Outdoing Dewey: Wise Provincialism, Critical Race Pedagogy, and Pragmatist Theologies of Hope
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Abstract: Dewey’s constructivist pedagogy is a powerful – but flawed – instrument for addressing racial difference. Like his argument for a “common faith,” it is too modernist and pays too little attention to key particularities. Josiah Royce’s “wise provincialism” offers a more workable alternative. In this paper, I engage Pragmatist approaches to Whiteness, Womanist pedagogy, and a Pragmatist theology of hope, to sketch a vision of undergraduate classroom practice in which students can claim and explore racial identity in healthy ways.

As US young adults come of age, they and their fellow North Americans grapple with serious disagreements over critical topics including economic sustainability, the choice between liberal democracy and the politics of illiberal tribalism, and – perhaps the most challenging – the ongoing challenge of race relations. Many of the approaches which young adults bring to these problems are intellectually dubious, and undermine the construction of healthy, democratic, liberation-oriented communities:

• “Everyone is entitled to their opinion, as long as they are not hurting anyone else” (which only begs the question, “What is injurious to me and to others?”).
• “I have discovered the one true answer (the Bible, the Qur’an, Ayn Rand, etc.): why can’t everyone see it as well?”
• “You are not Black / Female / Queer / White / etc.” or “I am the child of a police officer / from a hard-working middle-class family / etc.” – “I guess we just can’t see eye to eye.”

Dewey’s approach to “reconstructing experience” can be a powerful teaching tool in these situations; but on its own it only provides a partially effective approach. While Dewey’s analysis of individual experience, shared inquiry, and large-scale community politics is often rich and insightful, his approach to intermediate communities – the church, the local culture, the province, the race – lacks nuance and sophistication. (Roman Catholics might call this a deficiency in his
understanding of “subsidiarity.”) His fellow Pragmatist, Josiah Royce, however, addresses these communal dynamics in much greater detail. Royce’s proposal for developing a “wise provincialism” does what Dewey’s reconstructivist model does not: it offers a vision and a roadmap for constructing communities in which particular traditions are preserved, adapted, and integrated into larger, more universal social dynamics.

In this essay, I speak from the perspective of a White person seeking to use critical race theory for the liberation, humanization, and healing of all people: both the White “tribes of Europe”¹ and the peoples of the global majority. My primary goal is to transform Whiteness into an antiracist identity in ways that White people will embrace and employ. To this end, I employ Shannon Sullivan’s work, which takes Royce’s wise provincialism and applies it to critical race theory. Although the category “race” has no biological basis, it is real enough from a Pragmatist perspective: it has “a powerful impact on the habits and institutions that determine human interaction.”² Sullivan argues that the racial category of “Whiteness,” like healthy provincialism, must be cultivated by White people if we Whites hope to live in solidarity with peoples of the global majority.

Holding this all together for me is a foundational theology with strong links to the Process tradition but distinct enough from Whitehead’s theology to be recognizable to traditional Christians: a Classical Pragmatist theology rooted in the philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce. Pragmatist theology, like Pragmatist philosophy, directs our attention always back to evidence, to experimentation, and to concrete practice. As Sullivan notes,

If the question of how to transform whiteness cannot be answered in some practical detail – if it is not a difference that makes a difference – then [the project of reconstructing

Whiteness rather than erasing it altogether] would amount to a hopeful, but ultimately harmful abstraction that makes no difference in lived experience and that damages anti-racist movements.³

I close the essay by suggesting some specific frameworks and practices that can be used to help White students build healthy forms of intra-racial and inter-racial solidarity.

**Preliminary Reflections: On the Nature of Identity**

As I have worked to address and transform White identity, I have found it useful to clarify my own thinking about the dynamics of identity in general. My understanding of identity and identity formation is rooted in two traditions. The first is Classical American Pragmatism as it has been mediated by Charles Sanders Peirce, Josiah Royce, and the scholarship around “social construction of reality.” The second is my experience in Re-evaluation Counseling (also known as Co-Counseling), a grass-roots, liberation oriented, international peer-counseling community.⁴ Classical Pragmatism and Co-Counseling share several key premises: the power of habit; the reality of human qualities like resilience, creativity, intelligence; the reality of health, truth, and other human norms; the power of critical inquiry to ignite transformative practice. All these play a part in my understanding of human identity.

