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**A Visit to “The Clearing” and “Warrior Falls”:
In Search of “Brave and Beyond” Spaces for Religious Education**

ABSTRACT

This paper will employ the fictional scenes of “The Clearing” from Toni Morrison’s novel, *Beloved* and “Warrior Falls” from the movie, *Black Panther*, co-written and directed by Ryan Coogler as primary sources for my engagement of the question: “How can religious educators learn from those who have been marginalized and whose voices are not usually heard because of the hegemony of whiteness?” I will also use implications from these two scenes to interrogate the concepts of brave and beyond spaces.

What shall I tell my dear ones raised in a white world
A place where white has been made to represent
All that is good and pure and fine and decent.
Where clouds are white, and dolls, and heaven
Surely is a white, white place with angels
Robed in white, and cotton candy and ice cream
And milk and ruffled Sunday dresses
And dream houses and long sleek Cadillacs
And angel's food is white...all, all...white.¹

I. INTRODUCTION

Early attempts at teaching Christianity to African peoples forcibly transported to the United States and indigenous peoples already existing on the land foreshadowed how the teaching of the Bible and Christian faith would become almost inextricably bound with racism, white supremacy, and marginalization of non-white peoples. The June 16, 1854 edition of William Lloyd Garrison's newspaper, *The Liberator*, included an excerpt from *The Southern Episcopalian* news monthly entitled, "A Catechism for Slaves." The excerpt contained the following:

Who gave you a master and a mistress?
God gave them to me.
Who says that you must obey them?:
God says that I must.
What book tells you these things?
The Bible.

These practices of equating whiteness with God set a precedent for sacralizing white normativity that continues to plague Religious Education in less covert, but nonetheless, insidious ways.

This paper aims to contribute to an ongoing conversation about intentionally working toward the field of Religious Education becoming an emancipatory space for teaching and learning in light of the deleterious impact white normativity has had on the field, implicitly and explicitly. It is primarily informed by the cultural productions of two Black creatives from literature and popular culture whose work is grounded in the voices, history, experiences, and imaginations of Black peoples in the U.S. and the African diaspora. Specifically, I examine the "Clearing" scene in Toni Morrison's 1987 Pulitzer prize-winning fiction novel, *Beloved* and the "Warrior Falls" scenes in *Black Panther*, a 2018 records-breaking Marvel comics film co-written and directed by Ryan Coogler. Both scenes model approaches that center Blackness in order to address concerns and realities that confront the Black peoples in their fictional story worlds. I will use implications from these two artistic expressions to inform my engagement of the question: "How can religious educators learn from those who have been marginalized and whose voices are not usually heard because of the hegemony of whiteness?" Additionally, the

¹ Margaret G.T. Burroughs, "What Shall I Tell My Children Who are Black (Reflections of an African American Mother)," *Poetry Foundation*. Accessed August 22, 2018, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/146263/what-shall-i-tell-my-children-who-are-black-reflections-of-an-african-american-mother>.

explication of these scenes assists in problematizing the concepts of “beyond” and “brave” spaces in relationship to de-centering white normativity in religious education.

II. SACRALIZING WHITE NORMATIVITY

One of my most formative religious education lessons came from images that were prominent fixtures in my Christian faith formation from childhood through adolescence in the 60s and 70s in the U.S. South. These images appeared in my home, in the predominantly Black churches I attended, and in many of the homes of my Black family and friends. One was a depiction of a white Jesus adorned with immaculately-groomed shoulder-length blond hair, a mustache, a beard and brown eyes, a white tunic and looking upward. It appeared in wall portraits and in Sunday School materials.² The second image was a composite picture of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., President John F. Kennedy, and a white Jesus. For many Blacks in the South, this image represented a cultural holy trinity. Often it could be found in family homes. Sometimes it was imprinted on the front of handheld cardboard fans available in Black funeral homes and/or in pew pockets alongside Bibles and hymnals in Black churches. There were no formal teachings related to these images. In fact, no one ever said anything about them. They were normalized and authorized by their prevalence in the most sacred and formative spaces for me, i.e., in churches and in family homes. These images subliminally informed my early theological foundation by teaching me that: Jesus/God is white, i.e., 1) Jesus/God does not look like me and 2) There was no need to explain or debate the validity of these depictions because depictions of a white Jesus was a capital “T” truth. Amazingly, many Blacks were able to uphold divine whiteness as an unspoken norm in spite of their participation in social protests against white hegemony and their insistence on a divine mandate for liberation.

