

The Terrain of Whiteness By Rebecca Parker

Opening reflections:

- *If we understand this essay to be about the terrain of whiteness, what is it that Parker has learned about that terrain?*
- *What exactly is the “ignorance” created by Parker’s education into whiteness? What is the “stuff” of that ignorance?*
- *What is the stuff of ignorance that constitutes white congregations (so constituted as “white”)?*
- *What do you see as particularly lamentable or grievous in the white ignorance described by Parker?*
- *What allowed for the Awakening, Bodhi experience, for Parker? What specific elements were involved?*
- *Following Parker, what behaviors/actions would be necessary for you and your congregation to have an Awakening of the terrain of whiteness, a Bodhi experience?*
- *Comment on Parker’s assertion that, “Knowledge is never an individual achievement alone.” What are the implications for you and your congregation?*
- *Comment on Parker’s assertion that, “Ignorance is a precondition of violence.” What are the implications for you and your congregation?*
- *Following and being informed by Parker: What may your journey of re-education be? How shall you and the congregation move from misperception to realization? What steps shall you take to move beyond denial and disassociation?*

Part I

The Terrain of Here and Now

In 1976 I began a cross-country road trip, on my way to seminary. I traveled with a friend. We had time, so we decided to take back roads. One afternoon the road passed through rural western Pennsylvania. Late in the day, we came down through hill country into a valley. It had been raining hard, and as we neared a small town, we noticed blinking yellow lights warning of danger. We saw fields covered in standing water and passed several side roads blocked off with signs saying: Road Closed.

“Looks like they’ve had a flood here,” we said.

Coming into town, we crossed a bridge over a wide river. The water was high, muddy, flowing fast. Sandbags lined the roadway.

“Gosh,” we said, “They must have had quite a bit of high water to contend with here. Looks like it was a major flood!”

We headed out of town, following a winding country road, captivated by the evidence all around us that there had been a dramatic flood. Then we rounded a bend, and in front of us, a sheet of water covered the roadway. The water was rising fast, like a huge silver balloon being inflated before our eyes.

We stopped and started to turn the car around. The water was rising behind us as well. Suddenly we realized the flood hadn’t happened yesterday or last week. It was happening *here and now*. Dry ground was disappearing fast. We hurriedly clambered out of the car and scrambled to higher ground. Soaked to the bone, we huddled under a fir tree. No longer were we lodged in our familiar vehicle; the cold water of the storm poured down on us, baptizing us into the present – a present from which we

had been insulated by both our car and by our misjudgments about the country we were traveling through. (Parker 2003: 171-72)

This is what it is like to be white in America: It is to travel well ensconced in a secure vehicle; to see signs of what is happening in the world outside the compartment one is traveling in; and not to realize that these signs have any contemporary meaning. It is to be dislocated—to misjudge your location and to believe you are uninvolved and unaffected by what is happening in the world. (172)

To come of age in America as a white person is to be educated into ignorance. It is to be culturally shaped to not know and to not want to know the actual context in which you live. (172) ...By the time I came of age, neighborhood and church, economic patterns, cultural symbolism, theological doctrines, and public education had narrowed my awareness of the country I lived in to the point of ignorance. (173) ...I inhabited a white enclave that did not know and did not want to know the complex, multicultural history of the land in which I lived. The white-washed world ignored the violence and exploitation in my country's history, as well as the resistance, creativity, and multiform beauty of my country's peoples. (174)

Based on experiences of growing up white in the South, the experience of being “cultured” into whiteness, according to Lillian Smith (1949, *Killers of the Dream*), is the experience of being educated into fragmentation and denial:

They who so gravely taught me to split my body from my mind and both from my “soul” taught me also to split my conscience from my acts and Christianity from southern tradition. I learned [white racism] the way all of my southern people learn it: by closing door after door until one's mind and heart and conscience are blocked off from each other and from reality. Some learned to screen out all except the soft and the soothing; others denied even as they saw plainly, and heard.

The result of this closing-down process for whites, Smith says, is that “we are blocked from sensible contact with the world we live in.” (175)

Smith describes racism as a fragmentation of knowledge—a splitting of mind, body, and soul; neighbor from neighbor; disciplines of knowledge from disciplines of knowledge; and religion from politics. This fragmentation results in apathy, passivity, and compliance. (175)

Education into Whiteness

When I speak of the ignorance created by my education into whiteness, I am speaking of a loss of wholeness within myself and a concomitant segregation and fragmentation of culture that debilitates life for all of us. Who benefits from this fragmentation and alienation? Does anyone? What I know is that I do not benefit from this loss of my senses, this denial of what I have seen and felt, this cultural erasure of my actual neighbors, this loss of my country. I become, thus educated, less present to life, more cut-off, and less creative and living. Once I recognize it, this loss disturbs me deeply. It is precisely this loss that makes me a suitable, passive participant in social structures that I abhor. (175)

The moment my friend in Pennsylvania and I left our car and felt the rain falling on our bodies, soaking our skin, and had to exert ourselves to scramble to safety was a blessed moment – not because there is any virtue in danger, but because it was a moment when disoriented, alienated consciousness was interrupted. We became present to our environment. We ceased being passive observers or commentators. Our whole beings, bodies, minds, and senses became involved with the requirements of the situation. We arrived. We entered in. We left our compartment and inhabited the world. No

longer tourists passing through the country, we became part of the place along with everyone else that day, in that corner of western Pennsylvania, in that storm. (176)