There are three key points here to consider: first, that identities are constructed; second, that identities have real effects; third, that identities can possess both neurotic and health-giving dimensions. These points are hardly groundbreaking, but they are worth underlining; when White people broach the topic of race, when guilt and other feelings start to fare, it becomes particularly important to remember our best thinking.

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To parse “identity,” I explore my own sense of what it means for me to be “Italian”. I was born in the US as the child of two Italian immigrants; my first language at home was my parents’ hometown Central Italian dialect; today I consider myself a “native” speaker of English – though I am still fluent in my hometown dialect (so long as conversation remains restricted to household matters and farmyard animals); I was brought up with Italian food, music, and family values; in my 20’s I applied for and received an Italian passport.

My Italian identity is constructed: it does not represent an unchanging “essence,” its boundary with other identities is neither sharp nor hard. As the child of Central Italians, am I “more” Italian than my friend from the southern island of Sicily? than my colleague from the Austro-Italian region of Tyrol in the north? Am I “less” Italian than my parents? My Italianness is a product of culture and nurture, even of the way others have treated me as an Italian (American). If I decided to “work on” my Italianness – say, to explore my persistent feelings that I am an outsider and to “clean up” their roots in my peasant, immigrant background – I would need to do (1) “own” my Italianness; (2) decide to transform those outsider feelings which presently seem such a “reflexive” and an integral part of my identity; (3) gather enough inner strength and outer resource to do so; and (4) work at – probably for a very long time. On the other hand, if I decided simply to suppress or reject these unwanted feelings, the repressed (as Freud notes) would most surely return – in ways that are less manageable, and probably even more ugly, than the identity as I currently hold it today.

Identities are habits. As Dewey says, a habit is
that kind of human activity which is influenced by prior activity and in that sense acquired: which contains within itself a certain ordering or systematization of minor elements of action; which is projective, dynamic in quality, ready for overt manifestation and which is operative in some subdued subordinate form even when not obviously dominating activity.”

Habits shape us, not least by organizing the world around us to make their repetition more routine and “normal.”

Like any habit, identity produces effects which are real, persistent, and self-reinforcing; as a deep-seated habit, identity is hard to transform. My Italian identity is inscribed on my mind and my body; it shapes the way that I think and express myself (language, accent, diction, habits of thought); it shapes how I move, what I value, how I perceive and execute style and taste (i.e., it is a social habitus). Especially when I was younger, before I entered the intelligentsia, it determined what resources were available to me, and what avenues were foreclosed; and the repercussions continue to shape my life and work even today.

Finally, my Italian identity has both health-giving and neurotic potential. Its salutary dimensions open up possibilities for action which is more richly expressive, more responsible, even more loving. I am proud of my Italian culture and sensibility: emotional expressiveness; ready shows of affection; love of good food and song; appreciation for extended family. These are by no means unique to Italians; but they are easily embraced (even normative) in Italian settings. I am proud of my Italian heritage. Though this heritage is mainly imagined (“Italy” has only existed as a nation-state since 1861), my Italian identity allows me ready access to emotional connections with art, literature, history, and religion; it gives me heroes to emulate, object lessons in villainy to abjure, and other rich cultural tropes. Of course, I can develop deep appreciation for other cultures, just as others can fall in love with all things Italian; but exploring

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my “own” identity provides a compelling place to begin filling out my own humane development.

Along with these salutary dimensions of identity, there is a set of unhealthy and neurotic tendencies, as I’ve already suggested. Identity gone wrong can foreclose expression and loving commitment; it can instill irrational fears and rigidities; it can even lead to trauma, illness, and premature death.