The sacralizing and centering of white normativity in religious education demands continuous vigilance even though some progress has been made. Promising strides toward de-marginalizing Blackness in religious education were made in the late 20th century by Black religious educators like Olivia P. Stokes and Grant S. Shockley. They helped to extend the impact of the Black Theology movement into denominational and congregational infrastructures by advocating its privileging of African and U.S. Black history, identity, culture, and theological perspectives as well as its insistence on the connection between Christian faith and social justice engagement. Further evidence of some movement away from centering whiteness can be seen in the diversification of images for humans in mainline denominational Sunday school curricula. However, even though publishing companies have diversified human images in some of their materials, they have not matched that with movement away from theological stances that do not link teachings about Christian discipleship to social justice for the people of color now featured in their resources. In terms of Black religious education, Almeda M. Wright’s research on selected sermons by Black preachers and the Sunday school curricula being used in some Black churches suggests that religious “mis-education” continues. She found that the majority of the examined materials communicated theologically conservative perspectives with little advocacy

² Cf. “Head of Christ” painting by Warner Sallman (1940). Accessed August 15, 2081, <https://www.anderson.edu/warner-sallman/collection/head-of-christ>.

for social justice engagement.³ Finally, there has been even less progress related to the whitening of divinity.⁴ For instance, Charles R. Foster describes the negative responses *Upper Room* received when it published Joe Cauchi's depiction of a Black Jesus blessing children on the cover of its 1983 devotional.⁵

In the academic arena, Black religious education faculty and their colleagues in other fields have written about the resistance they experience in their classrooms in predominantly white institutions when their students' assumptions of white normativity encountered their Black bodies, their syllabi that included and/or prioritized Black sources, and their more relational pedagogies.⁶ Nancy Lynne Westfield and Arthur L. Pressley note the particular challenges faced in teaching about God to Black students in these contexts: "What does it mean for a Black student to learn about issues of faith, theology, and leadership in a white institution?"⁷ Elsewhere, Westfield discusses the additional work of "re-humanizing" herself as a Black woman faculty person.

Racism works to truncate the imagination of the racist person. It thwarts the human spirit's yearning to know and develop meaningful relationships with persons who would be strangers...I have come to understand that an effective teaching strategy when the racism and sexism is thick is to find ways to expand the narrative about Black women in the knowing of my students.⁸

This paper's turn to literature and film created by Blacks as legitimate resources for Religious Education research continues in the path of the scholarship of Black religious educators who have written about the impediments caused by the centering of white normativity in the field and whose scholarship has proven the value of research that foregrounds the realities and concerns of Black people.

III. THE CLEARING

I have never lived, nor has any of us, in a world in which race did not matter. Such a world, one free of racial hierarchy, is usually imagined or described as dreamscape — Edenesque, utopian, so remote are the possibilities of its achievement. From Martin

³ Almeda M. Wright, "Mis-education, A Recurring Theme?: Transforming Black Religious & Theological Education," in *Religious Education*, 112, no. 1: 66-79.

⁴ One exception is Urban Ministries, Inc. It was founded in 1970 with a mission to produce Christian education resources specifically for "African American churches and individuals seeking a Christ-centered perspective on faith and life issues." Accessed on September 10, 2018, <https://urbanministries.com/our-story/>.

⁵ Charles R. Foster, *From Generation to Generation: The Adaptive Challenge of Mainline Protestant Education in Forming Faith* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 64.

⁶ Nancy Lynne Westfield, ed. *Being Black, Teaching Black: Politics and Pedagogy in Religious Studies* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008).

⁷ Westfield and Arthur L. Pressley, "Teaching Black: God-Talk with Black Thinkers," in *Being Black, Teaching Black: Politics and Pedagogy in Religious Studies* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), 139.

⁸ Westfield, "A Strategy to Re-Humanize," *Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion, Teaching, Religion, Politics Blog*, February 16, 2016, accessed September 10, 2018, <https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2016/02/a-strategy-to-re-humanize/>.