I speak of this experience as an *Awakening* (*Bodhi* – Buddhist sense of clarity of understanding) because it was a conversion from distance to presence, from misconception to realization. It was an awakening to life, an advance into participation, and a birth into the world. (176)

This is the *Awakening* that is needed for those of us who are white Americans. We need to move from a place of passive, misconstrued observation about our country to a place of active, alert participation in our country. We need to recover our habitation and reconstruct our citizenship. (176 words modified)

The journey to the realm beyond the mythical Garden of Origins, the garden sanctioning innocence, ignorance, and lack of self-consciousness, begins with claiming forbidden knowledge. Because my education cultivated in me, and many others, an ignorance rather than a knowledge of my country's history and its peoples, I can begin to change things when I accept my power and responsibility to re-educate myself. (179-180 words modified)

Part II

Knowledge is never an individual achievement alone. It is constructed by communities of people; and its construction transforms communities. "Knowledge claims are secured by the social practices of a community of inquirers, rather than the purely mental activities of an individual subject." (180)

Ignorance is a precondition of violence. Once I as a "white" have been cultivated into ignorance of my society, its multiple cultures, their diverse gifts, and the history of cultural conflict and exploitation based on racial categorization, then I am easily passive in the face of racism's re-creation. But my ignorance is not mine alone. It is the ignorance of my cultural enclave. My search for remedial education, to come to know the larger reality of my country, is necessarily a struggle to transform my community's knowledge—not mine alone. As I gain more knowledge, I enter into a different community—a community of presence, awareness, responsibility, and consciousness. (180)

My community, in the largest sense, is my country, and I am trying to become a *citizen* of my country. To be a *citizen* is to experience with some measure of fullness the context in which one lives and to act in the context as a creative agent, a creative participant in a way that serves life. (186)

I have learned that as a white American, I must face the conflict that erupts between whites when compulsory fragmentation of knowledge begins to break down because remedial education has taken place. This engagement among whites needs to take place with directness, wisdom, and a sustained commitment to build a new communion not dependent upon violence. It involves a spiritual practice of nonviolence resistance and non-avoidance of conflict. (181)

Journey of Re-Education

To sustain the journey beyond the garden, those of us who are white must turn inward as well as outward. We must form a new relational capacity, less hindered by the fragmentation, silences, and splits in our souls. We must find the path that takes us beyond the narcissistic need to have People of Color approve of us, tell us we are good, or be the prophetic and moral compass that is absent from ourselves. (Parker 2003: 181)

The inner journey for whites involves learning to withdraw our negative and positive projections from People of Color. Whites must become relationally committed to meeting People of Color *as themselves*,

not as symbolic extensions of ourselves. To love more genuinely, whites need to do the internal work to recover and integrate the lost parts of ourselves—to find the silenced, suppressed, and fragmented aspects of our own being and to create internal hospitality to the fullness of our own lives. This work cannot be done by others *for* us. We must find an internal blessing, not seek a blessing from those we use to symbolize our loss and our shame. (182)

The soul work that whites need to do turns us to the sources of spiritual transformation that are transpersonal—to the presence of a deep reality of wholeness, connection, and grace that supports us beyond our brokenness and urges us toward a more daring communion. (182)

From Misperception to Realization

...To become an inhabitant of America, whites need to deconstruct the effect on our self-understanding of religious imagery that sanctions innocence and ignorance as holy states (as explained above). Moreover, an engaged presence is required. Racial injustice is perpetuated by the passive absence of whites who are numbly disengaged with the social realities of our time. Conversely, racial injustice will fail to thrive as more and more of us show up as present and engaged citizens. (Parker 2003; 182 words modified)

Racism is a form of cultural and economic violence that isolates and fragments human beings. Engaged presence counters violence by resisting its primary effect. As a white, the cure for my education into ignorance is remedial education. The cure for my fragmentation of self is hospitality to myself. The cure for my cultivation into passivity is renewed activism. Social activism becomes a spiritual practice by which I reclaim my humanity, and refuse to accept my cultivation into numbness and disengagement. (182)

A person of [conviction], seeking out of love and desire for life to inhabit his or her country, needs to be engaged in incarnational [embodied] social action. Activism returns one to the actual world as a participatory citizen and an agent of history. Through activism, compliant absence is transformed into engaged presence. ... The struggle for racial justice is a struggle to overcome the numbness, alienation, splitting, and absence of consciousness that characterize my life as a white and that enable me to unwittingly, even against my will, continue to replicate life-destroying activities of my society. It is a struggle to attain a different expression of human wholeness: one in which my inner life is grounded in a restored communion with the transpersonal source of grace and wholeness, and the primordial fact of the connectedness of all life. (183)

The struggle is imperative. Racial injustice is not only a tragedy that happened yesterday, whose aftereffects can be safely viewed from behind the glass windows of one's high-powered vehicle; racial injustice is currently mutating and re-creating itself. Its dehumanizing effects are harming hundreds and thousands of lives. (183)

Beyond Denial and Disassociation

This is my country. Love calls me beyond denial and disassociation. It is not enough to think of racism as a problem of "human relations," to be cured by me and others like me treating everyone fairly, with respect and without prejudice. Racism is more: It is a problem of segregated knowledge, mystification of facts, anesthetization of feeling, exploitation of people, and violence against the communion/community of our humanity. (184)

Rebecca Parker: 2003: All references of 2003 refer to Bowens-Wheatley & Jones, eds.
Soul Work: Anti-Racist Theologies in Dialogue, 2003 (Redaction: Margery Otto 2013)