**Race and Identity**

I have shown out how ethnicity demonstrates three points about identity in general: it is constructed; it has real effects; it can possess both neurotic and health-giving dimensions. I have suggested that it is unhealthy to reject one’s identity; that the better path is to own it, to identify and embrace its healthy dimensions, to locate and reform its neurotic, unhealthy components.

My argument is that, mutatis mutandis, this same framework applies to racial identities. It is not hard, for example, to imagine how non-White identities can be read in much the same way as Italian identity: historically and socially constructed; vaguely bounded; facilitating access to some resources, but not to others; capable of opening up possibilities for rich expression, cultural celebration, and loving action; marred by trauma, oppression, and complex neuroses; self-reinforcing but amenable to change.

It is more difficult to imagine the salutary dimensions of White identity, because White identity was born to benefit the beneficiaries of racist oppression. Books like *A People’s History of the United States* trace the construction of Whiteness as tool for “dividing and conquering”; the author, Howard Zinn, shows how elites used skin color to construct laws and mores that could rupture the solidarity between poor European-Americans and poor people of “color.” Like any distinction born to further oppression, White identity also harms and twists its own
“beneficiaries.” For immigrants like my parents, there were a clear set of bereavements associated with the process of “becoming” proper Whites in this country. As Terrance MacMullan notes, great “damage” was “done to those people who were convinced to break their ties to their past in order to better pass as white Americans.” He quotes the critical theorist Adrienne Rich:

The pressure to assimilate says different things to different people; change your name, your accent, your nose; straighten or dye your hair, stay in the closet; pretend the Pilgrims were your fathers; become baptized as a Christian, wear dangerously high heels, and starve yourself to look young, thin, and feminine; . . . value elite European culture above all others; laugh at jokes about your own people; don’t make trouble; defer to white men; . . . be ashamed of who you are.”

To Rich’s analysis, I add this imaginative passage by the modern fantasy writer, Lynn Flewelling. In her universe of sword and sorcery, the wicked god Seriamaius plays a prominent role:

[They] brought the worship of the Empty God back from somewhere over the seas. … [Human sacrifice.] all kinds of nasty ceremonies. [Seriamaius] was said to feed off the living energy of the world. He did grant uncanny powers to the faithful, but always at a terrible price. Still, there are always those who will seek such power, whatever the risk.

It is not too much to see Whiteness reflected in this fictional passage. In sketching the history of Seriamaius, Flewelling gives us a cipher for the guiding spirit of Whiteness – an ever-hungry, empty ethnicity made in the image of its soul-eating, false, Empty God.

White identity is more deeply problematic than most other ethnic racial and ethnic identities because Whiteness is so closely connected to domination and assimilation – both in its origins, and in the ways that it continues to function today. Those of us who are marked with a White identity find it difficult to undo the habits of Whiteness. The inscriptions of privilege,
pretense, guilt, and self-abjection cannot be erased by simply repressing or rejecting our White identities. We cannot escape race, because race is a habit and habits constitute the very stuff of the self.

Because habit is transactional, in a raced and racist world, the self necessarily will be racially constituted. Race is not a veneer lacquered over a nonracial core. It composes the very beings that humans are and the particular ways by which humans engage the world. In that sense, race is ontological. Like all habits, Whiteness is constructed, and for this reason it can be reconstructed: not simply with words, but with other habits. We White people can reconstruct our own Whiteness if we own it, decide to transform it, gather up tools and resources, and work on it for a long time.

**Dewey’s Reconstructivist Approach: In Need of Further Reconstruction**

As an American religious educator, and especially as an American Pragmatist, my first impulse is to look to John Dewey for insight in a project aimed toward the critical reconstruction of Whiteness. Reconstruction is a central theme in Dewey’s corpus, and a key element in the presentation of Dewey’s work to teachers in training. But Dewey’s work provides only the broadest outline for the work of reconstructing racial identity; indeed, some of the key themes in his work can undercut the work of reconstructing identities such as race and ethnicity (not to mention religion).