Luther King's hopeful language, to Doris Lessing's four-gated city, to Jean Toomer's "American," the race-free world has been posited as ideal, millennial, a condition possible only if accompanied by the Messiah or situated in a protected preserve — a wilderness park.⁹

Toni Morrison situates *Beloved* within 19th century slavery in the U.S. south. She writes about Black life within this white hegemonic system, paying special attention to Black women's experiences, Blackness, freedom, wholeness, and community. Morrison wrote the novel after reading about the true story of Margaret Garner, a young Black mother who escaped slavery in 1856. When Garner was later captured, she tried to prevent the re-enslavement of her children by attempting to kill them. One child died. The novel is Morrison's attempt to address "what 'free' could possibly mean to women."¹⁰ She recreates Garner in her protagonist, Sethe. She also gives voice to the murdered Garner child through the character Beloved, a reincarnated form of the daughter Sethe murdered when she also tried to resist her children being returned to slavery. The novel begins nine years after Sethe has killed her child. She has settled in Ohio with her freed mother-in-law, Baby Suggs holy, her two sons and her surviving daughter. In order to grasp the power of the Clearing scene, one must stand in the horror of this indefensible history of human enslavement and the "marrow weariness" it induces in the enslaved.¹¹

The character Sethe mentally escapes her present by recalling the Clearing. The Clearing is a hidden, yet visible gathering place in the woods of the Sweet Home Plantation where Sethe and other Blacks were enslaved. Apparently, the whites who owned Sweet Home had not ventured into this area of their land or if they had, they did not deem it worthy of their attention. It was a seemingly barren lot of land, not yet claimed or commodified by its owners. But it was claimed by the enslaved Black community as a site for their clandestine Saturday afternoon gatherings. The Clearing in *Beloved* functions much like the historical hush arbors where enslaved Blacks would "slip off in de woods in de old slave days on Sunday evening way down in de swamps to sing and pray to our liking" to beseech God "for dis day of freedom" and plead "dat if we don't live to see it, do please let our chillun live to see a better day and be free."¹²

In the Clearing scene, Baby Suggs holy presides over a congregation of Black women, men, and children broken by enslavement. Having earned the community's respect as elder, healer, and griot, she stands regally in the Clearing to teach and preach. Her body is bent, but her spirit has not been broken yet. In her Sweet Home days, she was a hopeful, resilient, defiant woman who possessed "no title of honor before her name, but allowing a small caress after it, she became an unchurched preacher...Uncalled, unrobed, unanointed, she let her great heart beat

⁹ Toni Morrison, "Home" in *The House That Race Built: Original Essays by Toni Morrison, Angela Y. Davis, Cornel West, and Others on Black Americans and Politics in America Today*. ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 3.

¹⁰ Toni Morrison, *Beloved: A Novel*, 1st Vintage International ed. (New York: Vintage International, 2004), xvi.

¹¹ Morrison, *Beloved*, 212.

¹² From excerpted interview with Alice Sewell in *Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk About Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Emancipation*. eds. Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller (New York: New York Press, 1988), 205.

in their presence.”¹³ She invoked the Spirit to usher her co-sojourners into her presence. There, she exhorted them to love their body parts. The dominating narrative of the slaveholders negated their humanity. But the counternarrative that Baby Suggs holy proclaimed instructed them otherwise. She believed that her teachings about self-love could resuscitate her people from the suffocating chokehold of slavery.

“Here,” she said, “in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it... This flesh I’m talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved... More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize.” Saying no more, she stood up then and danced with her twisted hip the rest of what her heart had to say while the others opened their mouths and gave her the music. Long notes held until the four-part harmony was perfect enough for their deeply loved flesh.¹⁴

Baby Suggs holy transformed the Clearing into a communal intergenerational worship/teaching/learning space that was infused with what Anne Wimberly calls an “evocative nurture” that cradles the broken while calling forth something from them as well.¹⁵ Suggs did not preach morality or teach respectability. She scaffolded the Saturday afternoon sessions with a foundational word about grace: “She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it.”¹⁶ Hers was a “liturgy of Spirit” that revived the image of God within them in spite of the brutal, systematic attempts to erase their divine humanity.¹⁷ She taught them how to reclaim their embodiment. Each time they reassembled or re-membered their bodies in the Clearing, they rejected the “dismembered self created in chattel bondage”.¹⁸

She led them in practicing vulnerability in the Clearing. The practices she taught them freed them to risk removing the cloak of stoic docility that they wore to protect themselves; to risk transgressing age and gender role boundaries by crying, laughing, and dancing in front of one another. She celebrated their full humanity. These practices were emancipatory and transformative. The participants understood that acts of freedom like unauthorized learning or worship would be viewed as acts of resistance by their oppressors. In other words, Baby Suggs’ exhortation for them to love their Black selves was not an innocuous ask. As bell hooks suggests: “to love blackness is dangerous in a white supremacist culture — so threatening, so serious a

¹³ Morrison, *Beloved*, 102.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 103-104.

