

Fr. Ferree Annual Lecture  
Being Where We Are: The Land, Catholic Scholarship, and Anti-Racism

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Welcome everybody, in the Torch Lounge and wherever else you are. The image on the screen is the work of John August Swanson, Mexican-Swedish-American Catholic artist. This painting is titled Psalm 23, “the Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want...” Mr. Swanson is now in hospice with congestive heart failure. Remember him in your prayers. I encourage you to look up his work. But not right now. Right now, try to be where you are, whether that’s in Torch or someplace else, wherever your feet are, on land that has known many before us, shared now with many other lives, human and nonhuman; in a built environment formed by labor and dreams and money and law. Notice who you are with. It’s good for us to be here now.

Over the past year, I have spent a lot of time speaking with many staff and faculty and some students about UD’s commitment to be anti-racist as well as Catholic and Marianist. In important respects, the work of unmasking white privilege and educating about racism and promoting not just diversity but inclusion and equity has been going on for years among many of you here, from whom I’ve learned. And if you can check out the upcoming events, in the program or posted in chat at the end of this session, you’ll see that the work continues to grow in many ways. It’s not new work and it’s not short-term work.

This talk is an attempt to capture much of what’s been going on in the many conversations I’ve hosted and participated in recently--and to press us toward deepening that commitment.

We’ll start with some words from Dorothy Mensah-Aggrey.

Move!  
To the left  
Farther . . . a bit more  
Move!

Why these vexed utterances?  
Why the indignation?  
What did they say?  
Who are they anyway?

Move!

Into that circle  
Sit, and don't move!  
No, stand, and be still!  
No, kneel!  
Sit!  
Stand!  
Straighten up!

Why the screaming?  
Why the malice?  
Why the contempt?  
Such repugnance . . .  
Such viciousness . . . for what?

So, we move  
And move  
And move  
And keep moving  
To the left, or right,  
Do we stand, or do we sit?  
Do we crawl, or do we run?  
Run from what?  
Run from who?  
Run to . . . ?

Where are we?  
Why the constant displacement?  
Shift, relocate, move and remove,  
Dislocate, supplant, transplant and dislodge  
Sounds familiar?  
Stop, stop, stop!

Stop in the name of . . .  
In the name of God, Creator of heaven and earth  
Stop and ask yourself . . .  
Whose space is it anyway?  
Whose space?

And *Asaase Yaa* retorts  
Whose land is it anyway?

Whose land?  
Whose space?

Dorothy is reflecting here on a major theme in Jennings' work,<sup>1</sup> displacement. He means by it, for one thing, the forced displacement of peoples in colonialism, both being made to go to a different place, and also being stripped of a life with the plants and animals and mountains and communities even in the same place. Displacement means people are made isolated, portable, commodities; all that needs to be known about their identity, for the purposes of racial capitalism, can be seen in skin and hair. And Jennings also uses "displacement" to talk about the more voluntary, power-seeking self-displacement of Europeans who came to new lands and instead of meeting and growing into the difference they met there, carried their identity only in their flesh, being people who own and oversee all places, but do not need to be part of, changed by, accountable to any.

We inherit displacement, in both senses. Where are we, Dorothy asks? Whose space is this?

I remember discovering where I was in my childhood. My mother, a devout and thoughtful Catholic who continues to this day being converted from the self-deceptions of her own upbringing, took me with her to hand out food. The whole process had made me very uneasy, adults pushing me forward to practice Christian love by handing sandwiches through a barely-opened door to men whose names and stories I would never know. As we drove home, when my mother turned onto Ninth street, she told me in a tight voice, "Roll up your window and lock the door." I didn't understand why she was anxious, but I knew she was. As we drove through that Black neighborhood, my mother's tension conveyed that this place was a threat; it wasn't ours, which was the same thing: not ours therefore not safe. I was surprised. I presumed without ever saying it to myself, without anyone saying it to me explicitly, that it was all supposed to be mine. I had no idea how toxic that assumption was. But that day as I rolled up my window and locked my door, for a moment I felt the weight of the structures of racism that formed me.