A recent textbook paints the following picture of Deweyan approaches to education. For Dewey, to learn is to “reconstruct” past information into new and creative solutions. True learning flows from the “Complete Act of Thought,” a version of the scientific method: encounter a problematic situation; identify the problem; search past experience and collective

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knowledge for relevant data; construct solutions; and test those solutions. The overall goal is to “grow”: to increase self-possession, coping capacity, and individuality.

Dewey believed that democratic schooling should introduce students to “past ideas, discoveries, and inventions,” that it should “encourage people to share their experiences, … [to] access their cultural heritage, and [to] learn [how] to use it” in order to meet present needs. For this reason, Dewey “oppos[ed] separat[ing] people from each other because of ethnicity, race, gender, or economic class.”

A key text frequently included in Dewey anthologies is Chapter Seven of *Democracy and Education*. There Dewey identifies two “criteria” that define a healthy, democratic society; first, developing a common goal or “interest;” second, “interacting and cooperating … with other groups”.

That savage tribes regard aliens and enemies as synonymous is not accidental. It springs from the fact that they have identified their experience with rigid adherence to their past customs., … [I]ntercourse with others might dissolve custom … [and] would certainly occasion reconstruction.”

A careful study of Dewey and of Deweyan scholarship can help us identify the deeper currents that move his thoughts about reconstruction, education, and cultural change.

For example, elsewhere in *Democracy and Education*, Dewey presents his “technical definition” of educational practice. Education “is that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience.” To reconstrucit is not to abandon previous ways of thinking, but to reshape them so that they work once more to meet exigent needs.

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12 Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 86.
13 Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 82.
Jim Garrison explains that for Dewey, we engage in reconstruction whenever we find ourselves in a disrupted situation. … These situations often arise when the existing cultural constructions fail an individual, a community of inquiry, or perhaps even the culture as a whole.”

Even habits as pernicious as racism must be “reconstructed” – albeit in radical ways. As MacMullen writes

unfit habits of action (whiteness, I will argue, being one example) cannot simply be jettisoned; they must instead be reconstructed into more fortuitous patterns that place people and communities in greater harmony internally, with each other, and their environment.”

But while Dewey puts great emphasis on reconstruction, he lacks the conceptual tools to detail the process of reconstructing group identity. There are at least two reasons for this shortfall: first, Dewey’s modernist-evolutionist tendencies in viewing human culture; second, his attention to the ways in which group identity can be the enemy of individual growth.

In his earlier writings, as Thomas Fallace has shown, Dewey expressed the belief that “all the communities and cultures of the world could be placed on a single continuum of social progress leading through the stages of savagery to barbarianism to civilization.” Fallace argues that Dewey’s views developed over time from this “linear historicism” to a more modernist instrumentalist outlook. In his later works, Dewey shows an appreciation of how cultural particulars can shape our possibilities and can more richly fund our experiments. In 1915, Dewey rejected “the theory of the melting pot”; arguing instead that American society should resemble an “orchestra” in which each “cultural section … maintain[ed] its distinctive literary and artistic

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traditions … in order that it might have the more to contribute to others.”\textsuperscript{17} But in 1916 and 1918, he also insisted that “it is the business of the school environment” to “transmit and conserve” only what “make[s] for a better future society”, to “eliminate … dead wood from the past,”\textsuperscript{18} and to undo the “antisocial … isolation” and “exclusiveness” of “gangs,” “cliques,” “nationalities,” “churches,” “cultural traditions” and other identity groups.\textsuperscript{19} In his late works on religion (\textit{A Common Faith}, 1934; “One Current Religious Problem,” 1936), Dewey criticized those who cling to a parochial religious viewpoint and advocates the reconstruction of religiosity in a universalist vein. He called for a kind of common spirituality in which people draw from different cultural sources – religious, artistic, literary, scientific, and so on.