¹⁵ Anne S. Wimberly, *Nurturing Faith and Hope: Black Worship as a Model for Christian Education* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004).

¹⁶ Morrison, 103.

¹⁷ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 52.

¹⁸ Carol E. Henderson, “Refiguring the Flesh: The Word, the Body, and the Rituals of Being in *Beloved* and *Go Tell It on the Mountain*,” in *James Baldwin and Toni Morrison: Comparative Critical and Theoretical Essays*, eds. Loyalie King and Lynn Orilla Scott (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 148.

breach in the fabric of the social order, that death is the punishment.”¹⁹ Hooks asserts further that “loving blackness as political resistance transforms our ways of looking and being, and thus creates the conditions necessary for us to move against the forces of domination and death and reclaim black life.”²⁰

Morrison constructs the Clearing scene as an affirmation of Blackness rather than a polemic against slavery. She draws her marginalized and oppressed community from the margins of the Clearing and centers their humanity during their time together. Although the African country of Wakanda in *Black Panther* is not enslaved, Coogler takes an similar to Morrison's. He centers the community’s humanity and affirms their evolving communal identity.

IV. WARRIOR FALLS

The critically acclaimed Marvel comics movie, *Black Panther* secured its place in popular culture with its global commercial success, exceeding the \$1 billion in sales mark less than a month after its February 2018 U.S. release.²¹ The movie was also a victory for Black representation with Black male and female lead actors, a predominantly Black cast, Black artistic leadership, and a storyline informed by the history and cultures of Black peoples in Africa and the U.S. Visually, the movie immersed viewers in diverse and beautiful images of Blackness. It has been widely praised for its depictions of Blacks as multidimensional and powerful. These depictions stirred the imaginations of its viewers nationally and internationally.

What if there existed a time when marginalized and oppressed peoples were free, when their freedom, whole humanity and flourishing selfhood was the norm? What if in that time their culture, history, and traditions were celebrated? What if their worldviews, leaders, and governance reflected their identities and their theologies, spiritualities and their religious education reflected their epistemologies and pedagogies? Unlike the backdrop of enslavement in *Beloved*, the Afrofuturistic world of the movie, *Black Panther* creates a time and space where the dreams, prayers, and hopes of generations of Blacks come to fruition. It has been said that the story world of *Black Panther* represents the “stand-ins for those great *what-ifs* in black history.”²² As an artistic expression, it helps us visualize a human existence wherein whiteness is not the center for non-white peoples. It offers a world where the marginalized no longer dream of freedom, but live the dream by means of Wakanda, a fictional independent African country. One reviewer wrote that *Black Panther* was “revolutionary” because it “envisions a world not devoid of racism but one in which black people have the wealth, technology and military might to level the playing field.”²³

¹⁹ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1982), 9.

²⁰ hooks, 20.

²¹ Rebecca Rubin, “‘Black Panther’ Crosses \$1 Billion at Global Box Office,” *Variety*. March 10, 2018. Accessed September 6, 2018, <https://variety.com/2018/film/news/black-panther-billion-global-box-office-1202723326/>.

²² Vann R. Newkirk II, “The Provocation and Power of *Black Panther*,” *The Atlantic*. February 14, 2018. Accessed September 6, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/02/the-provocation-and-power-of-black-panther/553226/>.

²³ Jamil Smith, “Behind the Revolutionary Power of *Black Panther*,” *Time*. February 8, 2018. Accessed September 6, 2018, <http://time.com/black-panther/>.

Black Panther begins with a conversation between a father and his son. The son asks his father to tell him “the story of home.” The father shares highlights from the origins of Wakanda, the history of Wakanda’s tribal leadership, and the history of vibranium, the country’s most valuable natural resource that establishes its wealth and technological advancement. This prologue introduces viewers to foundational dilemmas facing Wakanda: 1) preserving traditions vs. engaging ideas of emerging generations; 2) maintaining national security vs. extending itself to the world; and 3) remaining hidden vs. risking visibility. Questions of identity and belonging underlie these dilemmas, i.e., Who are we? Who were we? Who are we and our emerging generations becoming? These questions inform the entire movie, but they dramatically converge in the communal gatherings at Warrior Falls.