Whose land is it? There's ancient Christian teaching about this. Pope Francis, quoting Pope St. John Paul II, indicates that "the first principle of the whole ethical and social order" is the universal destination of goods, which means "the goods of the earth are intended to meet the needs of all." Creation is supposed to provide for all people, not because there's always so much that we will all have plenty, but because human creatures are made to live together in the creation that is our home. It's an ancient principle, revived in the medieval period, cited in *Rerum Novarum*, proclaimed in a major document of Vatican II. That tradition doesn't tell us what system to use to accomplish it. There may be a variety of ways to ensure that the earth meets everyone's needs. The truth it points us at is not how we must organize property and trade

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<sup>1</sup> Willie James Jennings. *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press: 2010.

but that we are creatures made to live among creatures, in connection with each other. If I may put it in Dr. Jennings' words when he talks about creation, "We are joined at the site of the dirt."

So how did we get from that tradition to the conquest of the Americas, the history of this land where we live? (If Christians are all about love, why are they so mean?) Jennings names the root theological error as supersessionism. That's the name of the belief that after Jesus, God rejected the Jews and that Christians have replaced the Jews as God's chosen people. One result of this belief is that it justified centuries of Christian violence against Jewish people. Another is that Christians and only Christians are imagined as the center of the salvation story, the light to the nations, God's own chosen people. That's a departure from the New Testament, in which Gentile Christians are the strangers and enemies and outsiders. They, we, are unexpected guests who come to share in a story that's not about us. What supersessionism does is change the way Gentile Christians see themselves, so they and only they become the heroes, the ones who bring light and freedom to all the world.

But it's more than that. It also plays a role in changing Christian imagining of land because when you read "chosen people" as really about gentile Christians, European gentile Christians, the places and people in scripture become metaphors. Every place, any place, can be Babylon or Mount Zion. The chosen people now are not people of a small land where God is making things happen in a way that challenges the powers of the world. Now they are those powers of the world, the nations that claim they are the universal people, the sign and reality of the fully human person.

To put it all together, in the supersessionist imagination, God's way of working with the world shifts. We can just see, if we look, indications that the Christian story is about a God who works in a particular people, even in a particular human being, so that all the world is invited to turn from their own position of power to know themselves as strangers and penitents invited in. But in Christianity, supersessionism warps the imagination so that white Christians become the owners and champions of the revelation, the people every other nation turns toward. Instead of being turned away from their own power by the encounter with Jesus, being chosen means they are people who rightly control all and need no help or change.

And so it is that Christians could imagine their worldwide mission, authorized by God, as meaning "it all belongs to people like us." We stand for universal natural fulfillment of humanity.

That's the story in broad terms. The history of white privilege works differently for different groups who count as "white." It's not the same for Catholics and evangelicals, and we are blessed with many historians who can unpack that human texture. My aim here has been to give you a sense of the broad path that got us from the community we hear of in the book of Acts,

people of many nations gathered in mutual love, to the horrors of indigenous boarding schools and Jim Crow era law and Christian nationalism.

There are two things I'd like to point out about this.

First, the Catholic church has officially rejected supersessionism. God hasn't backed out of a covenant with the Jews; Christians carry on alongside the Jews, and we don't know how that story will end. But that official statement didn't happen until the 1960s and it still hasn't really entered Catholic consciousness, devotion, even theology. Work to move the Christian imagination is urgently needed. We can see it in the ways we think about who belongs to the land and who are invaders, about who gets to decide whether we are distributing goods justly, whether an apology is sufficient, whose anger is justifiable, whose hurt deserves recompense. I am not able at present to address Christian Muslim relations, which are historically a significant part of this story as well. Suffice it to say at the moment, the work many are trying to do remains hard and very important.

Second, and I hope you already hear this coming, that work that needs to be done is not just about Catholicism and it's not just about Christianity. This talk is not about Catholic identity as a thing apart, of concern only to Catholics. The patterns established in colonial Christianities influenced modern accomplishments even where those accomplishments were critical of Christianity. That imagination shaped the development of the liberal rights tradition and the US constitution and US law about relations with indigenous people. We see it in economics, the sciences (human and "hard"). All of our systems of thought are touched by this. In some places, self-critical work has been going on for a while, but none of us can say we are beyond it.