So Dewey wants to use cultural diversity, but he says little about supporting the survival of particular cultures. This lack of attention is linked to a second, unresolved issue in Dewey’s thinking: the tendency to see individuality and inherited group identity as discontinuous. While Dewey insists that all of reality is continuous, he tends to see individuality and certain types identity as strongly opposed. As Ana Martínez Alemán explains, Dewey was adamant that “restrict[ing] individual contribution to the common project and the common good by a “prior principle” such as “family and birth or race and color or family or possession of material wealth” … infuse[s] democracy with an illiberal authoritarianism [which] is contradictory to “the democratic faith in equality.””

\textsuperscript{18} Dewey, \textit{Democracy and Education}, 24.
Beyond Dewey: Communal Dynamics according to Royce

Teachers and activists who intend to reconstruct Whiteness instead of abolishing it must reach beyond the limited toolbox and unresolved frameworks that Dewey offers. To pursue Dewey’s project of reconstruction in a way that preserves group identity, I turn to the writings of his older contemporary, the Pragmatist Josiah Royce.

Josiah Royce was born in 1855 in California, of a gold-rush family from the American East; he went on to teach philosophy at Harvard University from 1882 until his death in 1916. After 1900, he turned his attention to American Pragmatism and the philosophy of lived experience. His 1908 essay on “Provincialism” provides Pragmatist insights on the process of reconstructing group identity. I will use these insights to inform my reflections on the anti-racist reconstruction of White identity

Royce defines a province as a “domain” which is “sufficiently unified to have a true consciousness of its own unity, to feel a pride in its own ideals and customs, and to possess a sense of its distinction from other” regions of a nation.20 He goes on:

By the term ‘provincialism’ I shall mean, first, the tendency of such a province to possess its own customs and ideals; secondly, the totality of these customs and ideals themselves; and thirdly, the love and pride which leads the inhabitants of a province to cherish as their own these traditions, beliefs, and aspirations.21

Deeply influenced by the echoes of America’s Civil War,22 Royce draws a sharp distinction between regional factionalism and healthy provincialism. Regional factionalism pits one part of the broader community against every other; but a healthy provincialism enriches and strengthens the larger nation or group. Royce condemns “the ancient narrowness from which small

21 Royce, “Provincialism,” 1069.
communities were so long struggling to escape” and calls for a “higher provincialism,” a “wise” or “wholesome provincialism” which is “loyally patriotic, and yet preserve[s] our consciousness of the peculiar and unique dignity of our own community.”

The wise province is “proud of its own traditions, not unwilling indeed to learn, but also quite ready to teach the stranger its own wisdom.” Royce identifies three main dangers or “evils” that such a wise provincialism can overcome. The first is lack of solidarity, which he attributes to geographic mobility: newcomers necessarily have little sense of history, values, culture and social networks that make up the new region in which they are settling. The second is assimilation: mass communications eliminate diversity, a key social resource, by homogenizing culture and crushing individuality. The third is “mob mentality”: the tendency of contemporary mass societies towards moral panics and irrational passions – what we might identify today as the precursors to fascism.

A wise provincialism cultivates both individuality and common local identity: “the province will not serve the nation best by forgetting itself, but by loyally emphasizing its own duty to the nation and therefore its right to attain and to cultivate its own unique wisdom.”

Specifically,

(1) wise provincials hold local pride as an ideal to be achieved (not as a present accomplishment to be vaunted);

(2) wise provincials “learn freely from abroad, but … insist upon our own interpretation of the common good,” or to put it another way, “Provincialism does not mean a lack of

23 Royce, “Provincialism,” 1070, 1074, 1084.
24 Royce, “Provincialism,” 1084.
26 Royce, “Provincialism,” 1076-1081.
27 Royce published “Provincialism” in 1908 and died in 1916; Benito Mussolini and his colleagues first began using the term “fascism” around 1915.
plasticity, an unteachable spirit; it means a determination to use the spiritual gifts that come to us from abroad in our own way and with reference to the ideals of our own social order.”