Warrior Falls is a treasured centerpiece of the Wakandan landscape.²⁴ Like the Clearing in *Beloved*, it is a consecrated space for this community. It is nature’s handiwork, carved out of a towering mountain range that is accentuated by multiple waterfalls. Here, the elders stand covered by the respect of the community. Alongside them are the young who learn the country’s history as they practice ancestral traditions alongside their elders. Warrior Falls is a majestic space where Black bodies are never subjugated or commodified. Wakanda celebrates its history of freedom, wholeness, and greatness at Warrior Falls. Warrior Falls is also the place where kings are made.

The first Warrior Falls scene occurs after King T’Chaka has been assassinated during his tenure as Wakanda’s representative on an international council in the U.S. The community convenes at Warrior Falls in anticipation of the king’s son, Prince T’Challa, succeeding him. Sounds of joy and celebration arise from the intergenerational assembly of men, women and children who are splendidly adorned in their tribal attire. As the drums greet them, they move rhythmically to its beats. The ceremony continues with each Wakanda tribal representative indicating whether they will accept or challenge T’Challa’s succession to the throne. Unexpectedly, members of the estranged Jabari tribe arrive to contest the succession because they believe it will push Wakanda to abandon its traditions. The challenge necessitates a battle between T’Challa and the leader of the Jabari tribe. In the ensuing battle, T’Challa appears to be on the edge of defeat. At this point, the Queen Mother of Wakanda shouts out defiantly to her faltering son: “Show them who you are!” Prince T’Challa, in his weakened state, responds to his mother’s demand. He declares: “I am T’Challa, son of T’Chaka!” The declaration of his identity and lineage imbues the prince with the surge of inner and physical strength he needs to ultimately defeat his opponent. T’Challa, the Black Panther, is pronounced King of Wakanda at Warrior Falls amidst exuberant outbursts of acclamation. The lesson to onlookers is clear: True strength is connected to knowing one’s identity.

In the second Warrior Falls scene, another unexpected leadership crisis pits King T’Challa against an estranged cousin named N’Jadaka (or “Killmonger”) who seeks revenge for being abandoned as a child in the U.S. after the death of his father at the hand of fellow Wakandans. He not only threatens to become Wakanda’s next king (which he becomes), he threatens to shift the country away from its “hidden-in-plain sight” stance. N’Jadaka has made it

²⁴ Michael Maher, “Designing Wakanda and the Amazing Sets of Black Panther,” *The Beat*, Feb. 9, 2018. Accessed August 22, 2018, <https://www.premiumbeat.com/blog/production-set-design-black-panther/>.

clear that he will use violence and Wakandan resources to battle against hegemonic forces worldwide. As a result, there is no pageantry, no dancing, no celebration at the second Warrior Falls scene. The community anticipates an impending crisis it is not prepared to handle. Nevertheless, the community shows up because whatever happens, it must walk through it together. The first Warrior Falls scene displays Wakanda at its best. It basks in its heritage and history. In the first scene, the Queen Mother calls her son to claim his individual identity. But in the second scene, no one is present to call the community back to a place of strength after King T'Challa is defeated. The community falters when its collective identity is shaken.

Morrison and Coogler tell stories about enslaved Black bodies claiming freedom and free Black bodies losing and finding their individual and collective identities. They do not portray these characters or their communities in the Clearing and Warrior Falls as perfect or superior. They are foremost Black and human.

V. INTERSECTIONS & IMPLICATIONS

Morrison and Coogler share their visions of Black communities in bondage and freedom; in times of joy and suffering; in times of transition and conflict; and in times of teaching/learning and praxis. In the Clearing and Warrior Falls scenes, they develop Black characters imagined from the past and the future who respond to their human realities from the standpoint of their Blackness rather than from the perspective of imposed white normative resources that define their images of divinity, self, and others for them. Their engagement with a couple of themes in particular can be informative in that the themes intersect with the goal of de-centering white normativity in Religious Education.