And this imagination shapes the way we understand education. When we think about higher education as helping students leave behind a limited view, particularly if that limited view is associated with a non-masterly identity, that's an outgrowth of this legacy. When we imagine that through education we can become the light to all the world, a savior for every people, a community that is not in creation among other creatures but able to speak for all--that's a legacy of this theological mistake. I know there are people at UD working to correct these patterns. I also know that work is going to have to go on for a long time.

And this distorted imagination shapes the way we do patriotism. UD is not only a Catholic, Marianist, and anti-racist university. It is also an American one, and our anti-racism has to engage the way we imagine that as well. Supersessionism made the category "chosen people" into a floating image that could be attached to any nation, particularly to ones that count as white. The nation gains that universal/white mission to all the world, sometimes in ways explicitly connected to Christian identity and sometimes not. David Fine's essay, printed in the programs and available also on the Ferree website, was, like Dorothy's poem written in response

to Willie Jennings, and it evokes this aspect of the error of supersessionism. He writes about his childhood Sunday school class in which weekly they ended with the Lord's prayer and moved immediately into two other sets of ritual words.

*...for thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.*

*And now we sing farewell.*

*May we be ever true,*

*To God, our country, and our flag,*

*The red, the white, and blue.*

*May the Lord watch between me and thee*

*While we are absent one from another.*

Who is that 'we' and who is absent from us? That line comes from a story in Genesis, but that context disappears, as faith and the flag and love of our own become their own kind of devotion. I hope you'll ponder David's essay.

The good news is that, in the cracks of this long story, grace grows, in the past and still now. Other things were going on within that colonial world that the masters didn't capture. In the midst of scandal and violence, human beings find a way into the divine giving and receiving. Faith different from supersessionism and white privilege was carried, perhaps against the intentions of those who carried it; it was carried consciously particularly by those who suffered, who endured, who resisted. Those forebears in faith and their descendants who still carry that faith and that struggle have earned our respect and our gratitude. I mean in particular generations of indigenous Catholics, Black Catholics, Latinx and Hispanic Catholics, Asian Catholics who build spaces of faith, in spite of an often very cold reception or even betrayal by fellow Catholics. Their stories are not the side story of Christianity, a colorful addition to show that Catholicism is "inclusive" too. For one thing, demographically, Catholicism is not a white faith globally or among the under 30s in the US, and it's trending further that way for the future. But more than numbers: these believers witness that the faith is living... and it's not the faith of the master.

This past year, I've met a lot of white Catholic shame, some anger, some despair. I have to give voice to the question I heard sometimes behind the words: can we be both Catholic and anti-racist?

My answer is that a Catholic university has an obligation and a joy precisely as a Catholic institution, before God, to do the work of anti-racism, in honor of those who have kept the faith

and struggled so long; and for the sake of opposing sin, because racism is sin; but also accepting that as we inherit advantages from that history, so we inherit the burden of trying to repair harm.

I'm running low on time and my colleague Matt Witenstein is after me to get practical, because people need things to do. It's not my forte, telling people what to do. I will tell you what I'm learning to do.

First, pay attention to systems, but do the inner work. Working with Matt and three other colleagues this summer, I set out focused on practical, concrete changes to systems, in curriculum, in landscape, in administrative systems. Anti-racism is about dismantling the systems that perpetuate white supremacy, not just about individual attitudes, and we wanted to be part of making change. But over the summer, the cohort became more and more concerned that any structural change has to be accompanied by costly personal change. The danger is that we fix structures to prove that we are on the right side of history, that we are the good guys, so that we don't have to change anymore. We want to be right. That's a way to stay in power, to make sure we are masters of our situation, not necessarily entangled with others.