(3) wise provincials cultivate solidarity; they encourage people to bring new learning home – not just to up-skill and leave the community;
(4) wise provincials pay attention to nature and public space; they “let the province more and more seek its own adornment.”

These practices are honed and perfected through the comity of small group deliberation, taking as a model “a really successful town hall meeting in a comparatively small community.” With wise provincials, deliberation becomes a tradition and eventually a social institution that embodies the group’s collective wisdom (for example, a framework of religious or secular jurisprudence).

**Whiteness as a Form of Wise Provincialism**

Feminist philosopher Shannon Sullivan takes Royce’s wise provincialism and applies it to critical race theory: she argues that White people who hope to live in solidarity with the peoples of the global majority must cultivate and reconstruct their White identity in the same types of ways that wise provincials cultivate local identity.

Anti-racist Whites would certainly seek to avoid Royce’s first “evil” – disconnection, lack of solidarity. Sullivan argues that they can only do so by cultivating “conscious or deliberate

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29 Royce, “Provincialism,” 1086.
30 Royce, “Provincialism,” 1087.
31 Royce, “Provincialism,” 1080.
affiliation with their [own] whiteness.” Otherwise, “the meaning and effect of whiteness is left to happenstance,” or – what is more likely – determined by our ubiquitous and systemic racism. Unless White people choose to cultivate anti-racist forms of White identity, our Whiteness will take on racist structures and oppressive habits by default. Sullivan particularly calls on White people to teach our children a wise awareness of their own Whiteness. (Children are, after all, the quintessential “new arrivals” to any social and cultural scene).

Anti-racist Whites must also avoid Royce’s second “evil:” assimilation. Sullivan argues that White people who hope to work on anti-racist projects should resist the temptation to erase their own Whiteness, or the pull to assimilate their Whiteness to other identities. Whiteness is ensconced deeply within us, such that true “color-blindness” can only be pretense at this point in our history. Meanwhile, the Empty God remains devious, turning White people into hungry consumers and non-White identities into comestible products. Any modern identity that hopes to survive must resist the homogenizing dynamics of the market and of popular culture.

When applied to subaltern identities (regional, cultural, religious, even racial), the call to resist assimilation is welcome advice. When applied to Whiteness, it is the most dangerous of Royce’s counsels, because it echoes the fears stoked by racist White cultural politics: that the White race is under siege demographically, that it must fight tooth and nail for its cultural and politics to survive. But as Sullivan argues, “Royce’s advice that people should attempt to become more, rather than less self-conscious in their provincialism” applies even more to White people involved in anti-racist identity-building.  

Anti-racism requires anti-assimilation.

Given that distance from racial identification tends to be the covert modus operandi for contemporary forms of white privilege, white people who wish to fight racism need to become more intimately acquainted with their whiteness. Rather than ignore their whiteness, which allows unconscious habits of white privilege to proliferate unchecked,

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33 Sullivan, “Whiteness as Wise Provincialism,” 246; my emphasis.
white people need to bring their whiteness to as much conscious awareness as possible (while also realizing that complete self-transparency is never achievable) so that they can try to change what it means [to be white].

MacMullan puts it even more bluntly:

in a climate where more and more white people are dodging the issue of how we have benefited [and continue to benefit] from our whiteness, people who are now considered white need to affirm their whiteness as part of their democratic responsibility."

While it is not possible to erase our White privileges; it is possible to turn them to anti-racist advantage.

Finally, anti-racist Whites would seek to Royce’s third “evil” – mob mentality and moral panic. This evil might bring to mind images of Jim Crow and of race conflicts from the 1960’s (although recent right wing populisms across the “Western” democracies demonstrate that irrational outpourings of ethnic- and race-based feeling are hardly a thing of the past). For Sullivan, this is less about dodging fascism than about claiming individual reconstruction as a personal project. Identity for Royce (he would call it “individualism”) is a project: “Be and individual, he insists, “[b]ut for Heaven’s sake, set about the task.”