Starting “Darkly”

Vincent Wimbush asks in his introduction to *African Americans and the Bible*, “How might putting African Americans at the center of the study of the Bible affect the study of the Bible?” He suggests that this repositioning will have implications for the “methods, orientations, approaches, politics, goals” of the field, the formation of biblical scholars, and the business of academic guilds for biblical studies.²⁵ He argues for “an openness to beginning the study of the Bible...in a different key — in a different time, which means from a different site of interpretation and enunciation, with the necessarily correlative different presuppositions, orientations and agendas.”²⁶ This translates into what he calls “reading darkly” or “viewing and experiencing the world in emergency mode, as through the individual and collective experience of trauma.”²⁷ Wimbush’s queries could also be posed to Religious Education, i.e., What if the Religious Education field centered Black and other marginalized peoples as Wimbush suggests and as was done in *Beloved* and *Black Panther*? What would it mean for Religious Education to read “darkly” or start “darkly”— to educate, to train educators, to research about faith formation

²⁵ Vincent Wimbush, ed. *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 9.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 21.

and religious practices, etc. with an awareness of the experiences of marginalized persons and a willingness to foreground those experiences?

One outcome for Religious Education of reading or starting ‘darkly’ is to engage in what Trinh Min-ha calls “ground-clearing” activity, i.e., a commitment to question everything.²⁸ It means interrogating every aspect of established Religious Education categories. We would replace assumptions of their validity with a hermeneutics of suspicion about our field’s intent, methods, practices, etc. For example, conversations about faith formation generally assume that we start the research within traditional congregations. Faith formational work not located in congregations tends to be viewed as peripheral or even illegitimate. This approach is problematic for religious education with Millennials because so many of them have identified spaces other than traditional churches as preferred sites for their sacred or religious experiences. Clearing the ground with faith formation could lead us to begin research with the alternative spaces and resources that young adults have chosen for their religious expressions. It would allow us to hear their voices and to learn from them. This would expand our understanding because it positions the research *among* current and emerging generations of young adults rather than above or in opposition to them. Ultimately, this generates more possibilities for mutual growth that we hope will result in faithful Jesus followers.

Valuing Embodiment

Morrison and Coogler script their characters in their full, embodied humanity which is then reflected in their actions, beliefs, and traditions. The speech by Baby Suggs in the *Clearing* invited enslaved Blacks to love self, to love their Blackness, and to seek communal well-being. She led them in practices that liberated their spirits and affirmed Black bodies that hurt, cried, laughed, and danced. She emboldened the participants to risk believing they deserved a divine birthright of emancipated human existence. The self-love she taught equipped them to de-center the dominant (dominating) narratives that eroded their personhood. The transformation and freedom Baby Suggs facilitates in the *Clearing* then becomes enfolded in the characters at Warrior Falls.

To value embodiment as it is modeled in the examined scenes requires pedagogical commitments from religious educators. One commitment is to work on intentionally *seeing* learners in the classroom as individually embodied persons who are with you in that space. Poet Claudia Rankine describes an experience of temporary invisibility. She writes:

In line at the drugstore it’s finally your turn, and then it’s not as he walks in front of you and puts his things on the counter. The cashier says, Sir, she was next. When he turns to you he is truly surprised. Oh my God, I didn’t see you. You must be in a hurry, you offer. No, no, no, I really didn’t see you.²⁹

She suggests that what happens here is not an inadvertent overlooking. In other words, without intentional effort, not seeing easily translates into intentional erasure. It is hard to regain the trust of students once they recognize they have been erased. Another commitment is to intentionally

²⁸ Trinh T. Min-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 37.

²⁹ Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014), Kindle Locations 389-393.

see the *colored* bodies of learners in their classrooms. Religious educators must resist any claims of color-blindness that further marginalizes minoritized students and replicate a religious history of white-washing God/Jesus, Christianity, and Christian discipleship. Educators de-center white normativity when they create teaching/learning spaces where students feel that their full humanity, including being people of color, is welcomed and honored. Westfield describes a “ritual of invocation” that she uses to acknowledge that students do not enter classrooms alone. They bring their whole selves which are filled with stories of loved ones who have come with them and/or who they have had to leave behind.³⁰ Practices like this indicate to students that there is room in the classroom for their embodied humanity.

VI. BRAVE AND BEYOND SPACES

Morrison and Coogler give us access to worldviews influenced in some way by experiences of marginalization and oppression. In this section, I will visit the concepts of brave and beyond spaces through the lenses of the imagined lives of the Black peoples in the Clearing and at Warrior Falls. The objective is to problematize the concepts and add some dimension to them by viewing them a different vantage point.

The concept of ‘beyond’ generally communicates movement to a location that is away from or outside of something. For some, beyond means an improvement or advancement. In the context of our conference theme, a desired goal in Religious Education is to reach a point where white normativity no longer exists. Perhaps, the idea is to reach a post-white normativity status where our work is more reflective of diverse voices rather than a single dominating narrative. Clearing and Warrior Falls informed lenses would not negate the benefits of such a goal. But the lenses do nuance the concept.