Look, it's good to desire to end injustice and promote full life and we need to be doing that now, not later. But I'm learning that good and urgent desire belongs inside a larger desire: a desire for each other as interconnected creatures, a desire for a life together. This is about moving our imaginations away from becoming heroes who save the day and toward being together with each other as whole and different creatures. So that inner work--for me, now--is about weaning our imaginations and desires off the image of the hero who brings light and justice to others and feeding a desire to know each other, all of us strangers and aliens invited into a creation we did not make and do not control. (By the way, the Marianists have a spiritual tradition, the five silences, that may help us do that, so ask me or a Marianist if you want to know more.) Theologically, we are centering our participation in the divine giving and receiving and giving again, instead of ourselves. That's the deep meaning of the universal destination of goods. The creation is made to be mutual gift. We are joined at the site of the dirt.

It's good to recall at a moment like this that the Marianists got into higher education not for the sake of higher education as training for mastery (which it often is) but as a way to rebuild Christian faith by forming people for community. The Marianist vision has us doing scholarship within a mission that is first about developing community. Like everything else, that tradition is affected by that twisted colonial imagination. The hard part is making sure that "being together" is not on white terms, not an invitation for "others" to come to an established white space and accept its requirements. How will we claim the charism of community in a way that is not about control but an occasion for encounter, even mutual belonging? It may be that the model of restorative justice, where people who have suffered harm meet with the people who hurt them in a process of truth telling that leads to the offender taking responsibility to repair harm, needs to play a bigger role in our thinking about the charism of community.

Meanwhile, the worldwide Catholic community is calling for UD to participate in two global efforts that can be, should be occasion for UD both to learn and to contribute. UD is on the cusp of a seven-year process to re-shape structures and practices in light of *Laudato Si'*, the encyclical on integral ecology. While *Laudato Si'* says quite a lot about a spirituality of contemplation rather than domination, about the abuse of people being inextricably linked to the abuse of creation, still the issues about climate change and racism need energetic and courageous attention, here and beyond.

We are also at the very beginning of a worldwide Catholic process of synodality. For two years, Catholics all over the world will be working to discern how to be church, a body, a people. This isn't about rejecting hierarchy or turning Catholicism into a majority-rule faith. But it is an extraordinary opportunity for overcoming clericalism and claiming the Christian teaching that the Spirit moves in all the church and particularly in words that disrupt what we thought we knew, from voices that have been shut out. The church is asking, how will we be one people, welcoming all of our differences and still united by shared love of God? For the life of the world, Catholics are trying to renew our imaginations about how to be diverse creatures who not only manage not to kill each other or to trade with each other but who find our fulfillment in being together in God's world.

The call to be anti-racist is a gift to the Catholic community and to the world shaped by bad theology. It is demanding that we stop deceiving ourselves and take up our roles in the work. Sometimes that work will be a delight, an encounter with insight and beauty and faith. Often it is costly and controversial. Or both at the same time.

And Catholic faith is a gift to the work of being anti-racist, and not only because of the demographics. Catholicism offers to our anti-racist work a tradition of penitential encounter with a mercy that can make it possible to tell hard truths, because there is hope that dying to self is a path of life. The faith trains us to hope, to our astonishment and against our desserts, there is joy for us, not accomplished by running away or defending turf but by learning to be creatures together in God's world.

In the fall of 2019, after tornadoes and shootings and a white supremacist rally in Dayton and with climate change looming in my mind, I said that this is a good time to be alive. I still say that. It's not good because everything will be just fine. We've had losses. We'll have more. It's a good time to be alive because we are meeting our fragility anew. For some that's less new, for others more. We can--and many try to--avoid noticing our individual mortality, the tenuous nature of our political order, our dependence on economic systems that are unsustainable, the sense that we aren't in control of our place, much less our future. The answer isn't building a safe place, nor is it embracing a struggle to dominate. Being an anti-racist and Catholic university is an invitation to hear, to speak, and to listen to truth and to be changed, and to do our



work in gratitude to the Creator who holds space for us. What a blessing it is to be together, where we are.

Table discussion:

What do you see as the costly gifts of anti-racism for a Catholic university?

Of Catholicism for an anti-racist university?

What do you think about this call for “inner work” as a complement to structural work? How would you go about that?