This kind of individual project is the first of the four tasks that Royce lays out for wise provincials; and it applies just as readily to the work of shaping a wise form of White identity: White “pride” must always be an ideal under critical scrutiny, always under watchful and thoughtful reconstruction.

The next two tasks that Royce lays out – commingling gratefully with others, and thoughtfully applying what we have borrowed to our own contexts – are particularly helpful in building anti-racist White identities. As Sullivan argues, White people should avoid the kinds of

36 MacMullan: Beyond the Pale”, 281 emphasis added.
segregation we have practiced in the past: “physically, mentally, economically, and even sexually isolating [ourselves] from people of color”. This means making conscious decisions to step out of our “comfort” zones and move towards real relationships with non-White people. For example, White people might consider a decision to make new friends who are – specifically – people of color. This is not to seek out token friendships, but to identify people of color with whom we might indeed share common interests or undertake common projects. These may be neighbors or colleagues; fellow churchgoers, fellow students, or fellow teachers. For many White people, waiting for such friendships with people of color to develop “organically” means allowing such opportunities to pass by, to wither away on the vine. This is, after all, the nature of racism: it creates a preponderance of structures, habits, and ostensible reasons for White people to avoid contact with members of “other” races who might be upsetting or somehow unsettling to us. In other words, White folks who wait for deep, meaningful friendships with non-White folks to develop organically, will likely be waiting a very long time. Being more proactive in cultivating non-White relationships means facing the discomfort that will inevitably come up, including the racists “foot-in-mouth” moments and all the other missteps that we Whites will inevitably make. It means taking the time to work on that discomfort with counselors, friends, colleagues, and mentors.

For Sullivan, Royce’s third task translates to learning gratefully from non-White people and cultures. This too is a worthy practice to incorporate into a reconstructed, anti-racist White practice. It is good for us to cultivate a kind of humility that celebrates non-White cultural achievements as exemplars of excellence from which White folks can only “watch and learn.” One danger with this kind of humility has already been mentioned: the temptation to reject

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Whiteness altogether in favor of the subaltern culture. Its twin danger is that of “appropriation” – meaning, resorting to acts of spying or of cultural “borrowing” that amount to unethical, uncompensated, or scantily compensated cultural theft. Royce’s vision of wise provincialism militates against both these dangers by highlighting the importance of solidarity (toward the fellow White person) and gratitude (toward the outside culture or person of color). A wise Whiteness directs us to apply what we learn to projects for the conversion and humanization of ourselves and our race-soaked White habits.

Royce’s final insistence is that a wise Provincialism pay attention to the “adornment” of homes, towns, cities, and natural settings. Sullivan applies this mandate spiritually and metaphorically (she says, “psychologically”) to adorning “the souls of white folks[, which] are fairly ugly and in need of beautification.” On this topic, she aptly quotes W.E.B. Du Bois, who was himself a student of Royce:

I see these souls undressed and from the back and side. I see the working of their entrails … as they preach and strut and shout and threaten, crouching as they clutch at rags of facts and fancies to hide their nakedness, they go twisting … ever stripped,—ugly, human.

But the dimension of provincialism that touches on local spaces also highlights the particular role that place must play in anti-racist White practice. It is difficult for White people to act with solidarity towards local communities (e.g., neighborhoods, classrooms), unless we decide to become aware of the racial histories and the racial dynamics involved in those places. As White people, we need to consider the habits, patterns, and social privileges that relate to our own Whiteness as it plays out in spaces where we work, live, learn and do sabbath. (After all, it is

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certainly true that people of the global majority take racial factors into consideration whenever *they* move in White dominated spaces.)

Royce reminds us that places do matter. How should I live out my Whiteness in this particular place and time? Each place has its own cultures and conflicts, its own stories and histories, its own heroes and villains. Thus it is often useful for White people to direct our attention to local heritage elements of our North American context. As Sullivan argues, forms of “hyphenated Whiteness” such as “lesbian-working-class-whiteness” or “Southern-woman-whiteness” can be valuable “sources of consciously felt unity, shared customs, and memory.”