For Morrison, the past is never really finished in the sense that it is not valuable and no longer makes a demand upon us. The past bears witness to what can heal or set free and to what can also imprison and torment. The past is available to teach and form in ways that equip the characters to live in the present with hope for the future. Likewise at Warrior Falls, the characters hold past, present, and future together as an interrelated reality. They participate in rituals that require them to retrieve their history in order to inform their present and envision their future. Neither Morrison or Coogler confine history to the past, nor do they strive toward a fixed time located somewhere in a future that is disconnected from the present. They are moving back-and-forth and forward. In his work, Homi K. Bhabha states that ‘beyond’ is a space of revisioning that requires a “return to the ‘present’.”³¹ He refers to the fluid interrelationship between past, present, and future that we see operative in *Beloved* and *Black Panther*. All of this adds to the concept of ‘beyond’ the importance of keeping past, present, and future in relationship so that we also consider the possibilities for renewal and change as we back-and-forth, move through and toward.

³⁰ Nancy Lynne Westfield, “Bootstraps in Classrooms: Dissuading Rugged Individualism,” *Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion, Teaching, Religion, Politics Blog*, November 12, 2017, accessed September 10, 2018, <https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2017/11/bootstraps-classrooms-dissuading-rugged-individualism/>.

³¹ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 6, 10.

Finally, there is agreement that we cannot promise safety or an absence of conflict, discomfort or risk in settings that involve the difficult anti-racism work, combatting white supremacy, or de-centering white normativity.³² The Clearing and Warrior Falls lenses add that being brave and courageous are not optional. They were not optional for the characters in those scenes. Additionally, from the voices of the marginalized in those scenes, we hear that hope cannot be optional. The spaces where we engage critically around the systemic ills that plague Religious Education must be brave and hope-filled spaces. Brave spaces alert us that the spaces will be messy, entail risk, and require courage. Hope-filled spaces remind us that we cannot do this work without the God of our faith. Hope revives our imaginations when our failures threaten to derail us.

VII. CONCLUSION

*Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another.*³³

Beloved and *Black Panther* thrust us immediately into worlds that revolve around Black peoples. They envelop us in experiences of family, community, loss, mystery, triumph, loving, suffering, the ordinary, and the spectacular. Morrison and Coogler narrate human experiences viewed through the particular lenses of Blackness. One does not have to be a Black person from the U.S. or Africa to enter these story worlds. However, once inside, all are exposed to a worldview that privileges the feelings, experiences, thoughts, and imaginations of minoritized, marginalized persons. There is not a single white narrative through which everything is being filtered. Consequently, in the Clearing, no explanation or justification is needed for an enslaved Black woman preaching on a white-owned plantation during the slavery era in the U.S. Her sermon/teaching unapologetically exhorts her listeners to love themselves because loving and valuing their embodied selves is a necessity whereas words about obedience to slavery and white slaveowners only reinscribe death on their bodies. In *Warrior Falls*, no legitimation is needed for the diverse expressions of Blackness or for the peoples' respect for their traditions and assumptions of worthiness. These are the accepted norms. Starting with the affirmation of humanity produces freedom where there is none and deepens identity where freedom already exists.

I was a young adult seminarian before I started questioning the images of a white Jesus that were presented to me during childhood and adolescence. My interrogation began after exposure to Black History studies, Black Theology, fiction by Black novelists, and congregational life that emphasized being Black and Christian. It did not occur to until then that I was being formed by the white Jesus that I would not release. Having an image of divinity that did not look like me contributed to my inability to imagine myself as a co-creator with God. I could only conceive of God as 'power over' and 'other than'. I more readily accepted a transcendent God than an immanent God. The religious education of my early days nurtured my

³² Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens, "From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces: A New Way to Frame Dialogue Around Diversity and Social Justice," in *The Art of Effective Facilitation: Reflections from Social Justice Educators*, ed. Lisa M. Landreman (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2013), 136.

³³ Morrison, 111-112.

faith in God until its whiteness began to limit my growth as a Christian disciple in a Black female body. But that was my reality decades ago. This does not have to be anyone else's reality particularly if we are willing to listen to the artistic among us. We already know enough to be like Coogler's Queen Mother of Wakanda who upon seeing Religion Education faltering, can issue a demand: "Tell them who you are!"

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