you see with the ways that we view and treat groups that are considered 'other' in the United States today?" Again, some students will position themselves more directly in relation to the material than others. The ability to do so without it being required provides a structured space in the course for engaging with personally relevant, emotional connections. Whereas one student wrote directly about her experience as an immigrant describing how "in the United States we treat those who are different or foreign as if they are at some sort of disadvantage," others are observers of discriminatory practices. Not surprisingly, current events that have sparked protest are often included in students' reflections. In summer 2019, for example, approximately 50% of the students focused their writing on the incarceration of immigrant children at the US-Mexico border. In 2020, a similar percentage of students wrote about police violence against Black Americans. In both cases, students were amazingly respectful of each other in their writing. In addition to sharing their distress, they also asked for opportunities to learn more.

### **Writing for Empowerment**

Other discussion board prompts are more open-ended. For example, in the unit on ghettos and resistance, students are asked to share "some of the most significant take-aways," and instructions conclude, "As you think about your post consider what did you find surprising,

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<sup>4</sup> Orly Lubin, "Teaching Cinema, Teaching the Holocaust," in *Teaching the Representation of the Holocaust*, eds. Marianne Hirsch and Irene Kacandes (New York, NY: Modern Language Association of America), 2004.

challenging, or heart-breaking? As a witness to this history, what is important for you to share with others?" This discussion board assignment invites students to create a narrative about their own experience and attribute meaning to their emotions. Through the process of writing and responding to peers, students begin to establish their agency as engaged witnesses. A caveat is required here. Although I have presented these assignments chronologically and, perhaps, overenthusiastically suggested that students move from discovery to empowerment, we know that trauma erupts unexpectedly and not by the calendar of assignments in the syllabus. Yet, this is all the more reason to have intentional spaces throughout the syllabus to support students in their emotional processes. At the conclusion of the course, students are asked to reflect back on the material that was presented throughout the course. The writing prompt concludes, "Based on what you have learned, what are two things you can personally do to confront indifference and hatred." Students who choose this final assignment (again, choice is important) often return to the material from the history they encountered that triggered a personal challenge for them. I have been inspired to witness how students are willing to be vulnerable and share their own histories and legacies of trauma, acknowledging both the differences from the history they are studying and their responsibility and willingness to teach about its relevance to the future. Some find power in committing to being kind; others in speaking out when a friend makes a racist joke; still others are ready to be change-makers and vision a new world into being.

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