The value of Royce’s wise provincialism is the way that it can encompass yet push beyond Dewey’s modernist, universal visions of human formation. A wise Provincialism redirects our attention to the dynamics of the local and the particular. Each region of anglophone North America has its history of racialization: its story of how dominant elites cultivated White racial consciousness by dividing poor “White” settlers, workers, and proletarians from indigenous peoples, “Blacks,” and other dispossessed peoples. Each region also has its stories of resistance to this divisive process: cross-racial romances, multi-racial resistance, and other acts of solidarity that crossed shifting yet ever hardening racial boundaries of the time. When and which of our “White” forebears understand themselves as being essentially, or primarily, “White”? On one level, it does not matter: *we* see them as we have been trained to see them: as “White” people like us, and thus as part of our usable history. Through critical study and creative interpretation, they can become for us anti-racist White heroes, or cautionary figures who could not escape from the ravages of racialization, or — probably most often — both.
Religious Educational Implications and Theological Groundings

Catie Cannon’s proposals for Womanist pedagogical practice illustrate how this kind of activism can shape religious and theological education. Cannon outlines three pillars of Womanist theological teaching: historical ethos, embodied pathos, and communal logos. By historical ethos, she means “historical memory as cultural resistance.” what is the heritage of Black women and other women of color as cultural heroes and liberationist teachers? By embodied pathos, she means structuring our teaching in ways that are concretely situated in the bodies, stories, and struggles of classroom participants: what can students learn from their own experience, while (with humility and gratitude) seeking also the wisdom of women of color? By communal logos, she means discussions that are “organized so that questions and answers are continually reformulated”: how do we practice critical social and ideological analysis not as “territory to be covered but with a compass” in our hands?42

Using Cannon’s pillars to shape syllabi and individual lessons would introduce powerful heroes and eye-opening perspectives to White and non-White students alike. For younger students, introducing non-White people and stories across all parts of the curriculum, and introducing heroes and stories of White anti-racism, can opens up powerful conversations and plant powerful seeds. Undergrads can take the historical ethos, embodied pathos, and communal logos of Womanist subject matter and teaching even further in writing, projects, and conversation. In mixed race settings, allowing White and non-White students to reflect and write privately on these topics (journaling, free writing, conversations with the teacher through short

42 Canon, “Pedagogical Praxis,” 325.
and long essays) can give White students the space to start owning, sorting, and reconstructing their White identities.

How to ground this approach to anti-racist practice and theological education? What kind of vision can keep such anti-racist reconstruction moving forward? A pragmatist theology of hope, evidence, and experimentation would be congruent with this kind of pedagogy. As Anette Ejsing argues, a Classical Pragmatist theology rooted in the philosophy of C.S. Peirce identifies hope as an integral part of human thinking and human experimentation.\textsuperscript{43} We would not seek knowledge, wisdom, or practical skill unless we had some hope of actually finding them; and that hope is based on a history of finding something of what we have sought; receiving something of what we have asked; entering into something where we have knocked.

This is a pragmatic theology, not a transcendental one. Transcendental arguments establish what \textit{must} be true in light of the structures of human thought and understanding. Pragmatist arguments suggest what \textit{may} be true: true to the evidence, and true to the best hopes, values, and dreams of participants. The hope that a new, anti-racist Whiteness can be constructed must be rooted in evidence, and such evidence already exists: for example, in diligently negotiated relationships of interracial friendships and family units, in the work of anti-racist womanist/feminist scholars,\textsuperscript{44} and in the ongoing anti-racist work of communities like Re-Evaluation counseling.

My reflections on identity in the first part of this article are drawn from my own experience as a co-counselor. As religious educators, we need to “research” these kinds of data and make them accessible to our students. We do this by surfaced and sharing stories of racial

reconstruction with all of our students, and we do this with White students in particular by inviting them to take the first steps toward owning, sorting through, and making distinctions between the healthy and the twisted elements of their (our) own White heritage and identities.
Bibliography


